

## **Sri Lanka Country Profile on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)**

World Faiths Development Dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>

## SUMMARY

Sri Lanka faces a social and political crisis where religious divides among different communities play significant roles. Of particular concern is Buddhist extremism that has intertwined religious, ethnic, and political roots, within Sri Lanka and beyond. Violence against Muslims, Hindus, and Christians is largely the result of failures by the Sri Lankan state to protect minority rights and promote understandings of citizenship that reflect a commitment to the nation's diverse heritage, and religious and cultural identities, as well as engrained social prejudices. Following the 25-year civil war between the Sinhalese-dominated government, and the breakaway Tamils that ended in 2009, successive governments have not addressed root causes of the country's long-standing ethnic conflict, which include wide inequities among different communities. A newer element is terrorism claimed by Muslim actors that arrived forcefully on the scene with the Easter 2019 attacks on Christian churches, that killed almost 300 people. The Easter bombings have been followed by reprisal attacks against Muslims notably involving militant Buddhist groups.

Sri Lanka's tensions around what is a mosaic of ethnicity, religion, and language (all intertwined) have colored its history. This has sullied what had seemed in earlier times to be an especially promising democracy that was blessed with resources and an entrepreneurial population. Despite promising developments, the long and bitter civil war and continuing civic tension and governance failures contribute to disappointing progress and uncertain prospects.

Of real concern today are toxic brands of nationalism, including by Buddhist monks, used to promote discrimination, hate, and violence. Buddhist nationalism has long been a source of political mobilization in Sri Lanka, centered on the idea that Sri Lanka is a country for Sinhalese Buddhists (despite the nation's striking multicultural diversity). Tamils, Muslims, and Christians have suffered in different ways and at different times. The toxicity of rumors and related hate speech is reflected in reported comments by Buddhist hard-liners, for example: "Don't go to Muslim businesses, because Muslim-owned clothing stores are sterilizing women's panties to keep the Sinhalese population down."<sup>2</sup>

Sri Lanka, a Buddhist majority nation, is part of South Asia, where overall different religious communities dominate and Buddhists are a minority tradition. This is advanced as one explanation for tensions that spill over into international relations, especially with neighboring India. Growing links to Buddhist majority nations in Southeast Asia (notably Myanmar and Thailand) are a significant factor in religious nationalist politics today.

In sum, the tensions that Sri Lanka faces today are deep and complex. Politics is commonly fingered as the primary cause and path to a solution, but underlying issues related to interreligious institutions and attitudes affect social cohesion, and inclusion and treatment of minorities in law and society.

### Constitution and Law

Both before and after Sri Lanka's independence from Britain (1948), changes in constitutional arrangements and law have reflected differing views about ethnic and religious balance. Language is also a factor as the 1956 Sinhala Only Act stipulated that Sinhala was Sri Lanka's only official language. The constitution of 31 August 1978 (still in force today), provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,

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<sup>2</sup> Chotiner.

including the freedom to change religion. Four religions are recognized by law: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The state established a democratic socialist state, ensures the distribution of wealth, oversees economic development, raises educational and cultural standards, and promotes national identity through eliminating discrimination. The citizen's duty is to foster national unity by relinquishing their personal rights to ensure racial and religious harmony and protect public health and morality.

A longstanding underlying issue is local autonomy and equality among different groups, notably the Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups. Amendments to the constitution (18 since 1978) often involve the central issue of religious and ethnic identities. The intense and bloody civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, represented by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), inflamed tensions around autonomy and balance of power among ethnic and religious groups. In 2009, after President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared that the Sinhalese government had defeated the LTTE, an 18<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment expanded already extensive executive powers and essentially ended efforts to strengthen Tamil autonomy.

Religious “balance” is a continuing issue. The constitution and other laws give Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country's religious faiths and commits the government to protecting it while respecting the rights of religious minorities. A 2003 Supreme Court ruling determined that the state is constitutionally required to protect only Buddhism; other religions do not have the same right to state protection.

There is no registration requirement for central religious bodies of the four recognized religions, but new religious groups, including groups affiliated with the four recognized religions, must register with the government to obtain approval to construct new places of worship, sponsor religious workers (missionary) visas/immigration permits, operate schools, and apply for subsidies for religious education. Religious organizations may seek incorporation by an act of parliament, which requires a simple majority and affords religious groups state recognition. A 2008 ministerial circular, introduced by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, requires all groups, regardless of their religion, to receive permission from the ministry to register and construct new places of worship. A June 2017 Supreme Court ruling upheld the registration requirements and the Ministry of Buddha Sasana ruled the 2008 circular on registration and construction of religious facilities applies only to Buddhist religious sites.

Specific government ministers address concerns of each major religious community. Departmental and ministerial assignments are based on the religion of the respective incumbent minister and change when a new minister of a different faith takes office. This is a customary tradition spanning the past several governments.

Proselytizing (active efforts to encourage conversion from one faith to another) has been a significant source of tension in Sri Lanka. A 2003 Supreme Court ruling held that no fundamental right to proselytize exists or is protected under the constitution. In 2017 the Supreme Court determined that the right to propagate one's religion is not protected by the constitution.

Sri Lanka is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Underlying Factors in Ethnic and Religious Tensions**

Sri Lanka's history of violence is linked to longstanding patterns of discrimination, both by the state and reflecting tensions within the society. Government officials at the local level are seen to engage in systematic discrimination against religious minorities, especially Muslims and converts to “free” (nondenominational and evangelical) Christian groups. Local government officials and police respond minimally or not at all to incidents



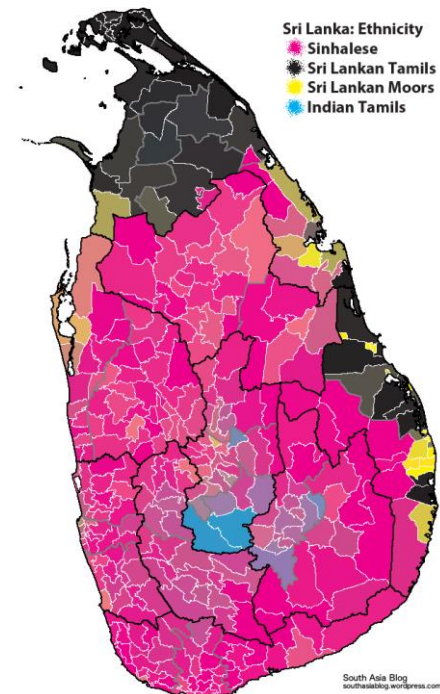
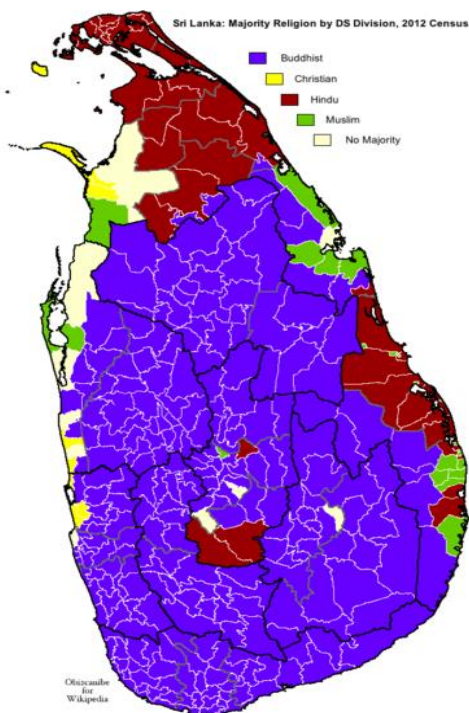
of religiously motivated violence and government officials are said to be complicit in physical attacks on and harassment of religious minorities and their places of worship.

Various reports indicate that violence and official harassment linked to religious identity have increased in recent years. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Power Force) promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media. Government responses have included declarations of a nationwide state of emergency, restrictions on social media access, and arrests. Local police and government officials have required places of worship to obtain approval to conduct religious activities. A mounting concern in recent years is the role of social media campaigns inciting communities to discrimination and violence. Deliberate campaigns have targeted religious minorities, fueling hatred and violence.

Peacebuilding, reconciliation, and conflict resolution are central concerns in Sri Lanka today. Both official and civil society organizations work to strengthen the capacity of religious and community leaders to engage in peacebuilding activities. Efforts include district-level interreligious reconciliation committees created in 2010 by the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka after the civil war ended.

## Freedom of Religion or Belief in Practice

### *Religious Demography*



Sri Lanka's total population is estimated to be 22.6 million as of July 2018. And, according to the 2012 census, 70.2 percent is Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian. Ethnicity, religion, and geographic concentration are important factors in a complex landscape. The Theravada Buddhist community is predominantly Sinhalese and comprises nearly all the country's Buddhists. Buddhists are the majority in the

Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western Provinces. Tamils are mainly Hindu with a significant Christian minority and are the majority in the Northern Province and the second largest group (after Muslims) in the Eastern Province. Tamils of Indian origin, who are mostly Hindu, have a large presence in the Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces. Most Muslims self-identify as a separate ethnic group (Sri Lankan Muslims). Muslims form a plurality in the Eastern Province, with sizable Muslim populations in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Western Provinces. Christians live throughout the country, but have a larger presence in the Eastern, Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces, and a smaller presence in Sabaragamuwa and Uva Provinces.

Most Muslims are Sunni, with small Shia and Ahmadi minorities. An estimated 82 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. Other Christian groups include Church of Ceylon (Anglicans), the Dutch Reformed Church, Methodists, Baptists, Assembly of God, Pentecostals, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Christian evangelicals and other "free" (evangelical and nondenominational Protestant) groups have grown in recent years, but there are no reliable estimates of their numbers. Some Christian groups worship in "house churches" (i.e., outside formally designated places of worship). The government does not recognize the small Baha'i and Jewish populations.

## Religion and Education

Religion is a compulsory subject in both public and private school curricula, and current arrangements reflect the nation's ethnic, linguistic, and religious tensions. Parents may elect to have their children study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity, provided there is enough demand (at least 15 students) within the school for the chosen subject. Students may not opt out of religious instruction. All schools teaching the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus must use the Ministry of Education curriculum on religion, which covers the four main religions and is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary Level exams (equivalent to U.S. grade 12). The ten international schools, which admit Sri Lankan children but do not follow the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus, are not required to teach religious studies.

Religious schools receive state funding for facilities and personnel, and come under the purview of the central government and/or provincial ministries of education. The law requires government and semi-government schools, some religiously affiliated, to accept students of all faiths; some schools reportedly have refused students admission on religious grounds. Not all schools have sufficient resources to teach all four recognized religions, and civil society groups report that some students were forced to study religions other than their own. Government schools frequently experience a shortage of teachers, sometimes requiring available teachers to teach the curriculum of a faith different from their own.

## Family Law

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and property inheritance, are adjudicated either under customary law of the ethnic or religious group in question or under the country's civil law. The practice varies by region, with many exceptions. Sharia and cultural practices typically govern Muslim's marriages and divorces, while civil law applies to most property rights. Civil law governs most marriages of Sinhalese and Tamils of various religions, including mixed marriages or those of individuals who claim no religious affiliation.

## FoRB Issues, Violations, and Violence

Rising tensions are reflected in a variety of reports, including about violent incidents, of which the Easter 2019 bombings that targeted especially Christian churches is the most serious. With religion, language, and ethnicity closely linked, incidents often involve various elements that are difficult to disentangle. Hate speech through

various media is involved, as are international networks. Specific incidents range from abductions and individual violence to mob violence and organized attacks. Government responses are seen as weak and inadequate, with politicians often fueling negative attitudes towards “others.” Active involvement of extremist and nationalist Buddhist groups is a special concern.

Violent incidents include several days of anti-Muslim attacks in Kandy District in 2018, that left two dead and 28 injured and almost 300 houses and 160 shops damaged or destroyed. The incident was precipitated when a group of Muslim men was accused of killing a Sinhalese Buddhist over a traffic dispute. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist gangs perpetrated the violence in various locations. An anti-Muslim riot in Ampara District in the Eastern Province left at least five persons wounded and several shops and a mosque damaged. State police and local government officials were reportedly complicit in physical attacks on and harassment of religious minorities and their places of worship, siding with the religious majority in given communities.

## Buddhist Extremism

Sri Lanka’s most active Buddhist extremist group is Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), which entered politics in 2012 with a Buddhist-nationalist ideology and agenda, its leaders claiming that Sri Lankans had become immoral and turned away from Buddhism. The blame is directed primarily to Sri Lankan Muslims. BBS’s rhetoric builds on other populist anti-Muslim movements, claiming that Muslims are “taking over” the country thanks to a high birth rate. It accuses Muslim organizations of funding international terrorism and seeking to impose sharia law. BBS has links to Myanmar’s extremist 969 movement, notorious for its hardline rhetoric against the Rohingya Muslim community.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhist nationalist groups such as the BBS promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities. The rhetoric of the BBS and other Buddhist nationalist groups has incited various actors to commit acts of violence against members of religious minority groups. The Kandy riots are an example of where social media mobilized anti-Muslim mobs.

## Peace Efforts with a FoRB Focus

During July 2018, a group of lawyers and academics from the South Asia region met in Colombo at the South Asia Legal Consultation, entitled “Defending Religious Freedom.” Deputy Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance Godfrey Yogarajah and Director of the Asian Evangelical Alliance’s Religious Liberty Commission Yamini Ravindran participated, discussing common trends, challenges, and strategies to promote religious freedom in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> Ranga Sirilal, September 29, 2014, “Radical Myanmar monk joins hands with Sri Lankan Buddhists,” *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-buddhism-myanmar/radical-myanmar-monk-joins-hands-with-sri-lankan-buddhists-idUSKCN0HO0GD20140929>

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