



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2024

CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SRI LANKA

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USCIRF's Mission

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

On May 7, 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing, [*Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka*](#). The hearing, led by Vice Chair Fred Davie, brought together a number of experts to examine current religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka and potential policy options for the U.S. government.

[*Vice Chair Davie*](#) opened the hearing by acknowledging the 15th anniversary of the end of Sri Lanka's Civil War. He explained that following the war, discrimination against Sri Lanka's religious minorities—including Tamil Christians, Tamil Hindus, and Muslims—has continued, often under the guise of national security concerns. He emphasized that due to the government's perpetration and toleration of religious freedom violations, USCIRF has recommended that Sri Lanka be placed on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List in 2023 and 2024.

[*Commissioner David Curry*](#) then offered remarks and reflections from USCIRF's October 2023 delegation to Sri Lanka. He noted that while Commissioners were encouraged by several local interfaith efforts, Sri Lanka continues to target religious minorities using harmful legislation. He highlighted authorities' use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR) to arrest and detain comedians, poets, and lawyers for blasphemy and activists advocating for religious minorities.

[*Commissioner Stephen Schneck*](#) echoed these concerns and offered additional comments on the increasing trend of land disputes impacting religious minorities in Sri Lanka. He explained that the Department of Archeology, operating under the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs, has worked in collaboration with Buddhist monks and local authorities to identify cultural sites throughout the country, leading to the expropriation of Hindu and Muslim places of worship in the north and east.

[*Hejaaz Hizbullah*](#), a human rights lawyer and former PTA detainee, provided an overview of the current religious freedom violations experienced by Sri Lankan Muslims. He highlighted a March 2024 judgment by the Colombo High Court sentencing Galagoda Atthe Gnanasara Thero, a hardline Buddhist monk, to four years imprisonment for insulting Islam in 2016. He emphasized that Thero had issued several discriminatory statements toward Muslims since 2016.

[*Madura Rasaratnam*](#), Interim Executive Director of People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL), contextualized the current religious freedom conditions in the aftermath of the civil war. She explained that the primary drivers of the conflict have not been resolved but continue to contribute to current religious tensions, including the expropriation of Tamil Hindu land and places of worship in the north and east.

She highlighted the case of the Athi Ayan temple on Kurunthurmailai Hill and the harassment of Judge T. Saravanaraja, who was forced to flee the country after ruling against the construction of a Buddhist statue.

[Mike Gabriel](#), Head of the Religious Liberty Commission, National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), summarized the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's Christian communities. He noted that since the end of the civil war, NCEASL has documented several incidents of discrimination, intimidation, and violence against the Christian community. Gabriel recommended that the U.S. government urge the Sri Lankan government 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 establish an independent investigation into the attacks.
- Support initiatives to build religious freedom literacy among state officials, with a specific focus on law enforcement and subnational state actors.

[Shreen Abdul Saroor](#), Cofounder of the Women's Action Network, summarized the unique religious freedom issues experienced by Muslim women in Sri Lanka. She emphasized that following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, Muslim women were disproportionately targeted under the PTA but also played a central role in advocating for the release of PTA detainees. Saroor further explained the nuances surrounding the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), which serves as the authority for marriage registration among Muslim couples in Sri Lanka. To curb anti-Muslim trends, she recommended:

- Issuing public statements against discriminatory policies that disproportionately target Muslims, including rejecting harmful narratives surrounding the Easter Sunday attacks.
- Repealing the PTA and proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB) and condemning the arbitrary use of the ICCPR Act.

- Calling on Sri Lanka to enforce its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other human rights instruments.

[Alan Keenan](#), a Senior Consultant at the International Crisis Group, explained that while the Sri Lankan constitution offers general freedoms for Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians to practice their faiths, restrictions are underpinned by the constitutional mandate guaranteeing Buddhism the foremost place. He highlighted recent examples of the Sri Lankan government's installation of a Buddhist stupa in Kurunthurmalai and the March detention of Hindu worshipers in Veddukunaari. He recommended:

- The international community, including those whose citizens were targeted in the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, support the Catholic Church's call for an independent international investigation.
- Continued monitoring of Sri Lanka's human rights conditions by the United Nations Human Rights Council and other organizations to bolster conflict prevention.

Following the witnesses' testimony, Vice Chair Davie facilitated a question-and-answer session focused on how the United States can engage with the Sri Lankan government. All witnesses emphasized the importance of publicly raising Sri Lanka's religious freedom issues. Keenan stressed that the U.S. government has been primarily concerned with supporting economic stability in Sri Lanka, resulting in a softer approach to addressing human rights abuses. [Commissioner Frank Wolf](#) suggested that the U.S. Congress conduct a bipartisan delegation to Sri Lanka. Additional questions raised concerns about the registration process for places of worship, the targeting of advocates and religious minorities under the PTA, and the role of India's influence in Sri Lanka.

Vice Chair Davie concluded by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.



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