

Introduction

Despite the end of a prolonged 30 year ethnic civil war, Sri Lanka's challenges to unify its diverse ethno-religious population has been plunged into further uncertainty following the 2019 terror attacks on Easter Sunday. Sri Lanka's religious communities risk being on a collision course that will fundamentally threaten the peace and security of the nation, which will pose further challenges to a successful transition to justice. A fundamental Islamic presence has further heightened challenges for the country and region.

In 2015 Sri Lanka co-sponsored a UN resolution entitled 'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka', pledging to implement a robust transitional justice process and reaffirming that "all Sri Lankans are entitled to the full enjoyment of their human rights regardless of religion, belief or ethnicity..." Despite this positive step, religious intolerance in Sri Lanka has been increasing since 2000, and especially since the end of the civil war in 2009. Acts of violence motivated by religious hatred have increased since 2012, and crimes are committed in an environment of impunity. Buddhist nationalist groups continue to discriminate against, intimidate and attack Muslim and Christian communities.

Social media

Social media in Sri Lanka has a big influence on the spread of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding religious minorities. For many Facebook has become synonymous with the internet, with more traditional media such as newspapers being ignored. Facebook is often the medium of choice for those seeking news and those disseminating real or fake stories.¹

The rapid spread of rumours and the government's reaction of blocking social media following the 2018 Kandy riots, the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings and violence in the North Western Province, in May 2019, demonstrate this is an issue across Sri Lanka. It is important to note that whilst social media is the preferred means of spreading hate, it is not the cause of inter-religious tensions.

Social media is frequently used by Buddhist nationalist groups and individuals to create a climate of intolerance,

making it easier to mobilise people when they want to. In February 2018 false rumours were spread on Facebook about a seizure of 23,000 sterilisation pills from a Muslim pharmacist in Ampara in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka.² It was rumoured that the pills were being put in the food of Sinhalese customers to ensure the dominance of Islam. The next day a customer in a Muslim-owned restaurant found a lump in his food. He asked one of the owners in Sinhalese if he put sterilisation medicine in his food. The owner, who did not understand Sinhalese, and was unaware of the rumours, replied in broken Sinhalese, "Yes, we put?" thinking that the customer was correctly identifying the object as a lump of flour.³ A mob which had gathered during the complaint beat the owner, destroyed the shop and set fire to the local mosque.

2008 Circular

Although Sri Lankan legislation does not require the registration of religious places of worship or any religious body, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment (presently the Ministry of Buddha Sasana) issued a Circular on 16 October 2008 concerning the construction of new places of worship. The Circular has been used by law enforcement and local government officials to discriminate against religious minority groups and their places of worship, and to close churches forcibly and arbitrarily.

Violations against religious minorities

Since the beginning of 2015 to the end of June 2019 the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) has documented an estimated 387 attacks or violations targeting Christians. The number of incidents reported to them has remained fairly even across the years. These incidents are wide ranging, including acts of physical violence, threats of violence, closure (and attempted closure) of churches, hate campaigns and propaganda, property damage and police indifference.

The 2019 Easter Sunday Bombings, in which over 250 people were killed when terrorists targeted a number of churches and hotels across the country, have further destabilised ethnic-religious relations in the country. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks, but reports indicate that they were perpetrated by a little-known local Islamist group called National Towheed Jamath

¹ Centre for Policy Alternatives. *Consumption and Perceptions of Mainstream and Social Media in the Western Province*. 28 January 2016. pp. 41. <https://www.cpalanka.org/full-report-consumption-and-perceptions-of-mainstream-and-social-media-in-the-western-province/>

² *The New York Times*, 'Where Countries are tinderboxes and fb is a match', 21 April 2018
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html>

³ Ibid.

(NTJ). In the aftermath of the attacks, IS leader and self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi expressed praise for the perpetrators in a video message replete with jihadi symbolism, raising concerns that this could galvanise further action in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Allegations that the Sri Lankan authorities received prior warning of the attacks but failed to act are highly concerning and require investigation.

In the wake of the attacks, a spate of anti-Muslim violence ravaged the North Western province and the Gampaha district. Nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist mobs attacked mosques, and Muslim homes and businesses in apparent retaliation for the bombings, resulting in the death of one person. Several accusations have been levelled against the police and security officials for being complicit in these attacks and refusing to intervene and mitigate the damage caused.

Religious intolerance towards Muslims pre-dates the 2019 Easter bombings. Many propagators of hate speech towards Muslims play on economic factors, suggesting that all Muslims are successful businessmen. Responses to this include Halal boycotts and repeated attacks and destruction of Muslim businesses.⁴ Many Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists also fear a rapid rise in the Muslim population which would turn them into the dominant ethno-religious group. This fear was particularly evident in the build-up to the Ampara riots, during which it was widely circulated that Muslims were going to exploit their new position through the use of 'sterilisation pills' to end Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance.⁵ In July 2019, Gnanasara Thero, General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), called for the creation of a Sinhalese government, and for politicians to let Buddhist monks combat Islamist extremism, claiming that "It's our responsibility because this is a Sinhalese country. We are the historical owners of this country."⁶

Those who attempt to defend or speak out for religious minorities are also subject to persecution. In June 2017 prominent human rights lawyer Lakshan Dias quoted NCEASL research on violations targeting Christians during a television interview. He was consequently threatened with disbarment unless he retracted his comment and apologised within 24 hours.

⁴ Minor Matters, 'The Challenge for the Muslim Community after the Recent Communal Violence in Sri Lanka', 7 March 2019 <http://www.minormatters.org/en/blog/the-challenge-for-the-muslim-community-after-the-recent-communal-violence-in-sri-lanka>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Reuters, 'Hardline Sri Lankan monk calls for Buddhist Sinhalese government', 7 July 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-buddhist/monk-calls-for-buddhist-sinhalese-government-idUSKCN1U2078>

Recent developments

In August 2019 UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), Dr Ahmed Shaheed, conducted an official visit to Sri Lanka at the invitation of the government. In a statement issued upon completion of his visit, Dr Shaheed raised concerns that Sri Lanka had become rife with identity politics, stating that, in conversations with his interlocutors, he found that prominence was given to one specific religion and ethnicity over others, leaving members of other religious communities feeling excluded by the State.⁷

Dr Shaheed also stressed that Sri Lanka must take effective measures to address hate speech and hate crimes, including by prosecuting those who incite hate and by developing structures "to monitor and respond to hate speech in conformity with international human rights standards."

On 18 November 2019 Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former defence secretary and brother of two-term president Mahinda Rajapaksa, was sworn in as Sri Lanka's eighth president. His election sparked fears among Sri Lanka's minority communities, from whom he struggled to win votes. During his time as defence secretary from 2005 to 2015 he was accused of committing grave human rights violations and war crimes, including the establishment of military death squads. Since his election, Gotabaya has aligned himself closely with Buddhist nationalist interests, including by pledging in front of parliament to protect and nurture the Buddha Sasana as part of his government's policy on 3 January 2020.

Gotabaya's brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, has also illustrated close ties to Buddhist nationalist groups, like the BBS. During an address to senior Buddhist leaders at the Vibhajjavadi Dhamma Symposium and Maha Tripitaka Pooja on 4 January, Mahinda stated that the defence of the Buddhist order is central to ensuring unity and the protection of religious freedom of Sri Lankans who profess other faiths.

There are genuine concerns that the rhetoric employed by the Rajapaksa brothers will serve to embolden Buddhist extremists across Sri Lanka, to the detriment of religious minorities.

[lanka-buddhist/hardline-sri-lanka-monk-calls-for-buddhist-sinhalese-government-idUSKCN1U2078](http://www.minormatters.org/en/blog/the-challenge-for-the-muslim-community-after-the-recent-communal-violence-in-sri-lanka)

⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Preliminary findings of Country Visit to Sri Lanka by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief', 26 August 2019 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24918&LangID=E>

Recommendations

To the government of Sri Lanka:

- Guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief in its fullness for all religious minorities.
- Remove the 2008 Circular on construction of places of worship and ensure that it is not misused to intimidate members of religious minorities.
- Bring an end to the culture of hate speech in which fundamentalists are being emboldened to act with impunity against religious minorities.
- Prosecute those responsible for perpetrating hate speech against religious minorities;
- Take measureable steps to hold to account social networks accountable for harmful content, which polarises society.
- Actively establish mechanism to increase accountability, providing training on key human rights areas to the Sri Lanka police.
- Take effective measures to improve reconciliation and social cohesion among the different ethnicity and faith groups.