

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka remained on a concerning trajectory. Government and local authorities continued to harass, detain, and target religious minorities through discriminatory legislation and facilitated the expropriation of land from those communities under the guise of “protecting Buddhism.”

In collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs (BRCA); Buddhist monks; and the Army, the Department of Archeology continued to designate disputed places of worship in the north and east as “Buddhist” cultural sites at the expense of religious minorities. As a result, the government actively denied religious minorities access to houses of worship. In February, with support from that department, the army escorted Buddhist monks to Veddukkunaari temple in Vavuniya, declaring it an ancient Buddhist site. In March, authorities detained eight Tamil Hindus conducting Shivaratri festival activities at the temple, accusing them of harming Buddhist antiquities under the Antiquities Act. While authorities released the worshipers after 10 days, protests erupted across Vavuniya following their initial detention.

Beyond land disputes, religious minorities continued to face challenges in operating and registering places of worship. In August, the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (DMRCA) and the Wakfs Board announced the resumption of new mosque registrations, ending a five-year suspension following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. While a 2022 circular mandates registration only for new places of worship, the minister of BRCA announced in March that all religious institutions must register, regardless of their religion or belief. He added that, under the direction of the commissioner general for Buddhist affairs, authorities would raid all “unregistered” places of worship, claiming that such centers—including churches,

mosques, Hindu temples, and Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Halls—were engaged in religious conversions.

Christians and Muslims reported harassment and hate speech that contributed to a worsening social environment for their communities. In June, the Department of Examinations withheld exam results from 70 Muslim women from Zahira College who wore religious head coverings, claiming without evidence that they could have concealed Bluetooth earpieces to aid them during the exam. In April, Hindu nationalist group Siva Senai organized protests in Jaffna against the slaughter of cattle, where protesters carried placards carrying derogatory claims about Muslims and Christians.

Additionally, the government introduced legislation disproportionately impacting religious minorities. In January, it approved the Online Safety Bill, criminalizing online statements deemed to “outrage religious feelings.” In August, it published an amendment to that bill, offering modest changes but retaining language regarding insults to “religious sentiment.” Simultaneously, the minister of justice published the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), to replace the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which would expand state authority to search, arrest, and detain individuals under a broad definition of terrorism and likely facilitate targeting of religious minorities. Such targeting impacts those engaged in peaceful religious practice or protests, like lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah, whose trial under the PTA for “inciting communal disharmony” remained ongoing at the end of 2024. In February, the Supreme Court ruled that the ATA would require a national referendum to pass, unless legislators incorporate the recommended amendments—thereby leaving the PTA in effect. In October, the government, under newly elected President Aura Kumara Dissanayake, announced it would not repeal the PTA, claiming the issue is not the law but rather its “misuse.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Sri Lanka on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into the United States-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue, including the need to repeal or significantly reform the PTA to

require a higher threshold of evidence for charges, a definition of “terrorism” that complies with international standards, and safeguards against abuses of religious freedom.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through the Congressional Caucus on Ethnic and Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka,

foreign affairs committee hearings, resolutions, letters, and congressional delegations to Sri Lanka; and

- Prioritize meetings with the Department of Archeology and the Ministry of BRCA during congressional delegations, and specifically raise concerns over their expropriation of shared or disputed sacred sites.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Sri Lanka’s Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities](#)
- **Hearing:** [Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victim’s List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a multiethnic and multireligious country under the leadership of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, elected in September 2024. The constitution recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. While recognizing freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, Article 9 of the Constitution guarantees Buddhism the “foremost place” and instructs the government to foster and protect it.

Sri Lanka’s population is an estimated 22 million. Buddhists compose the majority (approximately 70 percent), followed by Hindus (12.6 percent), Muslims (9.7 percent), Roman Catholics (6.1 percent), Protestants and individuals who identify with other Christian denominations (1.3 percent), and followers of “other” religions (0.05 percent). Most Sri Lankans are ethnic Sinhalese and adhere to Buddhism. Tamils are the second largest ethnic group and are predominantly Hindu with a significant Christian minority. The government considers Muslims a distinct ethnic group. Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims, Indian Tamils, and other small groups also reside in the country.

Expropriation of Land

Throughout the year, the government continued facilitating the expropriation of land from religious minorities in the north and east under the auspices of protecting Buddhist cultural sites. In February, Sri Lanka’s National Physical Planning Department declared 11 additional Buddhist temples as sacred sites, bringing the total to 142. In March, the minister of BRCA proposed a new bill to safeguard “sacred Buddhist sites.” The same month, the army granted conditional access to seven Hindu temples in Jaffna’s High Security Zone but required worshipers to use army transportation, provide their name and home address, and allow the temple to share their information with the district and divisional secretariat.

Ahead of national elections, Ven. Dr. Omalpe Sobitha Thera, chairman of Sri Lanka’s National Association of Scholars, urged all political parties to maintain Buddhism’s primacy under Article 9 of the Constitution. Echoing this, Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Defense announced the restoration of several Buddhist *viharas*, claiming that thousands were damaged or declined during the civil war.

Places of Worship

April marked the five-year anniversary of the Easter Sunday attacks, which targeted three churches and hotels in Colombo, Negombo, and Batticaloa. Recognizing this anniversary, the inspector general of police instructed authorities to give special attention to religious sites due to heightened risk of terrorist attacks. Sri Lankan news media reported total of 5,580 police officers and 1,260 tri-force personnel deployed at 2,453 of the total 3,203 mosques across the country during Ramadan and to 1,873 churches out of 2,106 for Easter Sunday. This deployment reportedly incorporated body searches, as necessary, before entry into the houses of worship. In October, President Dissanayake visited St. Sebastian’s Catholic Church, which was damaged during the Easter Sunday attacks, and promised a “fair and transparent investigation.”

Attacks and Hate Speech against Religious Minorities

Incidents of discrimination and violence targeting religious minorities continued throughout the year, with little or no punishment from government authorities. Christians and Muslims reportedly faced threats, intimidation, or coercion for their religious beliefs, including from members of Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups like Siv Senai, Rudra Sena, and Ravana Sena. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reported an increase in anti-Christian and anti-Muslim sentiment proliferating online through social media platforms, particularly in the country’s north and east. In some cases, such discriminatory sentiment was expressed by government officials. For example, the head of Sri Lanka’s Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security said in May that “brainwashed Muslims” must be forcibly rehabilitated and emphasized that the country can no longer “please” the community by appeasing their demands.

Legislation Impacting Religious Freedom

In January, the government promised to take measures to prevent the purported distortion of religious teachings after a Buddhist preacher and seven of his followers committed suicide. In response to this interpretation of Buddhism, the Ministry of BRCA announced the formation of a committee to investigate “the activities of people who mislead society by distorting religious beliefs.”

In February, the government introduced the NGO Supervision and Registration Bill, which would require stricter regulations of civil society organizations. Its purview includes educational institutions, human rights organizations, and research institutions focusing on religious freedom issues. Such legislation risks exacerbating existing concerns from NGOs and religious leaders regarding levels of surveillance and monitoring. Additionally, in November, the new government announced that it would not make changes to the debated Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA)—which governs marriage, divorce, and other family matters for Muslims—emphasizing that any amendments would require consultation with religious leaders. Some critics argue that the MMDA does not afford Muslim women the same rights and protections as other religious minorities.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the United States continued to strengthen its bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka through foreign investment and high-level delegations. In August, the U.S. Embassy in Colombo [announced](#) the obligation of \$24.5 million to the Sri Lankan government to promote “good governance practices.” In May, then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Sri Lanka, where he expressed the importance of a robust civil society. In July, the United States [hosted](#) the Fifth Session of the United States-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue to “express their shared commitment to economic prosperity, security cooperation, sustainable development, democracy and human rights, and people-to-people exchanges.” However, these engagements did not appear to include any substantive discussion of issues related to freedom of religion or belief.