

**Hearing on Sri Lanka
USCRIF**

Restrictions on religious freedom of Christians in Sri Lanka.

7th May 2024

Mike Gabriel
Head of Religious Freedom
National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka

Chairman, Vice Chair, and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding religious freedom challenges faced by the Christian community in Sri Lanka. My name is Mike Gabriel, and I serve as the head of religious freedom for the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, commonly known as NCEASL. The NCEASL, with a history spanning over 70 years, is presently the largest representative body for evangelical Christians in the country. Over the past 14 years, my work at NCEASL has focused on advocating for and documenting religious freedom violations, supporting victims of religious persecution, and promoting social literacy on religious freedom.

With regard to religious demographics, Protestant Christians represent approximately 1.4 percent of the population, while Catholics comprise 6.2 percent. Constitutionally, Buddhism holds a privileged position under Article 9, with the State tasked to protect and foster the Buddhasasana while guaranteeing religious freedom to all citizens under Articles 10 and 14 (1) (e) of the constitution. However, state policy and practice have historically been majoritarian in nature, resulting in systemic discrimination against ethnoreligious minorities.

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, NCEASL has documented several incidents of discrimination, intimidation, and violence against the Christian community. This highlights the entrenched and persistent nature of religious freedom violations in the country. Furthermore, perpetrators of such violations often evade justice, as seen in the case of the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, where three churches, including two Catholic churches and one evangelical church, were bombed, resulting in over 260 deaths and 500 injuries. Five years on, and despite numerous committees and commissions of inquiry appointed by the government, the truth behind the attacks and the extent of the conspiracy remains shrouded in ambiguity.

Administrative restrictions imposed by the state, such as the 2022 Circular issued by the Ministry of Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs, have also posed significant challenges to the religious freedom of Christian communities. The circular mandates the registration of new places of worship, effectively requiring state approval for Christian religious activities. This undermines constitutional guarantees for religious freedom and non-discrimination in Articles 10, and 12 and 14 (1) (e) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka. The analysis of recent incidents concerning demands for registration of churches indicates that registration is

frequently exploited by the authorities as an intimidation tactic and a pretext to disrupt Christian activity in specific areas, demanding churches to register or discontinue worship activities. In some instances, the authorities have also hindered churches with parliamentary incorporation from carrying out religious worship services.

In a recent development, the Department of Christian Affairs have now specified plans to legislate a mandatory system to register Christian places of worship in the country. Following this, in March 2024, the Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs announced that steps will be taken to raid unregistered religious centres involved in religious conversions. This has been a worrying development.

Moreover, Christian churches, especially in rural areas, are also regularly visited by law enforcement officials, including members of the intelligence apparatus, who question churches about their activities including their membership and finances, as part of what churches deem--a culture of surveillance on Christian places of worship.

Apart from this, sporadically, Christian parents also face discrimination when seeking admission for their children to public schools, with some schools disregarding legal obligations to admit Christian students. Despite occasional judicial intervention, these violations persist, underscoring the complicity of state actors in religious freedom violations.

In conclusion, we urge the US government to press the Government of Sri Lanka to:

- Establish a clear and voluntary registration process for places of worship, allowing Christian churches the option to seek legal recognition.
- Publish the complete findings of previous inquiries into the Easter Sunday bombings and to establish an independent investigation into the attacks, while also arresting the prevailing culture of impunity concerning attacks on places of worship.
- Support initiatives to build religious freedom literacy among state officials, with a specific focus on law enforcement and sub-national state actors.