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The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia



The Asia Foundation

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1948

1956

Sinhala Only Act makes Sinhalese the official language.

1965

Marxist movement Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is formed.

1972

A new constitution establishes national religious and language preferences that significantly disadvantage Tamil citizens.

1977

The United National Party (UNP) government writes a new constitution creating an executive presidency.

1983

Deadly ambush by the LTTE on Sri Lankan military ignites anti-Tamil violence known as Black July, and war begins. Over 70,000 will die in the civil war which lasts until 2009.

1993

The LTTE assassinates President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

2002

Sri Lankan government and the LTTE sign a ceasefire which is later broken.

2006

Peace talks with the LTTE collapse, and the civil war enters its most violent phase.

2010

President Rajapaksa wins a second term, jailing his defeated opponent.

2013

Chief justice of the Supreme Court is impeached, continuing a crackdown on dissent.

2015

Maithripala Sirisena defeats SLFP in an upset presidential election and forms coalition with the UNP.

2015

Sri Lanka cosponsors a UN Human Rights Council resolution on reconciliation and transitional justice.

1948

Sri Lanka gains independence from the United Kingdom.

1948

Citizenship Act denies citizenship and voting rights to Indian-born Tamils.

1971

First JVP insurrection begins. Ten to twenty thousand die in the ensuing government crackdown.

1976

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is founded by Velupillai Prabhakaran.

1982

Referendum extends the term of the UNP-led parliament, without elections, until 1989.

1987

Sri Lanka and India sign a peace accord to resolve the conflict with the LTTE.

1987

Second JVP insurrection begins, lasting three years and killing 30,000–60,000.

2005

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led coalition wins elections. Mahinda Rajapaksa becomes president.

2009

War ends with defeat of the LTTE and the death of its leadership.

2009

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution strengthens presidential powers and removes two-term limit on the presidency.

2014

Anti-Muslim violence in the southwest kills four and displaces 10,000.

2016

Government initiates consultations on constitutional reform.

2017

Sri Lanka

At a glance



National civil war
Shifted from high to absent



Communal/ideological conflict
Medium



National political conflict
Medium



Local political and electoral conflict
Medium



Transnational terrorism
Not present



Local resource conflict
High



Separatism and autonomy
Shifted from high to absent



Urban crime and violence
Decreasing from high to low

** Rankings are based on the last 15 years and are relative to other Asian countries.*

Overview

Despite the government's victory over the Tamil separatist movement in 2009, tensions among ethnoreligious groups continue in Sri Lanka. The resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is increasing ongoing communal tensions and sporadic clashes between Buddhist extremists and ethnoreligious minority communities. While discrimination against the Tamil community persists, Muslims are also targeted by the majority Sinhalese Buddhists, as seen in the anti-Muslim riots that took place in June 2014. Following the 2015 presidential election, which removed President Mahinda Rajapaksa after 10 years of semi-authoritarian rule, the coalition government led by President Maithripala Sirisena initiated a reconciliation process to address the legacy of war and Tamil grievances, particularly through provincial devolution of power and constitutional reform. Due to slow progress, however, tensions persist in the northeast, where the military remains present.

National level



National civil war

Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has been marked by conflict between its two principal ethnolinguistic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The majority Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhists, make up 75 percent of the population, while the mostly Hindu minority of Sri Lankan and “upcountry,” Indian-origin Tamils represent 15 percent of the population.¹ The desire of mainly Sri Lankan Tamils for an independent state for themselves spiraled into a civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009.

Divisions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils can be traced back to policies from before and after independence. During the colonial period, large numbers of Indian Tamils were brought by the British to Sri Lanka to work “upcountry” on the tea plantations in the central parts of the island. Under British rule, mainly Sri Lankan Tamils occupied prominent positions in business and state administration. After independence, the balance of power shifted, and the Sinhalese-led government enacted several laws that restricted the rights of other ethnic groups. In the same year, the Citizenship Act was introduced, which denied citizenship and voting rights specifically to Indian-born Tamils. This was followed by the Sinhala Only Act, making Sinhalese the only official language, in 1956.² Land reform and development projects in the north, where most Sri Lankan Tamils lived, aimed to change the demographic composition of these areas. Tamil groups called for the devolution of power and equal linguistic status. Although the Tamil Federal Party and the Sri Lankan government signed a pact in 1957 that assured Tamils of greater regional autonomy, it was opposed by conservative Sinhalese Buddhists.

Post-independence, in an attempt to reverse colonial imbalances, several policies were enacted by the Sinhala-majority government that increased tensions. These included the religious preference given by the 1972 constitution to Buddhism, a system of ethnic quotas for university admissions, and a Sinhala-language requirement for public positions. These measures significantly reduced the number of Tamils serving in government and their access to jobs and careers in law, medicine, and science. As separatist movements led by Tamil youth began to campaign for an independent sovereign state in the mid-1970s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) formed in 1976. The LTTE started gaining support for violent militancy after anti-Tamil riots in 1977, 1981, and 1983 and a constitutional amendment making it illegal to call for a separate state.

70,000+
died in LTTE conflict
1984–2009

The conflict between the government and the LTTE began in July 1983, and ended in May 2009 when LTTE leader Vellupilai Prabhakaran and the rest of the group's leadership were killed by the Sri Lankan military. The conflict began with a deadly ambush on the Sri Lankan army by the LTTE, which killed 13 soldiers and triggered anti-Tamil pogroms and riots in response. Over 70,000 people lost their lives in the conflict between 1984 and 2009.³ The number of fatalities dropped after the government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire in 2002 (figure 1), but increased again dramatically after the peace process collapsed in 2006. More than 22,000 people on all sides, one-third of all fatalities in the long-running civil war, died during the last four years of the conflict.⁴ Other Tamil armed groups besides the LTTE fought against the government, such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front. However, these Tamil and LTTE splinter groups turned against Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, due to internal disagreements.

Since the defeat of the LTTE, and particularly since the 2015 election (see below), some progress has been made towards addressing Tamil grievances and the legacy of the war. The coalition government led by President Sirisena initiated a process of constitutional reform in early 2016, which is to strengthen devolution to the provinces. There is, however, little agreement on devolution among political elites.⁵ In 2015, the government cosponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for the country to establish a judicial mechanism to investigate abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, with support from the Commonwealth and other foreign judges.⁶ Progress, however, has been slow, and the government has been reluctant to allow international involvement in investigations into war crimes allegedly committed by security forces at the end of the war. Meanwhile, tensions remain high in the north and east, where problems such as continued military presence, conflicts over land, and resettlement of displaced Tamils and Muslims persist. Since the end of the conflict, there have been several reported cases of enforced disappearance of former Tamil militants and local activists.⁷

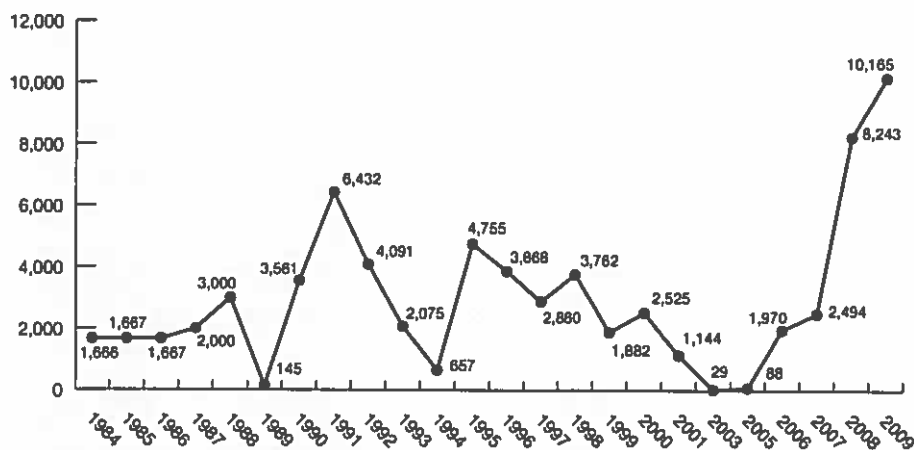


Figure 1. Number of fatalities in separatism conflict (1984–2009)

Source: Lacina and Gleditsch, "Monitoring trends in global combat," and Melander et al., "Organized Violence"



National political conflict

Sri Lanka's long history of democracy has been marred by electoral violence and periodic misuse of government power to suppress political dissent. Since independence, political power has alternated between two main political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Violence among political parties has become a common occurrence since the mid-1960s, particularly during election periods. The 1977 general elections saw postelection violence on an unprecedented scale, resulting in 62 deaths.⁸ The UNP, which won a majority in the 1977 elections, wrote a new constitution establishing an executive presidency above the prime minister. The UNP leader, J. R. Jayewardene, became the first executive president under the new constitution in 1978. After winning the presidential election in 1982, Jayewardene won a referendum extending the term of the 1977 parliament until 1989 instead of holding a regular parliamentary election.

Subsequent changes to the electoral system in 1978 and the extension of parliament's term increased tensions among political parties and their supporters. The 1989 elections took place during the JVP's second insurrection, which led to 669 people being killed, primarily by the

Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and paramilitaries of the regime.⁹ As the conflict in the north and east continued, the LTTE assassinated President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993. In the following year, the SLFP-led People's Alliance (later known as the United People's Freedom Alliance, UPFA) won the parliamentary and presidential elections, ending nearly two decades of UNP rule. Electoral violence between the SLFP and the UNP, and LTTE attacks on voting stations, resulted in 12 deaths during the 1994 general elections and eight deaths during the 1999 presidential elections.¹⁰

Due to intense fighting between the LTTE and the military, the parliamentary elections in 2000 and 2001 resulted in 73 and 83 murders, respectively.¹¹ The political climate in the country became increasingly polarized following the election of a president and a prime minister from different parties in 2001. President Kumaratunga and the SLFP resisted accommodating Tamil demands, while Prime Minister Wickremasinghe and the UNP favored a federal solution to the conflict.¹² After the ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002, the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections were more peaceful.

An SLFP-led political alliance spearheaded by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was elected in 2005, divided opposition parties and their supporters, cracked down on antigovernment activists, and used military means to end the war against the LTTE in 2009. Before the 2010 presidential election, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was passed in September 2009, removing the bar on the president serving more than two six-year terms, and granting the president final authority over all appointments to the civil service, judiciary, and police.¹³ President Mahinda Rajapaksa won his second term against the former army general Sarath Fonseka. Following the election, General Fonseka was arrested, without substantive evidence, for attempting to overthrow the government in a military coup.¹⁴ The government's crackdown on political dissent continued with the impeachment of the country's chief justice in 2013.

President Rajapaksa was defeated in the 2015 presidential election, as voters grew dissatisfied with corruption and nepotism and constitutional reform that gave excessive power to the president. Despite fears of violence, the 2015 presidential election was largely peaceful, with only one murder reported during the election period.¹⁵ Maithripala Sirisena, a candidate of the UNP-led coalition who was the former health minister and general secretary of the SLFP, won a surprising victory. Defeated president Rajapaksa then attempted to become prime minister in the parliamentary elections held later the same year, but lost to the UNP-led coalition. The polls were mostly free and fair, despite 316 reported incidents, which were mostly related to intimidation and threats at voting stations.¹⁶

A coalition government between President Sirisena's SLFP and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's UNP, with support from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), provides a chance for constitutional reforms to further devolve power to the provinces; however, progress has been very slow. President Sirisena also promised other political reforms to restore judicial independence, improve the electoral system, and address corruption and misuse of power by politicians and government officials. Several steps have already been taken, including the 19th Amendment, which reinstitutes term limits on the president. However, Sirisena's ambitious political reforms are expected to take much longer than the current government's tenure.¹⁷



Transnational terrorism

Sri Lanka currently does not have transnational terrorists of foreign origin operating inside the country. There have been some unconfirmed media reports of a few Sri Lankan nationals fighting for the Islamic State (IS) and of suspected IS members in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government remains concerned that foreign cells of the LTTE may still be active in countries like India, Malaysia, France, Norway, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Subnational level



Separatism and autonomy

On the Tamil separatist movement, see national civil war section above.



Large-scale communal and ideological conflicts

The government's inability to respond to an economic crisis during the 1960s contributed in part to the growth of Marxist movements such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was formed in 1965. They found support among educated, unemployed Sinhalese Buddhist youth and the rural poor, as opposed to English-speaking elites based in Colombo. Around 1970, the movements became militant and elevated their goal to a socialist revolution. Younger generations angered by the erosion of their economic, political, and social opportunities were drawn to the movement. JVP-led attacks in 1971 and 1987–1990 caused nationwide infrastructure damage and killed an estimated 80,000 people.¹⁸

The first insurrection broke out in March 1971, when JVP plans to seize government power were uncovered, leading to the detention of 4,000 suspects, including JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera. In April 1971, JVP members attacked 92 police stations and government buildings across the country. Telephone and power lines were cut and roads blocked. The militants managed to control almost all areas of the Southern Province. The Sri Lankan government announced a state of emergency and suppressed the insurrection in less than a month. An estimated 10,000–20,000 JVP members were killed in the crackdown.¹⁹

The second insurrection took place between 1987 and 1990, by which time the JVP had become increasingly Sinhalese nationalist. In 1983, the JVP, along with the Communist Party (CP) and the Nawa Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), had participated in the anti-Tamil violence known as Black July. The government subsequently banned all three parties, but the JVP later resumed its operations with the CP, the NSSP, and other leftist parties. The 1987 peace accord between Sri Lanka and India, which attempted to resolve the conflict with the LTTE by accommodating certain Tamil demands within a unitary Sri Lankan state, drove the JVP to adopt an anti-India tone in its campaign and to gather arms for another insurrection. The second insurrection lasted until 1990, when the JVP leader was killed. This time around, the JVP resorted to subversion, assassinations, raids, and attacks on military and civilian targets, with an estimated 30,000–60,000 killed.²⁰

JVP
attacks
in 1971 and 1987–1990
killed 80,000

Despite the end of the civil war, the majoritarianism of Sinhalese Buddhists continues to affect politics in Sri Lanka. Tamils fear that their areas are going to be colonized by the Sinhalese Buddhists, as they witness an exponential rise in the number of Buddhist statues, stupas, and shrines built by troops still present in Tamil areas. Other religious minorities, such as Muslims and Christians,²¹ also face sporadic discrimination and violence. In June 2014, anti-Muslim riots took place in the coastal southwest of the country, the worst communal violence since the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. A hardline Buddhist group, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), instigated violent attacks against Muslims, resulting in four dead, 80 wounded, and more than 10,000 temporarily displaced.²² Christian communities also experience religious persecution in the country, as some in the Sinhala Buddhist community believe that Christians are forcibly converting Buddhists through material and spiritual inducements.²³ Over 200 violent incidents against Christians were recorded between 2013 and 2014, leading to destruction of church properties, attacks on their members, and desecration of religious objects.²⁴ The recent violence is a continuation of communal tensions and frequent low-level violence between the majority Buddhists and religious minorities.

Local level



Local political conflict and electoral violence

Local politics in Sri Lanka is intimately linked to national politics, as local politicians are mostly members of the national political parties. Therefore, local political conflict and electoral violence often reflect the political climate at the national level. The last local elections, which were held in three phases in March, July, and October of 2011, were marred by interparty and intraparty violence. In the lead-up to the first phase of the local elections, over 400 violent incidents were recorded between January 27 and March 15, resulting in two deaths.²⁵ Election day, on March 17, witnessed 56 violent incidents, including one murder, a grenade attack, assaults, and intimidation at voting stations.²⁶ The lead-up to the second phase of the local elections was also marred by violence, and election day, on July 23, had several violent incidents, including the killing of a UPFA supporter in an intraparty clash.²⁷ Despite various reports of election violations, such as vote buying, voter intimidation by armed groups, and confiscation of polling cards, the war-affected north had a high voter turnout. The conflict within the UPFA intensified in the third phase of the 2011 local elections, resulting in at least four deaths.²⁸ The next local elections, which have been postponed for two years, are planned for early 2018.



Local conflict over resources and community rights

Land has fueled conflict between the Sri Lankan government and local communities. Particularly in the war-affected northeast of the country, disputes over land exist among the Tamils, Sinhalese, and Muslims.²⁹ Some of these tensions are historical. During the 1950s, the government of President Bandaranaike launched several development projects that escalated ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese and ethnic minorities in the northeast. For example, a large-scale irrigation scheme known as Allai Extension, in Trincomalee District, favored Sinhalese farmers, who received the upstream land, over Tamil and Muslim farmers, who were given the downstream land. This was perceived as ethnicizing entitlements, and caused disputes between upstream and downstream farmers over the allocation of water.³⁰ More recently, Muslims have been accused of illegal encroachment and settlement in the Wilpattu Nature Reserve and surrounding forest reserves.³¹ From the Muslims' point of view, these are their lands, where they lived for more than 100 years before they were displaced by the war. After decades of conflict and displacement in the north and east, ownership of and access to land is highly politicized.

Despite the government's postwar effort to resettle more than 430,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), primarily Tamils and Muslims, a sense of mistrust and grievance endures among Tamils and other ethnic minorities due to the government's continued, heavy military presence, justified by demining operations and the need to prevent the return of Tamil militancy.³² Many IDPs have returned to find their land confiscated for military projects. The expanding military presence has occupied large agricultural and fishing areas, depriving local populations of their livelihoods. Even though several protests have been organized to express local grievances against this land confiscation, the military under the Sirisena administration continues to take additional land for new camps, and land concessions have been awarded to outside developers.³³



Urban crime and violence

Sri Lanka's urban population has grown relatively slowly,³⁴ but urban crime is still frequent. The Colombo metropolitan region has experienced a higher level of urban crime and violence than other cities. According to the Sri Lanka Police, the capital city and its suburbs, such as Nugegoda, Kelaniya, Mt. Lavinia, and Gampaha, had the highest number of reported crimes from 2009 to 2016. Home burglary, theft, and robbery are the most common crimes in these cities. When it comes to homicide, however, Colombo had one of the lowest rates of any city in Sri Lanka, with just 0.9 per 100,000 people in 2016. Ampara, a city in the Eastern Province, and Kandy, which is located in the Central Province, had the highest homicide rates, at 11.1 per 100,000 people, followed by Jaffna (9.4), which is the capital city of the Northern Province, and Gampaha (8.1), which is one of the major cities in the Western Province (figure 2). Since the end of the conflict in 2009, homicide rates in Sri Lankan cities have declined significantly.

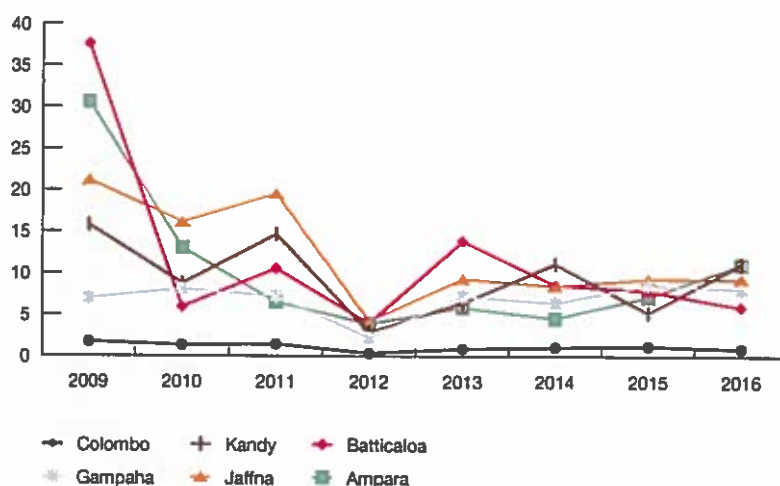


Figure 2. Homicide rates in urban areas (2009–2016)
Source: Sri Lanka Police statistics and 2012 census³⁵



Domestic and gender-based violence

Domestic and gender-based violence remain prevalent in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Police recorded over 33,000 cases of violence against women and children between 2005 and 2016. Incidents of rape and incest recorded by the police have increased by 40 percent in the last ten years, from 1,463 cases in 2006 to 2,036 in 2016 (figure 3).³⁶ It is difficult to determine the nature, extent, and magnitude of the problem, however, because women and girls who experience gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual violence, are less likely to report to the police due to stigma and fear of reprisal from perpetrators.

Perpetrators of domestic and gender-based violence enjoy a culture of impunity in Sri Lanka. Of the 15 percent of Sri Lankan men in a 2013 United Nations survey who had committed rape, nearly 65 percent had done so on more than one occasion,³⁷ and 60 percent had committed intimate-partner rape.³⁸ The survey findings revealed that over 95 percent of Sri Lankan men who committed rape against women or girls faced no legal consequences.³⁹ In Sri Lanka, marital rape is not recognized as a crime under existing law unless the wife and husband are legally separated. In addition, the Sirisena administration has done very little to end impunity for military and police personnel who committed acts of sexual violence during and after the conflict.⁴⁰ Lack of gender sensitivity and limited understanding of laws against sexual violence among police officers, as well as lengthy court procedures, further discourage victims from pursuing legal action against their abusers.

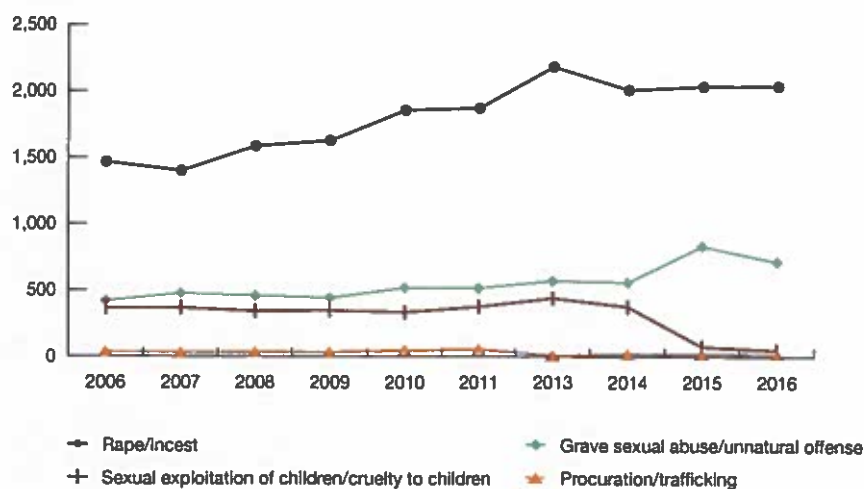


Figure 3. Gender-based violence cases recorded by the Sri Lanka Police (2006–2016)

Source: Sri Lanka Police⁴¹

Notes

- 1 Sri Lankan Tamils make up 11 percent of the Sri Lankan population, while so-called "upcountry" Tamils, of Indian origin, make up 4 percent. Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing, 2012* (Ministry of Policy Planning and Economic Affairs, 2012), 141, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/Activities/Reports/FinalReport/FinalReportE.pdf>.
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- 3 The total number of deaths is calculated using the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Battle Deaths Dataset's best estimates from 1984 to 1988, and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Battle-Related Deaths Dataset's best estimates for a period between 1989 and 1993. Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Monitoring trends in global combat: A new dataset of battle deaths," *European Journal of Population* 21, no. 2–3 (2005): 145–166, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10680-005-6851-6>; and Erik Melander, Thérèse Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, "Organized Violence, 1989–2015," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 5 (2016): 727–742, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343316663032>.
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- 34 Sri Lanka experienced 0.5 percent annual urban population growth between 1981 and 2012. As of 2017, only 18 percent of the population lives in urban areas.
- 35 Homicide rates are calculated based on crime statistics from the Sri Lanka Police and the 2012 population census. Police records of homicides between 2009 and 2014 also include cases of abetment of suicide. "Crime Statistics," Sri Lanka Police website, accessed April 28, 2017, <https://www.police.lk/index.php/crime-trends>; "Table 2.2: Urban population by sex and district, census years," Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics website, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Abstract2016/CHAP2/2.2.pdf>.
- 36 See "Crime Statistics," Sri Lanka Police website.
- 37 Emma Fulu et al., *Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok: United Nations, 2013), 43, <http://www.partners4prevention.org/node/515>.
- 38 Ibid., 29, 42.
- 39 Ibid., 45.
- 40 Anne Woodworth and Bhavani Fonseka, *Accountability and Reparations for Victims of Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2016), <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CSV-paper-June-2016.pdf>.
- 41 Only first-quarter data was available for 2012; therefore, it is not included in the graph. See "Crime Statistics," Sri Lanka Police website.