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Sri Lanka



International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
October 2001

The Constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," but it is not recognized as the state religion. The Constitution also provides for the right of members of other faiths to practice their religion freely, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Despite generally amicable relations among persons of different faiths, there has been occasional resistance by Buddhists to Christian church activity, and in particular to the activities of evangelical Christian denominations. While the courts generally have upheld the right of evangelical Christian groups to worship and to construct facilities to house their congregations, the State limits the number of foreign religious workers granted temporary residence permits.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 25,322 square miles and a population of approximately 18.5 million. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity all are practiced in the country. Approximately 70 percent of the population are Buddhist, 15 percent are Hindu, 7 percent are Muslim, and 8 percent are Christian. There also are small numbers of Baha'is. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west, with much of the north almost exclusively Hindu. The other parts of the country have a mixture of religions, with Buddhism overwhelmingly present in the south.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhists. Almost all Muslims are Sunnis, with a small minority of Shi'a, including members of the Borah community. Roman Catholics account for almost 90 percent of the Christians, with Anglicans and other mainstream Protestant churches also present in the cities. The Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Assemblies of God are present as well. Evangelical Christian groups have increased in membership in recent years, although the overall number of members in these groups still is small.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution gives Buddhism a "foremost position," but it also provides for the right of members of other faiths to practice their religions freely, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There is a Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, which is led by the Prime Minister. Within the Ministry, there is a Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs and a Department of Muslim Cultural and Religious Affairs which deal primarily with cultural issues and maintenance of historical sites. The Ministry of Muslim affairs deals with all other issues involving the Muslim community. A Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs monitors government relations with Christian denominations, which have resisted greater government involvement in their affairs. Instead they are registered individually through acts of Parliament or as corporations under domestic law. Christian denominations must fill out and submit forms in order to be recognized as corporations. This gives them legal standing in Sri Lanka to be treated as corporate entities in their financial and real estate transactions.

Despite the constitutional preference for Buddhism, major religious festivals of all faiths are celebrated as national holidays.

The Government has established councils for interfaith understanding.

There is no tax exemption for religious organizations as such. However, churches and temples are allowed to register as charitable organizations and therefore are entitled to some tax relief.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Foreign clergy may work in the country, but for the last 30 years, the Government has taken steps to limit the number of foreign Christian religious workers given temporary work permits. Permission usually is restricted to denominations that are registered formally with the Government. Most religious workers in the country, including most Christian clergy, are Sri Lankan in origin.

Some evangelical Christians, who constitute less than 1 percent of the population, have expressed concern that their efforts at proselytizing often are met with hostility and harassment by the local Buddhist clergy and others opposed to their work. They sometimes complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment. However, there is no evidence to support this claim. The Assemblies of God claims that it continues to face opposition at the local level in many areas but states that legal action or the threat of legal action generally has resulted in the Church being allowed to construct facilities for its congregations and conduct worship services.

Religion is a mandatory subject in the school curriculum. Parents and children may choose whether a child studies Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. Students of minority religions other than Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity must pursue religious instruction outside of the public school system. There are no separate syllabus provided for smaller religions, such as the Baha'i faith. Religion is taught in schools from an academic point of view.

Issues related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance are adjudicated by the customary law of each ethnic or religious group. In 1995 the Government raised the minimum age of marriage for women from 12 to 18 years, except in the case of Muslims, who continue to follow their customary religious practices. The application of different legal practices based on membership in a religious or ethnic group may result in discrimination against women.

For the past 18 years the Government (controlled by the Sinhalese, and predominantly Buddhist, majority) has fought the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an insurgent organization fighting for a separate state for the country's Tamil (and predominantly Hindu) minority. Religion does not play a significant role in the conflict, which essentially is rooted in linguistic, ethnic, and political differences. Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians all have been affected by the conflict, which has claimed more than 60,000 lives. The military has issued warnings through public radio before commencing major operations, instructing civilians to congregate at safe zones around churches and temples; however, in the conflict areas in the north, the Government occasionally has been accused of bombing and shelling Hindu temples and Christian churches. In March 1999, government forces recaptured from the LTTE the town of Madhu in the northwestern area of the country, the site of a famous Catholic shrine. Because Madhu was controlled by the LTTE, for several years Catholics from the south had not been able to make the pilgrimage to Madhu. After the town was recaptured by government forces, Catholics were able to resume the pilgrimage. In November 1999 the LTTE recaptured the area where the shrine is located and limited access for a period thereafter. However, during the period covered by this report, the LTTE generally allowed Catholics access to the Shrine.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

The LTTE targeted Buddhist sites, most notably the historic Dalada Maligawa or "Temple of the Tooth," the holiest Buddhist shrine in the country, in the town of Kandy in January 1998. Thirteen worshipers, including several children, were killed by the bombing. The Government still is attempting to locate and arrest the LTTE perpetrators of the attack. As a result, the Government has augmented security at a number of religious sites island-wide, including the Temple of the Tooth. In contrast to previous years, the LTTE did not target Buddhist sites during the period covered by this report; however, the LTTE has not indicated that it will abstain from attacking such targets in the future.

The LTTE has discriminated against Muslims, and in 1990 expelled some 46,000 Muslim inhabitants--virtually the entire Muslim population--from their homes in areas under LTTE control in the northern part of the island. Most of these persons remain displaced and live in or near welfare centers. Although some Muslims returned to Jaffna in 1997, they did not remain there due to the continuing threat posed by the LTTE. There are credible reports that the LTTE has warned thousands of Muslims displaced from the Mannar area not to return to their homes until the conflict is over. In the past, the LTTE has expropriated Muslim homes, land, and businesses and threatened Muslim families with death if they attempt to return. However, it appears that these attacks by the LTTE are not targeted against persons due to their religious beliefs, but that they are rather a part of an overall strategy to clear the north and east of persons not sympathetic to the cause of an independent Tamil state.

The LTTE has been accused in the past of using church and temple compounds, which civilians are instructed by the Government to congregate in the event of hostilities, as shields for the storage of munitions.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Discrimination based on religious differences is much less common than discrimination based on ethnic group or caste. In general, the members of the various faiths tend to be tolerant of each other's religious beliefs. However, on occasion, evangelical Christians have been harassed by Buddhist monks for their attempts to convert Buddhists to Christianity, and they at times complain that the Government tacitly condones such harassment, although there is no evidence to support this claim (see Section I).

There are reports that members of various religious groups give preference in hiring in the private sector to members of their own group or denomination. This practice likely is linked to the country's ongoing ethnic problems and does not appear to be based principally on religion. There is no indication of preference in employment in the public sector on the basis of religion.

In April 2001, three Sinhalese men attacked a Muslim cashier. The Muslim community in Mawanella protested police inaction during and the day after the attack. In response approximately 2,000 Sinhalese, including Buddhist monks, rioted in the Muslim section of town and confronted the Muslim protesters. Two Muslims were killed, and a number of buildings and vehicles were destroyed. The Muslim community throughout the western portion of the country staged a number of protests claiming the police did nothing to prevent the riot. Some of the protests resulted in direct clashes between the Muslim and Sinhalese communities.

In mid-February 1999, a group of religious leaders from the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities made a visit to the north central part of the country, an LTTE controlled area. The purpose of the visit was to assess the humanitarian situation and to talk with senior LTTE leaders. The group later met with the President, but there were few concrete results. Follow-up meetings with the LTTE were cancelled after government forces captured additional LTTE-held territory that year. Since 1999 independent clergy have maintained intermittent contact with the LTTE. Religious leaders have continued to serve as unofficial envoys between the two warring sides.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Representatives of the Embassy regularly meet with representatives of all of the country's religious groups to review a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom issues. The U.S. Ambassador has met with many religious figures, both in Colombo and in his travels around the country. Christian bishops and prominent Buddhist monks, as well as prominent members of the Hindu and Muslim communities, are in regular contact with the Embassy. The Embassy has been supportive of efforts by interfaith religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

[End]

Released on October 26, 2001

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