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During 2014, the now former Rajapaksa government permitted extremist monks and laity affiliated with Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups to perpetrate numerous attacks against religious minority communities in Sri Lanka. In September 2014, a USCIRF staff member visited the country and heard multiple reports that officials in the previous government tacitly supported these groups and their actions against Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. Interlocutors also reported that some local police harassed religious minorities at their houses of worship, did not stop religiously-motivated attacks and sometimes participated in them, and did not adequately protect minorities. In March 2015, USCIRF Commissioner Eric Schwartz and USCIRF staff travelled to Sri Lanka to reassess the situation following the January 2015 election. While some religious freedom concerns remain, USCIRF is encouraged by the new government's statements and actions to promote religious freedom, national reconciliation and unity.

Background

Sri Lanka is a religiously pluralistic country, with a population estimated, as of 2012, to be 70 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9 percent Muslim, and 7.5 percent Christian. Until 2009, the country was ravaged by a 26-year civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an ethnically-based movement seeking an independent state. During the war, both sides failed to prevent communal violence involving Sinhalese Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Both the former Rajapaksa government and the LTTE are alleged to have committed war crimes, and the former government refused calls for investigations into these allegations for years.

On January 9, 2015 Maithripala Sirisena was sworn in as Sri Lanka's new president after defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, who held the office since 2005. Sirisena, who left the Rajapaksa government to run in opposition, put forward a platform that included fighting governmental corruption and nepotism, as well seeking national reconciliation and harmony. In a February 2015 speech President Sirisena stated, "While protecting the country's main religion Buddhism, we also protect the rights and freedom of Hindu, Muslim, and Catholic people in practicing their religion and create consensus among them to build up this country." Sri Lankan officials repeated those sentiments about tolerance and respect for religious freedom to a USCIRF mission to Sri Lanka in March 2015, and indeed, USCIRF has found that reports of abuses diminished significantly in the first months of 2015.

Violence against Religious Minorities

Individuals associated with Buddhist nationalist groups, particularly Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and

Sinhala Ravaya, perpetrated violence against religious minority communities during 2014. In the largest incident, a mob of an estimated 500 Buddhist nationalists attacked Muslims in the towns of Aluthgama, Beruwala and Dharga in the southwestern Kalutara district in June 2014. At least four people were killed, dozens severely injured, an estimated 10,000 people fled the area, and mosques and Muslim-owned shops and homes were destroyed. Officials in the Rajapaksa government who were associated with BBS were accused of complicity in the attack, for example, by shutting down media Web sites so they could not show the extent of the violence or that local police were not stopping it. Moreover, former President Rajapaksa made remarks at the UN Human Rights Council that seemed to blame the Muslim victims. However, the then-government did provide assistance to affected people and began to rebuild destroyed properties. Numerous other violent incidents against Muslims also occurred throughout the year.

Dozens of attacks against Christian churches and individuals were reported. For example, in January 2014, a mob attacked the Assembly of God and Calvary churches in Hikkaduwa. Local police reportedly were warned in advance but arrived after the attack. Eighteen individuals, including seven Buddhist monks, were arrested and are facing trial. In February 2014 a Buddhist nationalist mob of more than 200 individuals, including several Buddhist monks, attacked and damaged the Holy Family Church in Kandy district, injuring its pastor and his family. Dozens of similar attacks against Christian churches and individuals were reported in 2014.

Hindu communities also faced intimidation and harassment. While Hindus generally do not face the same level of violent persecution as the other minority communities, local police reportedly conduct surveillance of Hindu individuals and temples suspected of supporting the LTTE or advocating for an international war crimes tribunal.

Intolerant Propaganda

In 2014, BBS propaganda cast religious minority communities in a negative light, exacerbating religious tensions. For example, Buddhist nationalist monks accused Muslims of seeking to wipe out Buddhism in the country by secretly sterilizing Buddhist women. Additionally, BBS pressured the former government to ban Muslim headscarves and halal slaughter. BBS used similar propaganda campaigns against Christians, and called for the country to adopt a nationwide anti-conversion law and ban missionary groups.

Governmental Restrictions on Houses of Worship

A 2008 circular, still being implemented, issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs causes problems for Christian communities viewed as new to the country, such as Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations and Jehovah's Witnesses. The circular requires religious communities to register houses of worship with the Ministry and seek advance approval of new construction. While the requirements appear to apply to all religious groups, reportedly they are only enforced against Christians and Muslims. In addition, minorities complain that the registration process is opaque and slow; that registration results in monitoring and harassment by local police; and that they are often forced to register as NGOs and not religious groups. Unregistered houses of worship have been closed. For example, the National Evangelical Christian Alliance of Sri Lanka reported that 30 churches were forced to close in 2014.

Discrimination in Public Schools

During USCIRF's 2014 and 2015 visits, Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities reported discrimination in government-run schools. Teachers and administrators harass non-Buddhist students, including by throwing out of class Muslim girls who cover their hair. Reportedly teachers quiz minority students about Buddhism and, if a student cannot answer, the parents are fined and/or the student barred from school until s/he shows knowledge of Buddhism. Religious education is a required course, and religious knowledge is assessed on the national university entrance exam. If a

school has more than 15 non-Buddhist students, it is supposed to provide a religious education class on the relevant religion, taught by a member of that religion, and assess that knowledge on the university entrance exam. However, these requirements are often not met, forcing non-Buddhist students to either take the class on Buddhism or skip the religious section of the national test, which lowers their scores and adversely affects their entrance to university.

Religious Police

In April 2014 the former government formed a special police unit purportedly to handle complaints by religious communities. However, the unit of approximately 500 officers was comprised almost exclusively of Buddhists, raising concerns among religious minorities that the then-government and its BBS allies would use the unit to curtail their rights and intimidate and harass them.

Religious Freedom Prospects in 2015

Since President Sirisena took office in January, he has taken several steps to improve religious unity and religious freedom. For example, he created three new ministries to handle religious affairs for the Muslim, Christian, and Hindu communities respectively. Additionally, the new Ministry of Christian Affairs appointed a special coordinator for Charismatic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches. The special police unit created by the former government has been disbanded, according to officials and religious communities with whom USCIRF met in March 2015.

President Sirisena's public statements on the need for national unity, reconciliation, harmony, and improved religious freedom have been encouraging, as were the comments by government officials with whom USCIRF met in March 2015. Additionally, while the President continues to oppose an international investigation into alleged war crimes by the former government and the LTTE at the end of the civil war, he has made public statements in favor of accepting United Nations support on these issues, including advice on how a Sri Lankan investigation should be conducted. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, reports of abuses against religious minorities have diminished in the first months of 2015, though concerns remain.

Recommendations

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: strongly encourage the positive movement that has occurred in recent months; encourage the Sri Lankan government to allow a transparent and independent investigation into alleged war crimes, including targeted attacks on religious minorities; ensure that a portion of U.S. humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka is used to help protect minorities from religiously-motivated violence; assist the Sri Lankan government to train local government officials, police officers, and judges on international religious freedom standards and on how to investigate and prosecute violent attacks; and urge Sri Lankan government officials to provide minority students an equal opportunity to learn their faiths in public schools and to rescind policies and practices – often driven at local levels – that restrict religious communities' ability to build houses of worship or practice their faith.

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