

## **SRI LANKA**

### **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Sporadic attacks on Christian churches by Buddhist extremists and some societal tension due to ongoing allegations of forced or deceitful conversions continued, although the number and scale of attacks were reportedly fewer than in recent years.

U.S. embassy officials conveyed U.S. government concerns about religious freedom issues, particularly attacks on churches, to government leaders and urged them to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. The ambassador and other embassy officials also discussed religious freedom concerns with religious leaders and regularly met with representatives of all the country's religious groups to review a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom concerns. The U.S. embassy supported interfaith efforts by religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution of the underlying causes of conflict, and the U.S. embassy undertook a number of projects promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

Approximately 70 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent Muslim. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west, Muslims populate the east, and the north is predominantly Hindu.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhists. Most Tamils, who make up the largest ethnic minority, are Hindus. Almost all Muslims are Sunnis; there is a small minority of Shia, including members of the Bohra community. Almost 80 percent of Christians are Roman Catholics, with Anglican and other mainstream Protestant churches also present. Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Pentecostals, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are

also present. Evangelical Christian groups have grown in recent years, although membership remains small.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution states, “Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” The constitution gives a citizen “the right either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching.” The constitution accords Buddhism the “foremost place” and commits the government to protecting it, but does not recognize it as the state religion.

The Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs has four departments that work specifically with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian affairs. According to the legislation defining their mandates, each department should formulate and implement programs that inculcate religious values and promote a “virtuous society.” During the year, the Department of Buddhist Religious Affairs gave financial assistance to maintain temples in remote areas and conducted religious school tests and teacher training examinations. It also assisted in the conduct of Buddhist ceremonies at national events. The Department of Christian Religious Affairs developed infrastructure facilities at places of worship and provided financial assistance to churches in need. It also conducted evaluation of teachers of Christianity. The Department of Hindu Religious Affairs gave financial assistance to reconstruct temples destroyed during the conflict in the north and east, developed Hindu Aranery Schools (religious-based primary schools), and conducted seminars and workshops for teachers of Hinduism. The Department of Muslim Religious Affairs organized Muslim religious events, contributed towards development needs of Islamic institutions, and issued identity cards for Islamic clergy. It also issued letters of recommendation for students seeking education in Islamic studies in foreign countries.

Religious groups are not required to register with the government. To conduct financial transactions and open bank accounts, however, they must be incorporated either by an act of parliament under the Companies Act, as a business, under the Societies Ordinance, or under the Trust Ordinance. Until the 1960s, most churches were either Catholic or Anglican and were incorporated by acts of parliament.

Beginning in the 1970s as new Christian groups--including evangelical groups--began to emerge in the country, it became more common to register churches under the Companies Act. Due to allegations that evangelical churches have engaged in “unethical conversions,” the government has become reluctant to register new religious groups as companies. Evangelical groups reported that they found it increasingly difficult to register new churches or to reregister under the Companies Act. Registration under the Societies or Trust Ordinances limits these churches’ ability to conduct certain financial transactions.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are adjudicated according to the customary law of the concerned ethnic or religious group.

Religion is a mandatory subject in the public school curriculum. Parents may choose for their children to study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. Students who belong to other religious groups can pursue religious instruction outside the public school system. All schools follow the Department of Education curricula on the subject, which is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary/Level exams. International schools that follow the London Ordinary/Level syllabus may opt not to teach religious studies in schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Buddhist Poya days; Hindu Thai Pongal, New Year, and Deepawali festivals; Islamic Hadji and Ramadan festivals and the Birth of Prophet Muhammad; and Christian Good Friday, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom. Although the government publicly endorsed religious freedom, in practice there were problems in some areas.

While the number of attacks against Christians continued to decline and efforts to pass anti-conversion legislation reportedly declined, some Christian groups occasionally complained that the government tacitly condoned harassment and violence aimed at them. Police generally provided protection for these groups at their request. In some cases police response was inadequate, and local police officials reportedly were reluctant to take legal action against individuals involved in the attacks.

Some Christian groups, in particular newer denominations, reported an increase in complications obtaining local permission to construct church buildings. A Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs circular issued in September directed that the ministry must approve construction or maintenance of a place of worship. Such approval often was difficult to obtain for evangelical Christian groups in majority Buddhist towns and villages. There were credible reports that several evangelical Christian churches received letters and verbal instructions from local authorities ordering their closure because they did not procure approvals to build churches or maintain existing places of worship, and at least two had closed. Places of worship of other Christian denominations, including Catholic and Anglican, did not receive such orders.

Several smaller congregations were denied permission to register with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs as churches during the year, reportedly because they were not members of the National Christian Council. This prevented them from obtaining authority to solemnize marriages. The National Christian Council is an umbrella organization representing traditional Protestant churches. They coordinate often with the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), which represents the newer denomination churches. The government has used membership in the NCC as an administrative obstacle to newer denominations. Local authorities sometimes did not want these groups operating in their districts due to allegations of unethical conversions and pressures by local Buddhist groups.

Some evangelical Christian groups reported incidences of governmental discrimination in the provision of services. Advanced-level public schools require all students to take a course in religion. Some government schools with small numbers of Christian students told their parents there were no teachers available to teach Christian-based religion classes, and therefore their children would be required to attend Buddhist religion classes instead. There also were reports of government schools refusing to enroll Christians on the basis of their religion.

Most religious workers in the country were indigenous. Foreign clergy may work in the country, but for the last three decades, the government has limited the issuance of temporary work permits. During the year work permits for foreign clergy were issued for one year rather than five years as in the past, but they could be extended. In the past it was regular practice for many foreign religious workers on development projects to use tourist visas to gain entry without encountering problems with immigration authorities.

There also were reports of government troops setting up Buddhist shrines in Tamil areas of the north, with some Tamil groups claiming this was a sign of government-sponsored Sinhalese colonization of former Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-held areas. For example, the number of Buddhist statues, viharas, and stupas on the A9 highway reportedly increased throughout the year.

The government's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) noted that it heard reports that "the military had cancelled religious services to remember persons killed or missing and even some of the priests had been threatened and intimidated for their attempts to commemorate those killed in the conflict." The LLRC stated that "community leaders and religious leaders should be free to organize peaceful events and meetings without restrictions" and recommended the government "ensure that such rights are not arbitrarily restricted or violated by any state institution, especially by the security forces and the police." The LLRC also recommended that the government "take immediate steps to remove any remaining restrictions on visiting places of worship with the only exception being made in respect of the restrictions necessitated by mine clearance activities. This should also include access to places of religious worship within the High Security Zones."

In May authorities dropped charges and released Sarah Malanie Perera, a national resident who had previously lived in Bahrain for 19 years prior to her return to the country. She had been arrested in April 2010 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act because of a book she had written with a description of her conversion to Islam. Perera returned to Bahrain following her release.

### **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations**

The U.S. government has listed the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997. The LTTE victimized Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians.

In 1990 the LTTE expelled tens of thousands of Muslim inhabitants, virtually the entire Muslim population in the area, from the northern part of the country, many from the town of Jaffna. Although most of these persons remained displaced and lived in or near welfare centers, some members of this community continued resettling in Jaffna during the year. It was unclear how many individuals would eventually return, given the long period of time which had elapsed since their original departure. Many younger members of this community felt few ties to the north and expressed reluctance to return there.

The government worked with UNHCR and UNOPS to assess the needs and durability of resettlement of this displaced Muslim community and other internally displaced persons (IDP). The Presidential Task Force further requested that domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focus greater attention on the Muslim IDP population largely residing within welfare centers in the Puttalam area and to redirect some level of existing IDP program support--mainly shelter-related--so that Muslim IDPs could be resettled to their original home areas.

The LLRC noted that displaced Muslim IDPs had a significant effect on the process of reconciliation and recommended that the government create a uniform policy, to include an assistance package of financial assistance and other material support, aimed at the resettlement of these IDPs and/or their integration into host communities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Discrimination based on religious differences was much less common than discrimination based on ethnicity. In general, members of the various religious groups tended to be tolerant of each other's religious beliefs. However, prior allegations by Buddhist extremists of Christian involvement in "unethical" or forced conversions continued to be a source of tension between the two communities. Christians denied the charges, responding that persons freely underwent conversion. Some groups also alleged that Christians engaged in aggressive proselytism and took advantage of societal ills such as general poverty, war, and lack of education. Christians countered that their relief efforts were not aimed at converting aid beneficiaries.

There were reports of Buddhist monks or local residents in villages not allowing Christians to bury their dead in public cemeteries.

In a statement issued to the local press on November 11, the Jathika Hela Urumaya called upon the government to enact legislation to "ban fundamentalist Christian groups in the island" by reintroducing the 2004 anti-conversion bill in parliament, despite a Supreme Court ruling that some sections of it were unconstitutional.

Christians, particularly those from evangelical denominations, sometimes encountered harassment and physical attacks on property and places of worship by some local Buddhists who were opposed to conversion and believed Christian

groups threatened them. The number and severity of the attacks reportedly diminished somewhat during the year. The NCEASL reported attacks on Christian churches, organizations, religious leaders, and congregants; many of the attacks were reported to the police. Credible sources confirmed some of these attacks.

Camillus Roshan and S. Thanaruben of the Alliance Development Trust, the relief and development arm of the NCEASL, were attacked by an unidentified group on October 19 in Vavuniya. Police arrested three suspects in connection with the assault. The suspects were held in custody for 14 days and released on bail. The case was ongoing at year's end.

On August 7, the pastor of the National Gospel Church in Ratnapura was warned by a group of Buddhist monks to leave the area. The church ceased meeting for worship services due to these threats. In December, the pastor and a church worker were attacked by a group of people. The pastor did not file a complaint with the police, fearing they would favor the monks in the case because of the monks' significant influence in the village. Since the August 7 threats, the pastor has minimized his church activities and limited visits to his congregation due to fear of further harassment.

On July 19, a group of approximately 50 persons threw stones at the homes of five Christian families, causing damage to the houses. They also shouted threats against Christians. The group then broke into a grocery shop owned by one of the families and assaulted the owner. Police filed a case in the Welimada Magistrates Court against several of the assailants for assault and causing damage to property, and a hearing was pending at year's end.

On June 5, a group of 200 people forcibly entered the Prayer Tower Church in Puttalam and assaulted one of the church members. The police filed action jointly against both the attackers and the church on a count of breach of peace in the Marawila Magistrates Court. The church was compelled to come to a settlement, promising to limit its worship services.

On March 3 unidentified persons threw two fire bombs at the Jeevanalokaya Church in Hambantota. No one was injured in the attack. The pastor of the church continued to receive threats following the incident. The officer in charge led investigations into the attack but no arrests were made. The pastor and his family continue to live in the village.

In a statement published November 4, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, head of the Catholic Church in the country, accused what he called “American fundamentalist churches” of converting large numbers of Buddhists and Catholics through inducements. In his statement, the Cardinal called upon the government to control the spread of these churches. The NCEASL wrote to the Cardinal requesting an opportunity to discuss these issues, but received a response declining the invitation.

On October 26, a group of Catholic priests, members of the parish council, and their lawyer asked police to destroy a monument to disappeared persons in Gampaha. They alleged that the monument, which had stood for 11 years, was on church land unlawfully. A group of Catholic priests who work on human rights issues supported the monument remaining in that location. The case was ongoing at the end of the year.

In October 2010 a group of approximately 35 persons, led by six Buddhist monks, entered the premises of the Church of the Four Square Gospel in Kalutara. The intruders disrupted a worship service, threatened and assaulted the pastor, and destroyed furniture and musical instruments. The church lodged a complaint with the local police station and filed a case with the Kalutara Magistrate’s Court. The case was pending at year’s end.

In September a group of Buddhist monks destroyed an unofficial Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura, a UNESCO world heritage city sacred to Buddhists. The demolition was denounced by Muslim and Sinhalese leaders. Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa criticized the monks’ actions and assured Muslim leaders of the government’s commitment to protect Islamic holy sites.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials conveyed U.S. government concerns about religious freedom issues, particularly attacks on churches, to government leaders and urged them to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. The ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials also met frequently with representatives of all the country’s religious groups to discuss a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom concerns. The U.S. government strongly supported political reconciliation, and the embassy supported interfaith efforts by religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution of the underlying causes of the conflict.



U.S. government agencies in the country undertook several projects to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement, including interfaith panel discussions, workshops, and other events. These events involved key regional religious leaders and reached several thousand participants. For example, the embassy held interfaith panel discussions at Martin Luther King, Jr. exhibitions throughout the year, as well as at a May 26-May 30 advanced training program on nonviolence and peace-building for university students. The U.S. government also sponsored a project that provided a grant to a local NGO for training and support for interfaith dialogue and community engagement through 80 community and religious leaders in the northeast, east, and central regions. The ambassador and other embassy officials also regularly participated in religious conferences, ceremonies, and other events around the country.