



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: SRI LANKA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Sri Lanka's Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities

Introduction

Fifteen years after its decades-long civil war, Sri Lanka continues to reconcile with its history of conflict and its multifaceted religious dynamics. In *recent years*, the government has implemented discriminatory policies against religious minorities and societal actors have leveled violent attacks against religious minorities across the country. Five years after the *2019 Easter Sunday bombings*, the Sri Lankan government continues to utilize security concerns to target religious minorities, including through the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act.

In October 2023, a USCIRF delegation *traveled* to Sri Lanka to assess religious freedom. This country update provides an overview of the current religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka and key observations from USCIRF's trip, such as religiously motivated land disputes, registration challenges, and the use of discriminatory legislation to target and detain religious minorities.

Land Disputes

Land disputes between citizens and the government have continued in former warzones, including in the north and east. Since the war's conclusion, many Muslims and Hindus have reported difficulty in reclaiming land seized by military forces. For example, the Sri Lankan army continues to occupy the Thirukoneswaram Hindu Temple in Trincomalee. While worshipers are permitted to use the temple, the Department of Archeology considers it a Buddhist cultural site.

In March 2024, the Sri Lankan army granted *conditional access* to seven Hindu temples in Jaffna's High Security Zone. In order to visit the temples, worshipers were required to use army transportation, provide their name and home address, and allow the temple to share their information with the district and divisional secretariat.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of land disputes involving tensions between Buddhist heritage conservation and sites that religious minorities claim as their own. Sri Lanka's Department of Archeology, which operates under the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs, is tasked with identifying and preserving cultural sites throughout the country. While the 11-member taskforce designed to



assess archeological sites in the Eastern Province is *defunct* as of 2023, in the Northern and Eastern Provinces authorities have continued to expropriate Hindu and Muslim land for the construction of Buddhist sites and to uphold Article 9 of the constitution.

In some cases, authorities have restricted access to places of worship, claiming ongoing “archeological research.” These disputes frequently occur in religious minority areas in the north and east of the country, where there are few Sinhala Buddhists, except in areas with continued military presence. In the north, Hindus form the largest religious group, followed by Christians, Muslims, and then Buddhists. A *2023 report* identified 37 cases in the north and east in which the Department of Archeology attempted to construct Buddhist temples on Tamil land. In July 2023, President Ranil Wickremesinghe *called for* officials to prioritize the construction of Buddhist temples and cultural sites, including the Anuradhapura Sacred Site Development Plan and Maha Viharaya Development Plan in the Northern Province. In his remarks, he identified Sri Lanka as a “Buddhist nation” and emphasized the “national importance” of completing the Maha Viharaya. In February 2024, President Wickremesinghe announced his commitment to “protecting the Buddhist order” by *declaring* 11 additional Buddhist temples in the north and east as cultural sites, making 142 sites in total throughout the country. Additionally, in March 2024, the Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs *proposed* a new bill and collaborative effort with the Department of Archeology to safeguard “sacred Buddhist sites.”

Select Cases of Land Disputes

Trincomalee: In Trincomalee, Governor Senthil Thondaman has vocalized disapproval toward the expropriation of Tamil Hindu and Muslim land for the construction of Buddhist sites. In August 2023, he *ordered* the suspension of construction of a Buddhist temple at Boralukanda Rajamaha, arguing the neighboring area consisted of two Sinhala families. In response, a group of Buddhist monks *stormed* a district committee meeting and issued violent threats if the governor refused to meet their demands.

Kurunthurmalai (also referred to as Kurundi Viharya): Located in Mullaitivu District, Kurunthurmalai remains a disputed site between Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and Buddhists and was frequently mentioned in conversation with religious groups during USCIRF’s delegation. Kurunthurmalai is home to a Hindu temple called Aadi Adayyar, but since 2018, Buddhist monks have *attempted* to use the area for Buddhist worship, including installing Buddhist statues. In 2021, the government declared the area an archeological site, preventing Hindus from worshiping at the temple. In July 2023, Sri Lankan Judge T. Saravananaraja ordered the removal of Buddhist statues from the area after over 100 Sinhalese, including Buddhist monks, threatened worshipers during the Pongal festival. Reports indicate that police did not take action against the perpetrators. In August, a *complaint* was lodged against Saravananaraja in the Judicial Commission of Sri Lanka, calling his order “unilateral and irresponsible.” In September, Saravananaraja *resigned*, citing threats to his life, and reportedly fled the country.

Veddukkunaari: Located in Northern Province, the Veddukkunaari temple is a Hindu Shrine that Buddhist monks and the Archeology Department consider an ancient Buddhist site. In March 2023, the temple's statues were desecrated by unknown persons. Following the incident, a [protest](#) led by Tamil civil society took place, condemning the destruction. In February 2024, the Sri Lankan army escorted Buddhist monks to the site and the monks continued to declare that Veddukkunaari is an ancient Buddhist site. The following month, authorities [arrested](#) eight Tamil Hindu worshipers, including the temple's chief priest, while celebrating the Shivaratri festival. Police reportedly assaulted worshipers, and the Archeology Department claimed they had damaged antiquities. The eight worshipers were ultimately released, and charges were dismissed. Prior to their release, however, mass protests [occurred](#) across Nedunkerny, Vavuniya, in May in support of the detainees. The University of Jaffna's Teachers' Association [expressed concern](#) about the incident, condemning the treatment of the Hindu priest and devotees and emphasizing the violation of religious rights.

Places of Worship

In addition to land dispute cases, religious minorities continue to face challenges in registering their places of worship. Registration requirements are discussed in three circulars issued by the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs in 2008, 2011, and 2022. The 2008 circular [requires](#) all religious groups to obtain permission to register when constructing new places of worship. A 2011 circular further mandated that the construction of new places of worship requires approval by the relevant ministry (i.e., Ministry of Christian Affairs, Ministry of Hindu Affairs, or Ministry of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs). In 2018, the ministry ruled that such requirements only apply to the construction of Buddhist religious sites. A [2022 circular](#) supersedes previous circulars and dictates that new religious centers, places of worship, prayer centers, or any establishments engaging in collective worship must register. Although the 2022 circular applies only to new places of worship, reports suggest that local authorities have attempted to retroactively enforce the circular to existing places of worship. As a result, religious minorities, including Christians, continue to report harassment from local authorities for failing to register churches.

According to the Ministry of Christian Affairs, existing churches are not required to register at the national level, but those that do so receive "more security." The National

Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka reports that Christians in rural areas, particularly small Protestant denominations, are at greater risk of intimidation and violence. Pastors from such areas report that Buddhist monks and Hindu nationalists have called for churches to cease religious activities.

In March 2024, Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs Vidura Wickramanayake [stated](#) that all religious institutions, regardless of faith, will need to be registered, noting that some religious institutions "cause religious disharmony." He announced plans to raid unregistered places of worship, including those of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The same month, Inspector General for Police Deshabandu Tennakoon [announced](#) that special police security would be provided to all churches ahead of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Under this security plan, all churches were reportedly inspected before religious services. Tennakoon further [expressed](#) the need for increased security measures at mosques during Ramadan and during Sinhala and Hindu New Year celebrations.

Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Sentiment

Academics and civil society members in Sri Lanka have expressed concern about increasing Hindu and Buddhist nationalist sentiment in recent years affecting both the Christian and Muslim communities. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) [Hashtag Generation](#), nationalist groups particularly target Muslims with hate speech. Several Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups operate in the country, including the [Siv Senai](#), [Rudra Sena](#), and [Ravana Sena](#). In recent years, anti-Christian and anti-Muslim sentiment has proliferated primarily online and through social media platforms and has been more prominent in the north and east. In the first half of 2024, the National Evangelical Christian Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 20 incidents against Christians.

Anti-Muslim sentiment proliferated by Buddhist nationalist groups has also been on the rise in recent years. From November 2022 to October 2023, for example, NCEASL [recorded](#) 12 incidents of intolerance against Sri Lankan Muslims, including several instances of Muslims students ordered to remove their hijabs. In April 2024, Colombo's High Court [sentenced](#) Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera, the general secretary of Sri Lanka's leading anti-Muslim campaign group, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), to four years in jail for anti-Muslim

comments he made in 2016. Previous reporting suggests the monk had expressed intolerance against Muslims on other occasions, including criticism related to the hijab, halal and ritualistic food, alleged forced conversion of Buddhists to Islam, and tropes like high birth rate among Muslims. While his 2016 comments did not directly incite violence, activists claim that Thera's hateful rhetoric has contributed to a climate of increasing intolerance—and at times attacks—against religious minorities, including communal violence against Muslims in March 2018.

Proposed Amendments to Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act

Based on Shari'a and Islamic legal practice, Sri Lanka's [Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act](#) (MMDA) governs marriage, divorce, and other family law matters for all Muslim Sri Lankans. It is distinct from the 1907 Sri Lankan (General) [Marriage Registration Ordinance](#) (GMRO), which is applicable to all Sri Lankan citizens, [except](#) Muslims who marry within the faith. The MMDA establishes a tax-funded Muslim judge (*Quazi*) court system, including a Board of Quazis and an Advisory Board. A 2019 [report](#) from the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief indicates that there is no option for Muslim couples to opt out of the MMDA. While the Sri Lankan cabinet [approved](#) a proposal in 2021 permitting Muslims the option to get married under the GMRO, the status of this proposal remains unclear, suggesting that as of 2024, Muslim couples can only marry under the MMDA. Muslims marrying partners of a different religion, however, can register under the GMRO.

Critics argue that the MMDA is discriminatory toward Muslim women and does not afford them the same rights and protections as other religious minorities in Sri Lanka. In May 2023, an unofficial version of a [draft bill](#) for the amendment of the MMDA became public. If it passed, women would be allowed to hold positions as marriage registrars, Quazis, and conciliators. The [draft bill](#) further proposes that the Quazi system be subjected to proper supervision mechanisms under the Judicial Service Commission, including the appointment of a Muslim Marriage and Divorce Tribunal to inquire and hear appeals from decisions under the MMDA. Alternatively, the draft bill also recommends the creation of a community-based mechanism of conciliators. In response, in June 2023, 17 male Muslim Members of Parliament (MPs) rejected the draft bill and argued for

maintaining the Quazi system without changes. The UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls argued that if the recommendations by the Muslim MPs are integrated into the draft bill, it could be contrary to international standards. The status of these recommendations remains uncertain.

Anti-Terrorism Bill and Blasphemy Issues

In 2023, the Sri Lankan government published the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) to replace the existing [PTA](#). The proposed ATA expands on the provisions established under the PTA, including criminalizing “other offenses associated with Terrorism,” and applies to “any person who commits an offense ... whether within or outside the territorial limits of Sri Lanka.” Offenses that fall under this definition of terrorism include “propagating war or advocating national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” Such broad definitions of terrorism allow for wide interpretation of who can be accused of terrorism and subjected to arrest.

In October 2023, UN experts and human rights advocates [expressed](#) concern about the proposed ATA, noting that it fails to meet five international standards [articulated](#) in 2021, including defining terrorism or including mechanisms for independent oversight. In February 2024, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that the ATA would require a national referendum to be passed unless recommend amendments were incorporated into the bill. In addition to antiterrorism legislation, the Sri Lankan government enforces a [blasphemy law](#). Articles 290, 290A, 291A, and 291B restrict expressions made with the intent of harming religious sentiment.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act

Following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, hundreds of Muslims were arrested under the PTA and the ICCPR Act. As of August 2023, 21 detainees were on [remand](#) under the PTA, and 25 individuals were serving prison terms on terrorism charges. Enacted in 2007, the ICCPR Act was intended to incorporate the international treaty into Sri Lankan domestic law, but in practice it has been used to target religious minorities for the peaceful expression of their views or beliefs.

Cases of those detained under the ICCPR Act include writer Ramzy Ranik. In April 2020, Ranik was [arrested](#) by the Criminal Investigation Department on charges related to a Facebook post calling for an “ideological

jihād” to address justice and democracy concerns, particularly discrimination toward Muslims. Police argued that Ranik’s post violated the ICCPR Act and the Computer Crime Act. Ranik accused police officers of physical abuse and was remanded for five months before he was released on bail. In 2023, Ranik won his case against the police for his unlawful arrest.

The ICCPR Act also functionally serves as a blasphemy law in Sri Lanka. In May 2023, Sri Lankan authorities arrested standup comedian [Nathasha Edirisooriya](#) on charges of insulting Buddhism during a comedy show. She was released on bail in July 2023. Following Edirisooriya’s arrest, Minister Wickramanayake said he *intended* to submit a draft bill to prevent distortion of religion, arguing that no individual has the right to offend any religion. President Wickremesinghe additionally *called* for the establishment of a special police unit to combat “religious disharmony.” In May 2024, Sri Lanka’s Human Rights Commission (HRCSL) *expressed concern* regarding the “misapplication” of the ICCPR Act in the arrest of four individuals in Trincomalee. On May 12, four Tamils were arrested for allegedly violating a temporary order by holding a commemoration event at a Hindu temple. The HRCSL determined that such acts did not constitute the advocacy of national or religious hatred.

In April 2023, Evangelical pastor Jerome Fernando issued *controversial remarks* deemed *offensive* to Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. Members of the clergy, including the Catholic Church, *condemned* his remarks. In May 2023, President Wickremesinghe ordered the Central Intelligence Department to investigate the remarks and their potential to cause religious conflict. Pastor Fernando was *arrested* in December and granted bail in January 2024 but is prohibited from leaving the country and making additional statements that could “disrupt religious harmony.”

Surveillance of Religious Minorities and Advocates

In October 2023, the government published the [Online Safety Bill](#), which human rights experts argue could exacerbate the targeting and detention of religious minority communities. The bill seeks to establish an

Online Safety Commission, with broad powers to determine whether an online statement is “false ... threatening, alarming or distressing.” The bill mandates that any individual who “voluntarily causes disturbance to any assembly lawfully engaged in ... religious worship or religious ceremonies” can face up to three years in prison. It further criminalizes the publication of statements intended to harm or “outrage” religious feelings or insult religious beliefs. Sri Lanka’s parliament *passed* the bill in January 2024.

In February 2024, the government *introduced* the Nongovernmental Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act. If passed, this law would require stricter scrutiny and regulations of civil society organizations, including educational institutions, charities, human rights organizations, and research institutions. NGOs working on religious freedom issues have expressed concern about the implementation of the act and have claimed the government already surveils their activities, as they must register with the National Secretariat for Nongovernmental Organizations and submit regular reports. NGOs working on human rights and who advocate for religious minorities have reported receiving visits from police, being questioned about their funding sources, and having their offices searched.

Conclusion

Religious freedom remains a persistent issue in Sri Lanka. The government’s continued use of problematic laws to detain religious minorities and their advocates, tolerance of hate speech, and enforcement of unequal and opaque standards regarding places of worship all contribute to a challenging environment for religious minorities. In the absence of policy change, pending legislation such as the Online Safety Bill, ATA, and the Nongovernmental Organizations Act risk further marginalizing and targeting Sri Lanka’s religious minorities.

In its [2024 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommends that the U.S. Department of State add Sri Lanka to its Special Watchlist for severe violations of religious freedom. The chapter also outlines a number of steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Sri Lanka, including urging the government to repeal or amend harmful legislation like the PTA.



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