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Freedom in the World 2024 - Sri Lanka

PARTLY FREE

54

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 22 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 32 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

54 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Sri Lanka experienced improvements in political rights and civil liberties after the 2015 election of President Maithripala Sirisena. However, the Sirisena administration was slow to address the aftermath of a 26-year civil war between government forces and ethnic Tamil rebels, who were defeated in 2009. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election as president in 2019 and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's (SLPP) victory in the 2020 parliamentary polls emboldened the Rajapaksa family. Gotabaya and Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned from their posts in the face of the *Aragalaya* ("Struggle") protests—prompted by economic troubles, government mismanagement, and corruption—in 2022. While the government has since brought about relative stability, it has operated in ways that curtail civil liberties.

Key Developments in 2023

In February, the Election Commission (EC) delayed local elections due in March, citing funding difficulties. In April, those local races were indefinitely postponed. Before the races were suspended, the government sought to

persuade Sri Lankans that the elections were unnecessary and interfered in the electoral process.

- In March, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a four-year financial support package worth \$3 billion. The IMF delayed the second tranche of funding, citing a lack of progress in combating tax evasion and improving tax administration, before releasing that financial support in December.
- In March, the government published a draft of the Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB). That law is meant to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which authorities have used to undermine due process rights. The provisions of the ATB would give the authorities wide powers to detain individuals, criminalize some speech, and restrict assemblies, though the bill was withdrawn from consideration in October.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 3 / 4

The president is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. Under the 19th Amendment, the president has the power to select the cabinet, though some of the presidency's powers were reduced via the 21st Amendment, which took effect in 2022. The prime minister and cabinet must maintain the confidence of Parliament.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the November 2019 presidential election but resigned in July 2022 in the face of widespread antigovernment protests. Ranil Wickremesinghe then became interim president; later that July, Parliament voted for him to serve the remainder of Rajapaksa's term. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake noted allegations that lawmakers were bribed to support Wickremesinghe.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya's brother, was prime minister until he resigned in May 2022, also in the face of antigovernment protests. Wickremesinghe succeeded Mahinda as prime minister before becoming president. Dinesh Gunawardena of the SLPP then succeeded Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 3 / 4

The 225-member unicameral Parliament is elected for five-year terms, with 196 members elected through an open list system at the district level and 29 members appointed via a national list.

In the 2020 elections, the SLPP-led coalition won 145 seats and secured a supermajority with partners outside that coalition. Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) won 54 seats. The United National Party, from which the SJB had split, acquired 1 national-list seat. Sri Lanka's other major party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), also secured 1 seat, although most of its candidates sought office under the SLPP's banner. While the polls were mainly free and fair and saw lower levels of violence compared to previous elections, women, Muslims, and Tamil voters faced intimidation.

Provincial council elections were repeatedly postponed due to disputes over the delimitation of voting districts. The last rounds were held in 2012–14, meaning the councils' five-year terms expired in 2017–19. Prominent nationalists, including leading members of the Buddhist clergy, want the councils abolished, citing issues including council spending.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 3 / 4

The EC, which administers and oversees all elections in the country, has built a reputation for independence. The 21st Amendment reestablished a Constitutional Council to name nominees for the EC and other government bodies.

In February 2023, the EC postponed postal voting for local elections. Later in February, it reported that those elections, originally due in 2022 and then rescheduled to March 2023, could not be held as scheduled, citing a lack of funds. In April, the government postponed those races indefinitely.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 3 / 4

A range of political parties operate freely and participate in elections. However, political debates between parties sometimes involve an element of violence and intimidation.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 2 / 4

Opposition groupings are generally free to carry out peaceful political activities and can win power through elections. The SLPP, then in opposition, won control of 231 out of 340 local councils in the 2018 elections and took the presidency in 2019, leading to a peaceful transfer of executive power. The

SLPP-led coalition also won the 2020 parliamentary elections by a wide margin.

Political parties were prevented from contesting local elections when they were indefinitely postponed in April 2023, amid speculation that the Wickremesinghe government and the SLPP sought to avoid losses in those races. Before the races were suspended in February, the government sought to persuade Sri Lankans that the elections were unnecessary and interfered in the electoral process. In January, for example, the cabinet instructed district secretaries not to accept the deposits of local candidates before rescinding those instructions amid public opposition.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because local elections were postponed and then canceled without adequate justification, denying opposition parties an opportunity to gain power at the subnational level.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 2 / 4

Vote buying and political bribery persist as issues that distort the free choices of voters.

The military has backed the Rajapaksas in recent years, with active and former military officials openly supporting Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidential candidacy in 2019. Since then, the government has undergone increasing militarization, which President Wickremesinghe appears disinclined to reverse.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Several parties explicitly represent the interests of ethnic and religious minority groups. Systemic discrimination, including via language laws and naturalization procedures, negatively affects Tamils' political participation. The Wickremesinghe administration, like the Sirisena administration, has allowed the national anthem to be sung in Tamil at official functions, though the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government had stopped the practice. Muslim voters have also faced intimidation, limiting their ability to participate in the political process.

While a 25 percent local-level gender quota exists and women represent 52 percent of the population, they are severely underrepresented in national politics, holding only 12 out of 225 seats in Parliament. Women parliamentarians often receive sexist comments from male colleagues. Women and members of ethnic minority groups are poorly represented in the cabinet.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative 2 / representatives determine the policies of the government? 4

Members of the Rajapaksa family, who have held posts including the presidency and premiership, enjoyed nearly complete decision-making authority before the Aragalaya protests. The family still wields significant control via the SLPP, despite some splits within the party.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

A culture of impunity regarding official corruption appears to exist in Sri Lanka, in which politicians do not prosecute political opponents on corruption allegations lest they risk future scrutiny. A September 2023 IMF report noted that the “current governance arrangements have not established clear standards for permissible official behavior, acted to deter and sanction transgressions, nor pursued individuals and stolen public funds that have exited the country.” In July, Parliament passed anticorruption legislation that will give more power to the Bribery and Corruption Commission and mandates asset declarations on the part of political candidates. The legislation was linked to the IMF loan.

Corruption within the health sector has gained recent scrutiny. In December 2023, the Criminal Investigation Department detained a former Health Ministry secretary over the importation of substandard medicine.

In 2020, Gotabaya Rajapaksa established the Presidential Commission of Inquiry to Investigate Allegations of Political Victimization, which opposition leaders and rights groups said helped the Rajapaksa family and their associates evade criminal investigations and prosecution. In an early-2023 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International noted that the commission had interfered in judicial proceedings against military personnel.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

Individuals have used the 2017 Right to Information Act to access government records, but transparency is lacking in procurement and contracting decisions, including for large contracts with Chinese and other foreign companies. The auditor general in recent years noted major discrepancies in the government's assessments of public debt.

Add Q

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a -1 culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?

Following the end of the civil war in 2009, the military presence in the Tamil-populated areas of the north and east increased. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's creation of the Presidential Task Force for Archeological Heritage Management in Eastern Province in 2020 led to concerns that the government would employ the military to back claims pertaining to Buddhist heritage, to further change the region's demographics.

Military personnel and Buddhist monks have been implicated in forcing Tamil residents from their land in the north and east. In September 2023, a senior Tamil judge in Northern Province, who faced death threats for upholding court orders against the Archaeology Department's attempts to build a Buddhist temple on a Hindu site, resigned and fled the country.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed, though news outlets and civil society were cautious in challenging the government during the Rajapaksas' time in power. The media continue to practice self-censorship concerning alleged war crimes and corruption by military officials. However, Sri Lankan media have become more critical of the government since the 2022 protests. Additionally, a September 2023 report by Channel 4, a British television outlet, on the 2009 murder of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge and the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings were prominently featured in Sri Lanka.

Civil society groups expressed concerns that the government plans to use the proposed Online Safety Bill, which was tabled in October 2023, to suspend access to critical social media accounts and news sites.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because Sri Lankan media have reported critically on governing elites and government policies since the 2022 protests.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or 2 / nonbelief in public and private? 4

While anti-Muslim riots have taken place in the past, relatively little interreligious conflict was reported in 2023.

The Roman Catholic clergy has criticized the government for perceived faults in the official investigation into the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, which had targeted three Christian churches.

In Northern and Eastern provinces, the Archaeology Department prevents Hindus and Muslims from worshipping at sites deemed to be of archeological significance, though no restrictions are placed on Buddhists.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free 2 / from extensive political indoctrination? 4

Academic freedom is generally respected, but there are occasional reports of politicization at universities and intolerance of dissenting views among both professors and students. Students and faculty feel pressure to avoid discussing sensitive topics, including alleged war crimes, human rights for marginalized groups, Islamophobia, or extremist activities by Buddhist clergy.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 2 / other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

The civil war remains a sensitive topic. Awareness of state officials' harassment of civil society activists working on human rights issues in the north and east has deterred open discussion of such subjects among ordinary citizens. Antigovernment protesters active in 2022 reportedly avoided those issues and discouraged discourse on those subjects. While people speak out more critically than they did when the country was governed by the Rajapaksas, the government is believed to monitor minority groups through its intelligence apparatus.

The government has been accused of using the 2007 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR Act), legislation meant to enable the 1976 covenant, to restrict expression. In early 2023, authorities used the ICCPR Act to arrest social media user Sepal Amarasinghe for making offensive comments about an item venerated by Buddhists. In June, comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya was arrested for violating the act for her comments about Buddhism. Edirisooriya was bailed in July.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

Although authorities sometimes restrict freedom of assembly, assemblies occur regularly, though demonstrations on sensitive topics like security laws and impunity for forced disappearances may be surveilled by authorities. In November 2023, security officers arrested several Tamils who sought to memorialize Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters in Eastern Province. The demonstrators were charged with violating the PTA.

The Aragalaya protests that led to the Rajapaksa brothers fleeing office were held for much of 2022. While many of those protests were peaceful, protesters destroyed lawmakers' homes and SLPP supporters and

antigovernment demonstrators violently clashed. After Wickremesinghe became president that year, the government maintained a crackdown against Aragalaya participants.

In February 2023, police in Colombo attacked and chased protesters who opposed Independence Day celebrations. In March, the UN Human Rights Committee said that the government was inappropriately using antiterrorism legislation against protesters. Also in March, the government submitted the ATB for parliamentary consideration. The new bill would make it easier to curtail public and trade union protests. The proposed legislation was submitted again in September and then withdrawn from parliamentary consideration in October.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 3 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are generally free to operate without interference, but some NGOs and activists—particularly those in the north and east that focus on sensitive topics such as military impunity—have been subjected to denial of registration, surveillance, harassment, and assaults. Intelligence personnel have attended civil society meetings and questioned NGOs about their personnel and funding sources.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 3 / 4

Trade unions are legally allowed to organize and engage in collective bargaining. Except for civil servants, most workers can strike, though the 1989 Essential Services Act allows the president to declare any strike illegal. Harassment of labor activists and official intolerance of union activities, particularly in export processing zones, is regularly reported. Larger unions are often affiliated with political parties.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

Political interference in and intimidation of the judiciary abated somewhat under the Sirisena administration, and the courts have asserted their independence amid political turbulence in recent years, including during a 2018 constitutional crisis.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process rights are undermined by the PTA, which was expanded in 2021 to allow suspects to be detained for up to two years without trial. The law has

been used to hold perceived enemies of the government, particularly Tamils. Many detained under the PTA's provisions have been kept in custody for longer than the law allows. The PTA's most severe provisions remained after the law was amended in 2022. In March 2023, the government published the draft ATB, which would replace the PTA; the bill's provisions would give the authorities wide powers to detain individuals and criminalize some speech. A group of UN experts criticized the bill in October, saying it did not offer meaningful improvements over the PTA.

The police routinely treat government officials and those closely associated with them favorably. Military personnel accused of committing war crimes during the civil war later held prominent government roles, while others remain in senior military posts.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Police and security forces have engaged in extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, custodial rape, and torture, all of which disproportionately affect Tamils. Due to backlogs and a lack of resources, independent commissions have been slow to investigate allegations of police and military misconduct. Aragalaya protesters who were arrested were reportedly tortured while in custody.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Tamils report systematic discrimination in areas including government employment, university education, and access to justice. Ethnic and religious minorities are vulnerable to violence and mistreatment by security forces and Sinhalese Buddhist extremists.

LGBT+ people face societal discrimination, occasional instances of violence, and some official harassment. A rarely enforced article of the penal code prescribes up to 10 years in prison for same-sex sexual activity. Sexual harassment and employment discrimination against women are common, as are discriminatory legal provisions.

The government does not grant asylum or refugee status under its own laws, nor does it provide services or work permits to asylum seekers and refugees. These individuals rely instead on aid from NGOs, informal employment, and third-country resettlement by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

Free movement is restricted by security checkpoints, restricted military areas, and military occupation of public and private land. Security checkpoints erected in Northern Province after Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president have been mostly dismantled, though Tamil areas remain under surveillance.

Women with children younger than five years old are not allowed to travel abroad for work. Access to educational institutions is impeded by corruption, with bribes often required to obtain primary school admission.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Ongoing occupations and other forms of land grabbing remain serious problems, especially for Tamils in the northeast. Corruption sometimes hinders the effective enforcement of property rights in general. Some women face gender-based disadvantages regarding inheritance under the customary laws of their ethnic or religious group, and Muslims reportedly encounter discrimination in property transactions.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

Although women have equal rights under civil and criminal law, matters related to the family—including marriage, divorce, and child custody—are adjudicated under the customary laws of each ethnic or religious group, and the application of these laws sometimes entails discrimination against women. Rape of women and children and domestic violence remain serious problems, and perpetrators often act with impunity.

Some very young girls are forced into marriages under Islamic personal law. The government has sought to alter the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), which allows marriages to occur without the woman's recorded consent, allows Muslims to participate in polygamous marriages, and allows husbands to more easily seek divorce than wives, since 2020. A draft bill to amend the MMDA that would expand rights for married Muslim women and girls existed as of May 2023, though a group of Muslim lawmakers in June recommended changes that would preserve the MMDA's core provisions.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Although the government has increased penalties for employing minors, many children continue to work as household servants and face abuse from

employers. Women and children in certain communities are vulnerable to forced sex work.

In the 2023 edition of its *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the US State Department noted that the government was prosecuting and convicting more traffickers and was working to implement a 2021–25 action plan. However, Sri Lankans have increasingly sought to leave the country to escape the country's economic crisis using inauthentic travel documents, and some are exploited by traffickers.

While most of the mainly Tamil workers on tea plantations are unionized, employers routinely violate their rights. Migrant workers recruited in Sri Lanka are often exposed to exploitative labor conditions abroad.

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