

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka continued to decline. Throughout the year, the government continued to harass and threaten religious minorities and at times deny them access to their places of worship. Christian communities continued to face obstacles in registering churches. The government also used discriminatory legislation to target, monitor, and detain religious minorities. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been [criticized](#) for its broad powers to search, arrest, and detain individuals, particularly Muslim citizens, following the [2019 Easter Sunday attacks](#). Independent experts at the United Nations (UN) and human rights groups expressed [concern](#) over a new terrorism bill, stating that it fails to address flaws in existing legislation, including a vague definition of terrorism and limited judicial oversight.

Throughout 2023, the Sri Lankan government shrank religious freedom by continuing to arbitrarily detain individuals under the PTA and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\) Act](#). Enacted in 2007, the ICCPR Act is designed to incorporate the international treaty into law, but authorities widely use it to restrict religious freedom and limit freedom of expression. In January, Youtuber Sepal Amarasinghe was [arrested](#) and remanded for his allegedly derogatory comments about the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Lord Buddha. In May, stand-up comedian [Nathasha Edirisooriya](#) was [arrested](#) under the ICCPR Act for making a joke allegedly insulting Buddhism and Christianity. Following her arrest, the Minister of Buddhist, Religious, and Cultural Affairs said he [intended](#) to submit a draft bill to prevent distortion of religion, arguing that no individual has the right to offend any religion. President Ranil Wickremesinghe additionally [called](#) for the establishment of a special police unit to combat “religious disharmony.”

During the year, the Department of Archeology, in coordination with Buddhist clergy and local authorities, continued to expropriate land from Hindus and Muslims in the Northern and Eastern provinces for the construction of Buddhist sites. In March, Buddhist monks, representatives from the Department of

Archeology, and Sri Lankan security forces attempted to [install](#) a Buddhist statue in Trincomalee, threatening to shoot Tamil and Muslim protesters if they disrupted the process. In July, Judge T. Saravanarajah [ordered](#) the eviction of Buddhist monks from a Tamil Hindu temple in Kurunthumalai after they [prevented](#) Hindu worshipers from gathering. In September, the Department of Archeology violated a 2022 court order issued by Saravanarajah, which [halted](#) the construction of a Buddhist temple at the Hindu site. Subsequently, citing threats to his life for presiding over these cases, Saravanarajah [resigned](#) and reportedly fled the country.

In several instances, authorities failed to address tensions and violence instigated by Buddhist monks towards religious minorities. In August, for example, a Buddhist monk led approximately 50 Sinhala men armed with knives and swords to intimidate [journalists](#) and an [interfaith group](#) in Batticaloa. The group harassed a Hindu priest, two Catholic priests, and one Muslim scholar, and attacked the Hindu priest. The same month, a group of Buddhist monks in Trincomalee [stormed](#) a district committee meeting, violently threatening the Governor of the Eastern District if he failed to reverse an [order](#) to halt the construction of a new Buddhist temple in the Tamil-majority district. The Minister of Buddha Sasana similarly [expressed](#) dissatisfaction with the Governor’s order but argued the situation should be left up to the courts.

In October, the government published the [Online Safety Bill](#), which experts argue could exacerbate the targeting and detention of minority religious communities. The bill seeks to establish an Online Safety Commission, with broad powers to determine whether an online statement is “false [...] threatening, alarming or distressing.” The bill mandates that any individual who “voluntarily causes disturbance to any assembly lawfully engaged in [...] religious worship or religious ceremonies” can face up to three years in prison. It further criminalizes the publication of statements intended to harm or “outrage” religious feelings or insult religious beliefs.

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);
- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to urge the Sri Lankan government to repeal or significantly reform the PTA, such that it requires

a higher threshold of evidence for charges and a definition of “terrorism” that complies with international standards; and

- Advocate for the full implementation of UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 51/1](#) to promote reconciliation, accountability, and religious freedom in Sri Lanka.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and congressional delegations to the country to better incorporate religious freedom concerns into U.S. policy towards Sri Lanka.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** [Colombo, Trincomalee, and Jaffna in October 2023](#)
- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Special Report:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Sri Lanka](#)

Background

Sri Lanka is a democratic republic under the leadership of President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The constitution recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. While the constitution recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, [Article 9](#) offers Buddhism the “foremost place” in society and requires the government to “protect and foster the Buddha Sasana.”

Sri Lanka’s population is an [estimated](#) 23.3 million, which is both religiously and ethnically diverse. Buddhists compose approximately 70 percent of the population, followed by Hindus at 12.6 percent, Muslims (mostly Sunni) at 9.7 percent, Roman Catholics at 6.1 percent, Protestant and other Christian denominations at 1.3 percent, and “other” religions at 0.05 percent. Most Sri Lankans are Sinhalese and adhere to Buddhism. Tamils are the second largest ethnic group and are primarily Hindu with a significant Christian minority. The next smallest ethnic group is referred to as Sri Lankan Moors, who are mostly Muslim. Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims, Indian Tamils, and other small ethnic groups also reside in the country.

Land Disputes and Places of Worship

Under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Department of Archeology collaborated with the Ministry of Defense’s Task Force for Archeological Heritage Management to identify cultural sites across the country. In the Northern and Eastern provinces, authorities have used this mandate to expropriate Hindu and Muslim land for the construction of Buddhist sites. In 2023, Tamil political parties reported increased attacks and vandalism against Hindu temples and damage to statues. A 2023 [report](#) identified 37 cases in the north and east in which the Department of Archeology attempted to construct Buddhist temples on Tamil land, despite the lack of Buddhist populations in those locations. Human rights groups additionally [report](#) as many as 68 instances of land disputes in Batticaloa, as of September 2023. In July, President Wickremesinghe [instructed](#) officials to prioritize and expedite the construction of Buddhist temples and cultural sites, including the Anuradhapura Sacred Site Development Plan and Maha Viharaya Development Plan in the Northern Province. In his remarks, Wickremesinghe identified Sri Lanka as a “Buddhist nation,” and emphasized the “national importance” of completing the Maha Viharaya (temple).

According to civil society organizations, police and military personnel fail to address land disputes or to intervene in instances of tension between Buddhist clergy and religious minorities. In October, a Buddhist monk led a Sinhalese procession to install a Buddhist statue on disputed land in Batticaloa. At the order of President Wickremesinghe, police removed the statue, after which Buddhist monk Ampitiye Sumanaratna [threatened](#) to kill Tamils. No action was taken by authorities against Sumanaratna. In January, high-ranking Buddhist monks [requested](#) President Wickremesinghe not to remove security personnel assigned to monitor locations identified by the Archeology Department as Buddhist religious sites in the north and east. The letter highlighted the role of the military in “safeguarding and maintaining important places of Buddhist worship.”

Surveillance and Detention of Religious Minorities

Surveillance, intimidation, and detention of religious minorities continued in 2023, under the premise of national security concerns. As of August 2023, 21 detainees were on [remand](#) under the PTA, and 25 individuals were serving prison terms on terrorism charges. In April, three detainees, who had been held in pretrial detention for 14 years, were released after determining that their confessions had been coerced. In June, human rights organizations and international lawyer associations expressed concerns about witness intimidation and coercion in PTA trials, specifically [Hejaaz Hizbullah](#), who was detained for 20 months before being charged and ultimately granted bail in 2022. In March, the government proposed the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), which introduced some positive reforms, including improved access to bail; however, it still contains a broad definition of terrorism, which human rights groups fear could result in continued arbitrary detention of religious minorities. In December 2023, the ATA remained under further review, leaving the PTA in effect.

In January 2023, the Sri Lankan Parliament [passed](#) the Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill. While this bill focuses primarily on rehabilitating “drug-dependent persons,” it mandates the “rehabilitation” of individuals deemed part of “violent extremist groups” or individuals engaged in “extreme or disruptive acts of sabotage.” Human rights groups expressed concerns that it could be [broadly applied](#) to “rehabilitate” individuals, including religious minority communities, arrested but not convicted of a crime.

Human rights groups continued to report authorities monitoring expression on social media. In November, however, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court [determined](#) that Section 3 of the ICCPR Act should not be interpreted as criminalizing blasphemy, including in online contexts. It cited the [case](#) of Ramzy Razik, a Muslim man who was detained for five months without charges in 2020 for writing a Facebook post expressing his views of challenges faced by Muslim communities.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy towards Sri Lanka has historically focused on democracy building and post-civil war transitional justice. In FY 2023, the U.S. government provided \$78 million for [programs](#) in Sri Lanka. In April, the U.S. Department of State [leveled](#) sanctions against Wasantha Karannagoda, Governor of the North Western Province, for human rights abuses during his time as a Naval Commander. In a September [letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, 12 members of Congress condemned Sri Lanka’s violation of international human rights law and democratic principles. In November, U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung [condemned](#) the continued use of the PTA to target peaceful protesters. In December, members of Congress introduced a [bipartisan resolution](#) urging increased transparency and investigations of human rights abuses, including against religious minority groups.