

Legal framework

The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka contains several provisions that explicitly protect freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Buddhism is accorded a special status, however, and the state is required to protect it, though it is not the state religion.

The law recognises four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, but according to a 2003 Supreme Court ruling, only Buddhism is protected by the state, and there is no right to proselytise under the constitution.

In 2025 the Supreme Court, while reaffirming its previous position that the constitution does not guarantee a fundamental right to propagate religion, held that it was not an offence to propagate a religion.

On 21 April 2022 the Ministry of the Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, issued a circular titled 'Granting approval to build and run new religious centres', outlining a process for granting approval for the construction and functioning of places of worship. While the circular is not a law, as it was not passed by the legislature, and therefore should not be used to impose restrictions on places of worship, it has been used by law enforcement and local government officials to target religious minority groups and their places of worship.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) gives security forces sweeping powers to arrest and imprison suspects. This has led to several fundamental rights abuses including torture, arbitrary arrest and detention and repression of free speech. Several members of the Muslim minority community continue to be held in indefinite detention, having been arrested after the 2019 Easter Sunday Bombings. The PTA has also been used as a justification for the arrests of human rights lawyers and others who have criticised the government.

In December 2025 the government proposed the Protection of the State from Terrorism Act (PSTA) to replace the PTA, however Human Rights Watch has warned that it includes numerous provisions similar to the current law and risks 'facilitating the same kind of repression'.¹

The Online Safety Act, which was passed into law in January 2024, threatens freedom of expression, including religious expression, by imposing excessive restrictions on online speech.

Political context

In September 2024 Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the National People's Power (NPP), was elected president of Sri Lanka following two years of political turmoil that saw the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and

his brother President Gotabaya Rajapaksa amid growing economic meltdown and widespread protests.²

Dissanayake's victory signalled a major shift, reflecting the electorate's desire for reform after years of political instability and economic hardship. In terms of FoRB, Dissanayake's campaign emphasised a commitment to inclusive governance. This is significant for Sri Lanka, where religious and ethnic tensions have historically fuelled discord. He aims to promote unity beyond ethnic and religious lines, focusing on reconciliation with minority communities which have faced long-standing marginalisation. His administration has also pledged to decentralise power and ensure fair representation at the regional level, potentially fostering greater autonomy and trust among these groups.

However, it remains to be seen how effectively these promises will translate into action. Addressing deeply rooted divisions and curbing nationalist rhetoric will be essential to ensuring long-term progress on the right to FoRB for all in Sri Lanka, and to promote social harmony under Dissanayake's leadership.

Violations against religious minorities

Sri Lanka's 30-year ethnic civil war ended in 2009, however there are ongoing challenges to unifying the country's diverse ethno-religious population. Ethno-religious tensions have been fuelled by Buddhist nationalist groups since 2012, and the Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities are discriminated against, intimidated and attacked largely with impunity.

Police officers frequently fail to protect minority communities and, in some cases, actively participate in FoRB violations. Research by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance Sri Lanka (NCEASL) indicates that state actors, particularly the police, are the main perpetrators of violations against religious minorities.³

In addition, despite positive statements made by senior government officials affirming the government's commitment to FoRB and non-discrimination, violations against minority Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities have continued.

Christians

One of the factors driving intolerance towards Christians is fear of expansion via proselytism. Similar to the narratives surrounding the fear of the expansion of the Muslim population, Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists perceive proselytism as a threat to their dominance.

Registration of places of worship continues to be a challenge particularly for Christian churches. To date, there is no law requiring registration, but law enforcement and regional

1 Human Rights Watch, 'Sri Lanka: Proposed Counterterrorism Law Risks More Abuses', 18 January 2026 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/18/sri-lanka-proposed-counterterrorism-law-risks-more-abuses>

2 Ranil Wickremesinghe served as president from July 2022 to September 2024, having been elected by parliament after Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned.

3 National Christian Evangelical Alliance Sri Lanka (NCEASL), 'Report: Rights at the crossroads: legal analysis of religious attacks in Sri Lanka, November 2024-October 2025' https://www.nceasl.org/_files/ugd/0f8498_262ac4e4623344e6b8c77ba80eeb8cd4.pdf

state bodies continue to demand proof of registration with, or approval from, the Ministry of Buddhasasana for churches to function. This has resulted in several churches being asked to shut down.

At the ministerial level of government, there is a refusal to acknowledge the violence experienced by the Christian community. The NCEASL documented 59 incidents of religious violence and intolerance against Christians in Sri Lanka in 2025, and a further 15 from January to July 2026.

Evangelical Christian churches face increasing pressure to register or risk closure, despite no legal basis for mandatory registration. The process is opaque, inconsistently applied and is based on a circular issued in 2022 by the Ministry of Buddhasasana.

Muslims

The Muslim community has faced decades of suspicion and distrust. Many Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists fear a rapid rise in the Muslim population, which would turn them into the dominant ethno-religious group. These tensions were further exacerbated after the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, in which over 250 people were killed in an attack perpetrated by a little-known local Islamist group called National Towheed Jamath (NTJ).

The attacks led to anti-Muslim violence in North Western Province and the Gampaha District. Nationalist Sinhalese-Buddhist mobs attacked Muslim homes, mosques and businesses in apparent retaliation for the bombings, resulting in the death of one person. In some cases, police and security officials have been accused of being complicit in these attacks and refusing to intervene.

Religious intolerance towards Muslims predates the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. Many propagators of hate speech play on economic factors, suggesting that all Muslims are successful businessmen.

Hindu nationalism

Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) is a new ideological current that is rising in Sri Lanka, particularly in the north and east of the country. It has dominated Indian politics since 2014, and is being transplanted into Sri Lankan Tamil society through organised groups and social media campaigns. The principal organisation is Siva Senai, founded in 2016, with ideological backing from India's Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Shiv Sena political party.

Groups such as Siva Senai promote ideas such as Sivabhoomi, which describes Sri Lanka and Tamil regions as an ancient seat of Shaivite Hinduism, portray conversion to Christianity as a threat to Tamil Hindu identity, and at times present Tamil Christianity as something foreign to Tamil culture. This introduces an additional dimension

to persecution: Christians can be portrayed not only as a religious threat, but as somehow less authentically Tamil. Recently, the activities of the Siva Senai in particular have reflected distinct trends, including campaigns asserting pressure against non-Hindu state and political actors, public demonstrations, and demands to curtail Christian activities.

Social media

Social media in Sri Lanka has a significant influence on the spread of misconceptions and misinformation surrounding religious minorities. For many, Facebook has become a dominant platform for ethno-nationalist groups. During the 2020 parliamentary election, online anti-Muslim propaganda was aimed at Muslim candidates. The January 2025 announcement by Meta Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg that the company was ending the use of independent fact-checkers on Facebook, Instagram and Threads is likely to exacerbate this.

Human rights groups have continued to report authorities monitoring expression on social media, primarily related to 'blasphemous' content. In November 2023, however, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court determined that Section 3 of the Sri Lanka's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act of 2007 should not be interpreted as criminalising 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.

Civil society surveillance and freedom of expression

Sri Lanka was ranked 134 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2025 World Press Freedom Index,⁴ with the RSF highlighting press freedom issues in the country remain 'closely tied to the civil war that ravaged the island until 2009, as well as the still-unpunished crimes of violence against numerous journalists when the Tamil rebellion was being crushed', and that 'the media landscape lacks diversity, is highly concentrated and dependent on major political clans.'

Surveillance, intimidation, and detention of religious minorities continues, under the premise of national security concerns.

Recommendations

To the government of Sri Lanka:

- Immediately repeal the PTA and the Online Safety Act in line with international human rights standards.
- Revoke the 2022 Circular on the registration of places of worship.

⁴ Reporters Without Borders, 'RSF World Press Freedom Index 2025: Economic fragility leading threat to press freedom' <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom>

- Take every step to end widespread hate speech and acts of impunity based on ethno-religious grounds and actively promote a pluralistic society.
- Prosecute those responsible for perpetrating hate speech and targeted violence against religious minorities promptly.
- Provide training on human rights and FoRB to the Sri Lankan police.
- Take steps to improve reconciliation and social cohesion among the different ethnic and faith groups.
- End state surveillance, harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and civil society groups.
- Establish an independent accountability mechanism with adequate powers and resources to investigate and prosecute law enforcement officials for offences committed under Sri Lanka's penal law to ensure criminal accountability.
- Resolve land disputes over sacred sites and take decisive action against individuals and groups inciting and carrying out ethno-religious violence and land grabs.

To the government of the United States:

- The State Department should place Sri Lanka on the Special Watchlist for FoRB violations in line with the recommendation from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and USCIRF commissioners should request an invitation to visit Sri Lanka with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- The State Department should engage with the new government of Sri Lanka and representatives of all religious groups to inform its annual religious freedom report on the country.
- Reinstate or allocate new funding to support FoRB and other human rights in Sri Lanka in order to strengthen local civil society efforts to promote FoRB and counter FoRB violations, which have been weakened due to abrupt funding freezes and cuts.
- Urge the government of Sri Lanka, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Sri Lanka'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies to include the right to FoRB in their monitoring and reporting on Sri Lanka, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise FoRB violations in Sri Lanka and offer recommendations to advance the right to FoRB.
- Support the OHCHR in its work towards progress in reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, as mandated by the UN Human Rights Council.
- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to Sri Lanka, and ensure that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Urge the government of Sri Lanka, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Sri Lanka'.

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