

PEARL Statement

USCIRF Hearing on Sri Lanka, 7th May 2024

Sri Lanka is a religious and militarised ethnocracy. The major institutions of the state, including the large and oversized military, are orientated towards ensuring the dominance or supremacy of Sinhala Buddhism. The constitution provides for religious freedom and association for non-Sinhala Buddhists but also explicitly tasks the state with ensuring Buddhism has the foremost place. The active and ongoing efforts of powerful political leaders and state agencies to enshrine the 'foremost place' of Sinhala Buddhism has severely curtailed the religious, civil, and political rights of Tamil Hindus and Christians, Muslims, and Sinhala Christians. These efforts provoked a three-decade long armed conflict. They have continued and arguably intensified since the end of the armed conflict a decade and a half ago.

In the Tamil speaking areas of the north-east, state-sponsored, and militarised efforts at 'Sinhalization' and 'Buddhisization' have intensified since the end of the war. The repertoire for these processes entails members of the Buddhist clergy working with the security forces and relevant government departments to disrupt, desecrate and seize buildings and sites that are long-established places of worship for Tamils. The ultimate object is to forcibly supplant the Tamil place of worship with a Sinhala one and subsequently to transform a Tamil speaking area into a Sinhala one. It is important to note that violent state-sponsored efforts at Sinhala colonization in the north-east have been ongoing since the 1930s and were one of the causes of the civil war. These efforts have developed and intensified since the end of the war.

An illustrative example is the Athi Ayan temple on Kurunthurmailai hill, Mullaitivu. The site is a long-established place of Hindu worship. But in 2018 it was invaded by a group of Sinhala Buddhists activists including monks who arrived with construction materials and attempted to install a Buddha statue. Tamils resisted including by taking the matter to court. The local Mullaitivu Magistrate ruled that any construction on the site would be illegal. Overriding these, in 2021 a Sri Lankan government minister led an event alongside the military and the archaeology department to install a Buddhist statue on the site and since then Tamils have not been able to access the site. Alongside this Buddhist monks have also blocked Tamils in the village adjoining the hill from cultivating their fields. The Mullaitivu judge (Tamil) who had issued orders on the illegality of the Buddhist constructions was also forced to flee the island in September 2023 because of threats to his life. This is an indicative example; other sites where similar tactics are used are Thayiddi in Jaffna, Mayilathamadu in Batticaloa, Neeraviyadi in Mullaitivu and Paralai Murugan Temple in Jaffna.

The post-war atmosphere of majoritarian entitlement and threat has also targeted Muslims and Christians. Anti-Muslim violence and rhetoric have become notable since 2013 when Buddhist groups began a successful campaign to end the halal certification of food. Since then, there have been attacks against Muslim places of worship and businesses. One of the most intense episodes was the anti-Muslim riots of 2014 in the southern coastal town of Aluthgama which began after a rally by a Sinhala Buddhist group. The hostility towards Muslims intensified after the Easter Sunday attacks. During the pandemic the Government instituted the forced cremation of COVID-19 victims thereby violating Islamic funeral rites. The government finally relented on this because of a forthcoming vote at the UN Human Rights Council.

In addition, there has been growing Sinhala Buddhist hostility towards Christians and specifically the expansion of evangelical Christianity. In 2004, a Buddhist nationalist party introduced an 'anti-conversion bill' that provided for imprisonment and hefty fines for the crime of 'forcible conversion.' The bill has not passed but remains latently on the agenda of Sinhala Buddhist groups. Alongside this,

there have also ongoing incidents of violence against Christian pastors and places of worship often lead by Buddhist monks.

Finally, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith has made remarkably candid and disquieting accusations against Sri Lankan leaders and the security forces. He has called for an independent and international inquiry into the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that killed 279 people in a series of bombings at three hotels and three churches. The massacres were initially blamed on Muslim extremists, but the Cardinal has alleged that the attacks were part of a 'grand political plot' that included collusion by security forces and were designed to help the presidential campaign of Gotabaya Rajapakse.

The Cardinal's allegations were supported in August 2023 by a British documentary aired on Channel Four in which a whistleblower alleged that senior politicians and security forces personnel had close contacts with the militants who carried out the attacks. In recent months, Sri Lankan government ministers have also begun to publicly criticise Cardinal Ranjith, claiming he is un-cooperative and alleging a rift in the Catholic hierarchy. These accusations have been refuted by the Catholic Church. These disturbing accusations suggest that powerful Sinhala leaders are willing to use deadly false flag attacks and incite religious violence as a means of advancing their ethnonationalist agenda.