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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Sri Lanka

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. In practice, however, local authorities failed to respond effectively to communal violence, including attacks on members of minority religious groups, and perpetrators were not brought to justice. Authorities failed to prevent the destruction of a Hindu temple in Dambulla and an attack on the Grandpass Mosque in Colombo. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) alleged that senior and local government officials provided assistance to or, at a minimum, tacit support for the actions of societal groups targeting religious minorities.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was an overall decrease in societal respect for religious freedom, as Buddhist nationalist groups led campaigns targeting Muslims and Christians. Buddhist groups attacked churches and mosques.

U.S. embassy officials urged government leaders to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators of attacks on churches, mosques, and other places of worship. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with representatives of all major religious denominations to discuss post-conflict reconciliation efforts and continuing harassment of minority religious groups. The U.S. embassy initiated projects promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement to support reconciliation efforts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 21.7 million (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 70 percent is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent Muslim. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west and Muslims in the east; the north is predominantly Hindu.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhist. The majority of Tamils, the largest ethnic minority, are Hindu. The Muslim community is comprised of both ethnic Sinhalese and ethnic Tamils. Most Muslims are Sunni; there is a small Shia minority, including members of the Bohra community. Almost 80 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic; other Christian denominations include Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Assembly of God, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Dutch Reformed Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Evangelical Christian groups have grown in recent years, although membership still remains relatively low.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. According to the constitution, every person is “entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” The constitution gives a citizen the right to manifest his or her religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching in both public and in private. It accords Buddhism the “foremost place” (priority consideration) and commits the government to protecting it, but does not recognize it as the state religion.

The Ministry of Buddha Sasana (doctrine and practice) and Religious Affairs has four departments working specifically with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups. By law each department is mandated to formulate and implement programs to inculcate religious values and promote a “virtuous society.”

Religious groups are not required to register with the government, nor is there a requirement to register places of worship. Incorporation by act of parliament is the highest form of legal validity, but that option is unavailable in practice for Christian churches. Christian churches are compelled to seek other forms of registration to establish a legal status, such as establishing a trust, society, NGO, or company under the Companies Act. Any of these forms of registration allows a church to engage in financial transactions, operate a bank account, and hold property.

Government ministries can also issue circulars, which are directives that do not have the force of law.

An instruction issued during the year by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs to the Registrar of Companies mandates that the ministry must approve all applications submitted by churches seeking registration. Since September local authorities have been citing a 2008 circular issued by the ministry on registration of new churches to close down churches, including those that predate the circular, even though the circular does not have the force of law and its apparent intent is to regulate the construction of new places of religious worship.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are adjudicated according to the customary law of the applicable ethnic or religious group. In order to solemnize marriages, religious groups must register with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs.

Religion is a mandatory subject in the public school curriculum. Parents may choose for their children to study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity. Students cannot opt out of religious instruction. Students belonging to other religious groups may pursue religious instruction outside the public school system. All schools follow the Ministry of Education curriculum on the subject, which is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary-Level (GCE O-Level) exams. According to the Department of Examinations website, those taking the exam in the Tamil language are tested in Hinduism and those taking it in the Sinhala language are tested in Buddhism, but students are not tested in both. International schools following the London Ordinary-Level syllabus are governed by the Board of Investment and may opt not to teach religious studies in schools, as students can pass without religion.

Government Practices

Although the government officially endorsed religious freedom, in practice there were problems in specific areas. NGOs accused authorities of reluctance to investigate or prosecute those responsible for attacks on churches, Hindu *kovils* (temples), and mosques and characterized this as indicative of a deepening “culture of impunity” that protected alleged Buddhist perpetrators.

On October 29, the Urban Development Authority, heeding the calls of area Buddhists in Dambulla, bulldozed the Hindu Dambulla Badhrakaali Amman Kovil near the separate Buddhist temple to make way for a pond in the Dambulla Buddhist “sacred zone.” According to various sources, more than 40 Tamil Hindu families who had paid rent to Sinhalese landowners in the area surrounding the *kovil* for over three generations were evicted with the promise of alternative living arrangements, but local authorities did not fulfill the promise.

Buddhists in Dambulla also demanded that a nearby mosque be removed because it was also located in the “sacred zone.” Disagreements about the presence of the mosque led to confrontations between Buddhists and Muslims, including acts of vandalism against the mosque. The mosque had been slated for destruction in 2012 to expand the major north-south A9 highway, but area Muslims held the deeds to their properties and gained concessions to divert the highway.

The Sinhala Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, "Forces of Buddhist Power") continued to promote views religious and ethnic minorities considered hostile. Local media and NGOs noted strong linkages between the BBS and the government, particularly Secretary of Defense (and brother of the president) Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who appeared prominently at public BBS events during the year. In response to pressure from this group, municipal councils began passing regulations prohibiting the slaughter of cows, a BBS demand, in their areas.

At times, local police and government officials appeared to be acting in concert with Buddhist nationalist organizations. Evangelical Christian churches, especially in the south, reported increased pressure and harassment by local government bodies to suspend worship activities or close down if they were not registered with the government, despite no legal requirement to do so. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) stated that "dozens" of churches from all parts of the country had been questioned about their legality by local government officials and police.

Church leaders, predominately from unregistered evangelical churches, reported that police used a government circular from 2011 in an attempt to coerce unregistered churches to register, even though the circular was subsequently revoked. The circular had required all places of worship to register, but was replaced by a new circular that only applied to new places of worship, which are required to register after procuring a "no objections" letter from local Buddhist officials. In some such instances, police warned church leaders that if their places of worship remained open, security forces would be unable to protect them from vandalism or attacks.

On December 1, the opening day of services at the Methodist Church of Habarana in Anuradapura District, Buddhist monks reportedly led a mob of 200 villagers that destroyed the church. Two police Criminal Investigation Division (CID) officers arrived at the scene and ordered the church to shut down because it had no legal recognition to operate, citing a circular issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs. The next day, the CID officers instructed the pastor of nearby Believers Church to close down for the same reason, even though the church had been functioning in the village for the past seven years and was legally incorporated.

The pastor of the Church of Grace in Warakapola, Kegalle District received a letter from the divisional secretariat dated November 11, instructing him to stop all religious worship activities. The letter referenced an August 2009 circular. The same pastor was violently attacked in December 2012. A case against the pastor for allegedly breaking the peace remained unresolved at year's end.

On September 8, police prohibited Praise Prayer Lanka Church, which had been operating in a Colombo suburb for 24 years, from holding services without proper registration. Police informed church officials that failing to register could open the church to attacks and disturb the peace. The church was compelled to suspend services, but resumed them two weeks later after sending the requested registration application documents. The church had yet to receive a response from the government and at the end of the year services were continuing. Church officials said the church had been registered for years with the divisional secretary and, under the former government, with the Christian ministry before it was subsumed by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs under the current government.

On August 1, while responding to a protest over contaminated water, security forces in Weliveriya, Gampaha District, entered a Catholic church and beat protesters who had entered the church seeking shelter. Video taken after the incident showed bullet holes in the church walls.

In May the divisional secretary of Hambantota District issued an ultimatum to evangelical Christian churches to show their registration documents or face closure. According to NCEASL officials, a senior member of the Buddhist clergy from the district publicly stated that Buddhist monks had already closed down 17 churches. The NCEASL stated these closures were often carried out with the tacit support and even cooperation of local authorities.

On February 17, two police officers, the village officer, and five officers of the divisional secretariat disrupted a prayer meeting in progress at the Christian Prayer Centre in Ingiriya, Kaluthara District. Police told the 15-20 Christians gathered for prayer their meeting was illegal, stating they did not have prior approval to hold prayer meetings there. The divisional secretary said a gathering for worship of more than 10 persons would be considered a "church" which would require prior approval to hold such gatherings. According to local human rights groups, there was no legal basis for such a claim.

Some Christian groups, in particular denominations with a more recent presence in the country, reported an increase in complications obtaining local permission to construct church buildings. Evangelical groups reported increasing difficulty in registering new churches or reregistering as corporations. Several smaller congregations were denied permission to register with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs as churches, reportedly because they were not members of the National Christian Council, an umbrella organization representing "traditional" Protestant churches. Reportedly local authorities sometimes did not want these groups operating in their districts due to allegations of "unethical" conversions and to pressure by local Buddhist groups.

Some evangelical Christian groups reported incidents of governmental discrimination in the provision of services. Some government schools required minority Christian students to attend Buddhist religion classes because there were no teachers available to teach classes on Christianity. There were also reports of government schools refusing to enroll Christians because of their religion.

The government continued to limit the issuance of temporary work permits for foreign religious workers and clergy. Work permits for foreign clergy were issued for one year but could be extended.

Following the conclusion of a 27-year conflict between the Buddhist-majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), government troops continued to build Buddhist shrines in Tamil areas of the north, which are home to primarily Hindu but also Christian and Muslim populations. Some Tamil groups alleged this demonstrated government-sponsored Sinhalese colonization of former LTTE-held areas. The number of Buddhist shrines and religious sites in the northern districts of Jaffna and Kilinochchi also increased.

Government Inaction

Human rights organizations and members of religious minority groups expressed concern that authorities tacitly condoned harassment and violence, particularly perpetrated by Buddhist nationalist groups, aimed at religious minorities. In multiple instances during the year, police failed to respond or were reluctant to arrest or pursue criminal cases against individuals instigating attacks on minority religious sites.

The government was hesitant to arrest and prosecute Buddhist monks involved in numerous attacks against Muslims and Christians. Buddhist monks generally operated under the protection of the government. Some monks, particularly outside Colombo, operated with impunity in trying to eliminate Christian and Muslim places of worship.

On August 10, 50-60 Buddhist monks and their supporters attacked the new Grandpass Mosque in Colombo during evening prayers on the day after Eid al-Fitr. Monks had previously protested against the relocation of the mosque, which the government had approved. Several people were hospitalized. Police were present during the attack but failed to intervene to stop the violence and they made no arrests. The Urban Development Authority subsequently decided to abandon plans to demolish the old mosque and forced the Muslims to return there. There were several similar mosque attacks during the year, none of which resulted in prosecutions.

On March 24, Buddhist monks led a mob of approximately 100 people who assaulted several members of the congregation in the Assemblies of God church in Kottawa, a suburb of Colombo. The police ordered the pastor to stop the services but did not arrest any of the perpetrators.

On March 18, a mob reportedly led by Buddhist monks attacked the wife, two children, and residence of the pastor of the Jeevana Alokaya church in Weeraketiya, Hambanthota District, causing serious injury to the pastor's wife and damage to the property. The pastor was in Colombo at the time attending the Supreme Court hearing on a petition he filed following an earlier attack on the church in December 2012. During the three-hour attack, shattered glass struck the pastor's wife in the eye, requiring surgery. Police were present during the attack, in which the pastor's home was vandalized and some Bibles burned, but took no action. Following the attack, police reportedly instructed the pastor's family to relocate outside the district for their own safety. The next day police made several arrests in connection with the attack, but the perpetrators were later released from custody after a protesting mob led by Buddhist monks hurled stones at the police station and politicians intervened to demand their release.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal discrimination and violence against religious minorities increased markedly. Although members of different religious groups were generally tolerant of each other's religious beliefs, there was evidence of growing distrust and fear, particularly on the part of religious minorities. Attacks on churches and mosques increased.

According to numerous reports, the BBS was behind a growing wave of anti-Muslim activities carried out by other violent Buddhist nationalist groups, allegedly coordinating with the Ravana Balaya, an extremist organization comprised of members of the Buddhist clergy and laity. Both groups were allegedly involved in a series of attacks on mosques, protests over animal slaughter, and a sustained attempt to further marginalize Muslims by outlawing the halal system of meat certification. The BBS staged large "anti-halal" rallies in February, which included intimidation and harassment of Muslims. The BBS suspended its anti-halal campaign in late March after the government agreed to ban the domestic sale of products labeled with a halal certification (an exception was made for products already labeled). The BBS recommenced its campaign on October 22 for a brief period, claiming the government had reneged on its promise.

The BBS denied involvement in attacks on mosques and Muslim businesses, including widely reported, Buddhist monk-led attacks on the Grandpass Mosque and the Muslim-owned Fashion Bug chain of clothing stores, even though monks associated with the BBS were often present during the attacks. There were also reports of attacks on Muslim food carts in Kandy.

Christian groups reported at least 60 violent attacks led by Buddhist monks against Christians or churches during the year. Christians, particularly those from evangelical denominations, sometimes encountered harassment and physical attacks on property and places of worship by local Buddhists who were opposed to conversion and believed Christian groups threatened them. The number and severity of the attacks reportedly increased modestly. The NCEASL reported attacks on Christian churches, organizations, religious leaders, and congregants; many of the attacks were reported to the police. Other sources confirmed some of these attacks.

In June a group of Jehovah's Witnesses was engaged in evangelical outreach through the distribution of a monthly magazine in Mulleriyawa. Members of Ravana Balaya surrounded the group and ordered them to stop distributing the magazine. The Ravana Balaya leader reported this incident to police and warned the Jehovah's Witnesses to stop visiting Buddhist residences.

Also in June a group attacked the Catholic Church of St. Francis Xavier in Angulana. The vandals destroyed a statue of the Virgin Mary and then demolished the tabernacle. In the same month, a mob led by a Buddhist monk assaulted the pastor of the New Life Church in Hanwella, Colombo District, along with his sons and members of the congregation. The monk was not detained.

On September 2, when a group of unidentified individuals threw plastic bags filled with kerosene at the home of the pastor of the Assemblies of God Church in Agunukolapalassa, Hambanthota District. The attackers fled when the pastor awoke and came out of the house. Police found evidence of lit matches outside the premises. The pastor filed a police complaint, but there had been no progress reported on the investigation by the end of the year.

On December 21, unidentified assailants threw two gasoline bombs at the Samaritan Church premises occupied by the pastor and his family in Ahangama, Galle District. On December 10, an unknown gunman shot at the home of a pastor in Western Province. No injuries were reported in either case. The police stated they were investigating but had made no arrests by year's end.

Several churches were attacked on Christmas Eve. Buddhist monks were among a mob of over 300 villagers who surrounded the pastor of the Assemblies of God Church in Angunukolapalassa, Hambanthota District, demanding he stop all worship activities planned for Christmas. The villagers alleged that a Buddhist monk had filed a police complaint against the pastor's religious activities. The pastor cited his right to hold services and was given police protection. At 11:30 p.m. the same night, a group of unidentified assailants threw stones at the Light House Church in Hikkaduwa, Galle District, shattering windows and causing minor damage. The pastors lodged police complaints, but no progress was reported on the investigation by year's end.

On December 27, approximately 200 protesters attempted to stop construction of a new Methodist church in Buttala, Monaragala District. Although police and the divisional secretariat intervened, the situation remained tense and construction was temporarily suspended.

Allegations of "unethical" conversions, implying economic inducements, by evangelical missionaries and churches continued to surface during the year. Such claims were made not only by hard-line Buddhists, but were also common among moderate Buddhist, Hindu, and established Christian church leaders. The BBS, for example, alleged that "U.S.-based" evangelical Christian groups offered economic inducements in exchange for conversion.

On May 24, a Buddhist monk self-immolated and later died in Kandy, reportedly to protest the Muslim halal method of slaughtering cattle and "unethical" conversions by Christians.

NGOs reported several incidents of discrimination against Muslims. A survey by the Asia Foundation, an international NGO working in the country, found that religious tension continued to be a problem among Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist groups. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed believed that attempts to convert people from one religion to another should not be tolerated, a perception that was relatively consistent across all religious groups. The survey also found that most members of religious minorities considered themselves free to express religious opinions in their local areas; however, higher percentages of Muslims and Hindus did not feel free to express religious opinions in public.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials regularly conveyed concerns about religious freedom, particularly attacks on churches and mosques, to government leaders at the most senior levels and urged them to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also met frequently with representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups to discuss a wide range of religious freedom concerns. The embassy

encouraged interfaith efforts by religious leaders to promote reconciliation. Following the Grandpass Mosque attack, the U.S. embassy issued a statement calling for prosecution of the perpetrators, the protection of the right of all Sri Lankans to practice the religion of their choice, and an end to religiously-based violence.

The embassy also undertook several projects to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement, including interfaith panel discussions and workshops. These events involved key regional religious leaders and reached several thousand participants. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss efforts for further development in the war-affected north and east. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also regularly participated in religious conferences, ceremonies, and other events promoting religious freedom around the country.

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