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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sri Lanka

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change religion. The law recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The constitution and other laws accord Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths and commit the government to protecting it while respecting the rights of religious minorities.

At the end of the year, approximately 70 Muslims, including 25 who were indicted on various charges and whose court cases were ongoing, remained in custody in connection with the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels, killing 268 persons, including 46 foreign citizens, and injuring more than 500. Religious rights groups reported instances in which police continued to prohibit, impede, or attempt to close Christian and Muslim places of worship, citing government regulations. In April, the government widened the scope of regulations requiring approval for construction of places of worship. Critics said the government used the regulations to unfairly target minority religious groups. Media outlets, ethnic minority groups, and opposition politicians continued to report that the Department of Archaeology and the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province identified Buddhist heritage in sites that were traditionally Muslim or Hindu, then designated the sites for conservation or construction of Buddhist structures. On February 22, unidentified individuals demolished and removed part of an approximately 800-year-old Sufi Muslim shrine in Kuregala. On May 15, then army commander General Shavendra Silva presided over an opening ceremony for the Kuregala Buddhist Vihara and Sacred Land

Development Project at the same location. Construction also continued on a new Buddhist stupa in Kurunthoormalai at the site of the ruins of the Athi Ayyanar Hindu Temple, despite a 2018 court order decreeing that no changes could be made to the location.

A local nongovernmental organization (NGO), the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), reported that by the end of the year, there were 80 incidents of physical violence, discrimination, threats, hate propaganda, or property destruction against Christians. During the year, NCEASL documented 14 incidents against Muslims and 19 against Hindus. In many of the incidents, police or other state actors played a role, and in cases of intimidation or attacks by Buddhist groups on Christian churches, police often said the pastors were to blame. Hashtag Generation, a local NGO that analyzes trends in online dangerous speech, stated that anti-Tamil content increased throughout the year, with many posts in response to protests over the construction of the Buddhist stupa at the Kurunthoormalai site. The United Nations documented that from April to September, Christians were the most targeted ethnoreligious minority, followed by Muslims. Anti-Christian posts accused Christians of co-opting the country-wide protest movement. Hashtag Generation also stated that antiminority online content often grouped Hindu Tamils and Christians together and spread divisive attitudes by portraying the two communities as at odds with Sinhala-Buddhist values and ideology.

U.S. embassy officials regularly urged senior government officials and political leaders, including the President, Prime Minister, and cabinet ministers to defend religious freedom for all, emphasizing the importance of religious minorities in the national reconciliation process, and calling for due process for those in prolonged detentions under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), including Muslims detained in connection with the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. The Ambassador frequently posted on social media about the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, and in an April press release emphasized the value of religious pluralism. Embassy personnel and visiting senior State Department officials met with religious and civic leaders across the country, including in provinces with large numbers of religious minorities, to understand the views of the communities they represent and the challenges they faced and to identify ways their communities could help diffuse ethnic tensions as well as contribute to economic recovery. The U.S. government funded multiple assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith and interreligious cooperation, dialogue, and confidence building.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.2 million (midyear 2022). The 2012 national census, which provides the most recent available data, lists the population as 70.2 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent

Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian. According to census data, the Theravada Buddhist community, which makes up nearly all the country's Buddhists, is the majority population in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western Provinces.

Most Sinhalese are Buddhist and are commonly referred to as Sinhala Buddhists, an ethnoreligious group. Tamils, mainly Hindu with a significant Christian minority, constitute the majority in the Northern Province and represent the second largest group, after Muslims, in the Eastern Province. Muslims are legally recognized as a separate ethnoreligious group, rather than as Tamil or Sinhalese. Within the Muslim community there are several communities, ranging from the majority Tamil-speaking Moors to Malays (whose ancestry traces to Java) and to those with Indian roots tracing back to Mumbai and Gujarat, the Memons and Bohras. Tamils of Indian origin, who are mostly Hindu, have a large presence in the Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces. Muslims form a plurality in the Eastern Province, and there are sizable Muslim populations in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Western Provinces. Christians reside throughout the country but have a larger presence in the Eastern, Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces, and a smaller presence in Sabaragamuwa and Uva Provinces.

Most Muslims are Sunni, with small Ahmadi and Shia minorities, the latter comprised of Dawoodi Bohras. According to government statistics, an estimated 81 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. Other Christian groups include the Church of Ceylon (Anglican), the Dutch Reformed Church, Methodists, Baptists, Assembly of God, Pentecostals, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Christian evangelical and nondenominational Protestant groups have grown in recent years, although there are no reliable estimates of their numbers. According to the government, their membership remains low compared with the larger Christian community. There is a small Jewish population living in different parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the constitution, every person is "entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," including the freedom to choose a religion. The constitution gives citizens the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching, both in public and in private. The constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place" among the country's religious faiths and requires the government to protect it, although it does not recognize it as the state religion. According to a 2003

Supreme Court ruling, the state is constitutionally required to protect only Buddhism; other religions do not have the same right to state protection. The same ruling also holds that no fundamental right to proselytize exists or is protected under the constitution. In 2017, the Supreme Court determined the right to propagate one's religion is not protected by the constitution. The Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs, the cabinet ministry is the cabinet ministry responsible for oversight of Theravada Buddhism.

The law recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. There is no registration requirement for central religious bodies of these four groups. New religious groups, including groups affiliated with the four recognized religions, must register with the government to obtain approval to construct new places of worship, sponsor religious worker (missionary) visas/immigration permits, operate schools, and apply for subsidies for religious education. Religious groups may also seek incorporation by an act of parliament, which requires a simple majority and affords religious groups state recognition.

The law considers any racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence to be a criminal offense, including through spoken word, written word, and signs or other visible representation that cause religious disharmony. Lower courts normally do not approve release on payment of bail for such offenses, with bail possible only through appeal to a higher court. The offenses carry a punishment of imprisonment for five to 20 years, depending on which law or laws are applied.

The government adheres to a 2008 ministerial circular, introduced by the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs, which requires all groups, regardless of their religion, to receive permission from the ministry to register and to construct new places of worship. A 2017 Supreme Court ruling upheld the registration requirements. In 2018, the ministry ruled that the 2008 circular on registration and construction of religious facilities only applied to Buddhist religious sites. Specific noncabinet departments under the ministry are responsible for addressing the concerns of each major religious community. In April, the government issued a new ministerial circular that supersedes and expands the scope of the 2008 circular and outlines new requirements for construction, maintenance, and registration of places of worship for all faiths.

The country's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, which is designed to incorporate the international covenant into domestic law, criminalizes propagating or advocating religious or racial hatred. Punishment for violations ranges from fines to up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Religion is a compulsory subject at the primary and secondary levels in public and private schools. Parents may elect to have their children study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity, provided enough demand (at least 15 students) exists within the school for the chosen subject. Students may not opt out of religious instruction even if instruction in their religion of choice is not available, or if they do not choose any religion. All schools teaching the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus, including private schools founded by religious organizations, must use the Ministry of Education curriculum on religion, which covers the four main religions and is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary Level exams (equivalent to U.S. grade 10). International schools not following the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus are not required to teach religious studies.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and property inheritance, are adjudicated either under customary law of the ethnic or religious group in question or under the country's civil law. According to the 1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), Islamic personal law governs marriages and divorces of Muslims, while civil law applies to most property rights. In the Northern Province, civil law governs marriages, while the *Thesawalamai* (Tamil customary law) often governs the division of property. For some Sinhalese, Kandyan personal law (based on the traditions of the Sinhalese Kandyan kingdom that preceded British colonial rule) governs civil matters, such as inheritance issues, and works within the caste system. Civil law governs most marriages of Sinhalese and Tamils of various religions, including marriages involving individuals of different faiths or those of individuals who state no religious affiliation. Religious community members report practices vary by region, and numerous exceptions exist.

There is no national law regulating ritual animal sacrifice, but there are laws prohibiting animal cruelty that are used to prevent religious ceremonies involving animal sacrifice.

The country is a party to the ICCPR.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Religious minority groups reported incidents of violence by members of local majority religious communities and said that state officials often supported the perpetrators. Analysts studying incidents of violence against Christians said that in some cases, state officials sided with perpetrators who demanded that Christians cease activities in "Buddhist villages" or obtain permission from the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs to conduct worship activities. The NCEASL said evangelical Christian groups continued to report that police and local government officials were complicit in the harassment of religious

minorities and their places of worship and often sided with the majority religious community in the area.

The NCEASL reported there were few arrests connected to the violence and none of Buddhist monks who were involved in violence. They reported that public officials were the most frequent perpetrators of anti-Christian and anti-Hindu discrimination.

According to a report issued in November by the Papal Foundation, Christians were at risk in the country. The report found, however, that conditions had "slightly improved" over the past several years.

According to police, 2,299 individuals were arrested in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks that targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels, killing 268 persons, including 46 foreign citizens, and injuring more than 500. In August 2021, the Attorney General's Department (AGD) indicted 25 suspects with direct involvement in the Easter Sunday attack. At the end of the year, their trials were ongoing. According to civil society, as of November, approximately 70 Muslims remained in custody, including the 25 who were indicted. The others were detained in prolonged pretrial detention under the PTA, some for more than three years.

In February, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said that he had no faith left in the Sri Lankan government and the AGD to investigate the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. "The present government has given promotions to officials who failed to prevent the Easter attacks," said Cardinal Ranjith at the launch of a book compiled by the National Catholic Commission for Social Communication after reviewing the government-appointed commission's reports on the attack. The cardinal said: "Now, nearly three years since the attack, we can hardly accept that justice has been done. This government and the attorney general have hidden the evidence given by the Presidential Commission."

On February 9, the Puttalam High Court released on bail prominent Muslim human rights lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah, nearly 22 months after his detention under the PTA in 2020. At the end of the year, a hate-speech court case against Hizbullah remained ongoing.

Muslim NGOs and organizations continued to report police harassment and surveillance of their activities since the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. Muslim families of the PTA prisoners arrested in connection with the attack and those who were released on bail reported continued harassment, including regular telephone calls and visits by government security forces to ask about their activities.

In a March report, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom Ahmed Shaheed drew attention to discrimination against the Muslim and Christian religious communities in Sri Lanka. He said that the 2020

establishment of the Eastern Archaeological Heritage Task Force, detention of minorities under the PTA, and restrictions on funerals and burials due to COVID-19 were curtailing the rights of religious minorities.

On May 30, the attorney general instructed police to file charges against Buddhist monk Galagoda Gnanasara, general secretary of Bodu Bala Sena, a Buddhist group described by Human Rights Watch and other organizations as ultranationalist, and then chair of the One Country, One Law Task Force, which completed its work and disbanded after producing a final report in June and which then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dismissed for using language deemed hurtful to religious sentiments. As of the end of the year, police had not filed any charges. On October 14, a Colombo court issued an arrest warrant for Gnanasara for not appearing in court in a separate earlier case charging him with hate speech against the Muslim community. As of the end of the year, Gnanasara had not been arrested.

On September 21, Mullaitivu police arrested former Tamil National Alliance Northern Provincial Council member T. Ravikaran and political activist R. Mayoorn for obstructing government officials' activities by leading a protest against the archaeology department's move to acquire 632 acres of land owned or managed by Tamils as part of the Kurunthoormalai conservation project. The two were released on bail on September 22. NGOs reported the encroachment on lands in Tamil areas by the archaeology department and other agencies – specifically, promoting or overseeing the destruction of Hindu and Muslim sites to build Buddhist temples and monuments – was one of the biggest impediments to religious freedom in the Northern Province.

On August 1, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) issued an order lifting the ban on six Tamil diaspora organizations and 316 individuals, mostly diaspora Tamils, who had been proscribed for supporting and funding the terrorist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The MOD also proscribed three new organizations and 55 primarily Muslim individuals for allegedly supporting terrorist organizations, including poet and teacher Ahnaf Jazeem who had been detained under the PTA for more than a year for his Tamil-language poetry book, *Navarasam*, that the government said contained extremist messages. As of the end of the year, a hate-speech court case against Jazeem remained ongoing. Civil society groups reported that many Muslim PTA detainees and some Tamil PTA detainees who had been released on bail were included in the proscribed persons list, which includes personal-identifying information, resulting in their bank accounts being frozen.

Some representatives of minority religious communities and NGOs stated they believed the government viewed the Muslim community as a threat to cultural, land, and population hegemony, the Christian community as

responsible for inducing unethical conversions in the country, and the Hindu community as encroaching on Buddhist archaeological sites.

A 2022 Jehovah's Witnesses religious freedom report stated that their adherents were accused multiple times over the previous few years of forcible conversion, propagating religion, healing illnesses, and causing disturbances. For example, in 2020 in Ratnapura, police arrested two members of Jehovah's Witnesses after individuals accused them of forcible conversion and filed a complaint. The Jehovah's Witnesses in the case reported that Buddhist monks questioned them at the police station in the presence of police officers, and that they were charged under the penal code for public nuisance and "attempting to excite disaffection." The two members were released on bail, and in May the AGD announced it would not pursue the case.

On April 21, the government issued a new circular outlining requirements for construction, maintenance, and registration of religious places. In November, the Ministry of Buddhasasana reported that registration requirements included a land deed, approval from the local government authority, at least one trustee, a mechanism to conduct regular religious programs, access to sanitary facilities, sufficient families residing in the area surrounding the site, and non-obstruction of existing religious institutions. Some civil society critics and lawyers said the circular was not based on existing law and thus was not constitutional. NCEASL and other civil society representatives said the government used the regulation to unfairly target minority places of worship. Some Christian groups said that government officials deemed Christian places of worship unauthorized or illegal if they failed to produce proof of registration and threatened them with legal action if they did not register. If the groups tried to register, however, they said the registration process continued indefinitely without resolution. Instead, unregistered Christian groups stated they continued to incorporate as commercial trusts, legal societies, or NGOs but without formal government recognition as religious groups. Nondenominational churches said they faced restrictions on holding meetings or constructing new places of worship. According to a local NGO report, government officials, police, and intelligence services frequently requested Christian groups show proof of registration of their place of worship and provide information on the leadership of the organization, the composition of the congregation, and religious rituals.

Christian groups reported that they experienced difficulties in complying with registration requirements. Without the consent of the local community or the local Buddhist temple, local councils often did not approve the construction of new religious buildings. Church leaders said they repeatedly appealed to local government officials and the Ministry of Buddhasasana for assistance, with limited success.

For example, on February 21, the local council in Mannar District informed the Theva Sabai Church that approval for construction of a church building, which the group had requested from the local council in April and December 2021, should be obtained from the District Integration Committee at the Mannar District Secretariat and then from the Ministry of Buddhasasana. On April 8, the divisional secretary informed the church that individuals from Vankalai and Naruvilikkulam, two neighboring villages, opposed the construction and that he had revoked a previous order approving the use of land for the church. On April 20, the local council informed the church that the building application was rejected. The church attempted to advocate with the divisional secretary and the District Secretariat. On August 23, Vankalai police ordered a halt to all construction, saying necessary approvals had not been obtained. On August 24, after a Catholic priest said the construction was unauthorized, approximately 150 persons surrounded the site for the church to oppose construction, and police ordered construction workers to evacuate the area. On September 9, the Mannar magistrate issued an order preventing the Theva Sabai pastor from carrying out further construction on the property and ordered the pastor to obtain the relevant approvals before proceeding with the construction.

The NCEASL also reported that on January 8, the pastor of the Apostolic Church in Padavi Sripura, Anuradhapura District, received a letter from the Padavi Sripura Divisional Secretariat saying that due to opposition from the general public and the provincial committee handling Buddhist activities, he had to stop all religious gatherings at his home, where the pastor had been conducting religious services since 2013. The pastor reported that he had sought approval for his religious activities from Ministry of Buddhasasana on several occasions with no response. On February 17, the pastor received another letter from police ordering him to stop all religious activity. On February 18, the divisional secretary denied the pastor permission to conduct religious activity.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that some religious groups present in the country for decades still found it difficult to register and be recognized as a Christian religion. Jehovah's Witnesses said they had been present and active in the country for over a century and reported more than 7,000 members in the country. Despite multiple meetings with the Ministry of Buddhasasana and the Department of Christian Affairs in 2020 and 2021, they said they did not receive clear guidelines regarding registration and as an unregistered religious group, did not receive the same rights and privileges as registered religious groups.

Buddhist nuns, or *bhikkunis*, reported that throughout the year the Ministry of Buddhasasana continued to refuse to issue them national identity cards due to opposition from senior Buddhist monks. Bhikkunis were only able to obtain registration as *dasasilmatas* – an alternative female Buddhist order with no ordination. The BBC reported that without

national identity cards or other form of legal recognition, bhikkunis could not open bank accounts, obtain passports, or access some educational benefits, such as completing government exams. Bhikkunis and some Buddhist monks said the problem was due to prejudice against nuns and highlighted a 2009 Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) statement which said that not registering bhikkunis and refusing to issue them identification cards was a violation of their human rights.

According to members of Christian groups, local authorities sometimes demanded their groups stop worship activities or relocate their places of worship outside the local jurisdiction, ostensibly to maintain community peace.

The NCEASL reported that on February 17, while preparing to bury a congregant of Foursquare Gospel Church/Assembly of God Church in Serukele, Puttalam District, at the Serukele public cemetery, a local Buddhist monk and approximately 12 villagers came to the cemetery and said the deceased could not be buried, stating it was only a burial ground for Buddhists. Three police officers of the Pallama police present at the scene asked the church to bury the deceased in a nearby village approximately seven to eight kilometers (4.2 to 4.8 miles) away, which the church did. On February 22, the church's pastor submitted a request to the Divisional Secretariat and the local council for a cemetery for Christians. On February 27 villagers erected a barbed-wire fence around the Serukele cemetery and put up a sign saying, "Buddhist cemetery."

The NCEASL also reported that on March 6, approximately 600 persons, including approximately 60 Buddhist monks, forcibly entered the Mercy Gate Chapel Church premises in Amalgama, Galle District, and demanded the pastor stop all religious activities and close the church, threatening to kill him if he did not comply. Two individuals in the crowd assaulted a congregant, who was hospitalized for two days due to injuries. Approximately 20 police officers from the Akmeemana police station were present during the incident but did not intervene to stop the assault. There were no reported arrests. The officer in charge told the mob that there was no legal basis to close the church without a court order but allowed four Buddhist monks to enter and inspect the church. The NCEASL reported that after questioning the pastor, the monks told the crowd that it was a "false" church. The pastor filed a police complaint and a court case for the assault on the congregant. During a March 15 stakeholder meeting, monks and government officials, including the chairman of the Akmeemana local council, the police officer in charge, and the divisional secretary, stated that the church was not legitimate and that all religious activities should be discontinued. On March 24, while the pastor was visiting his sister's house, approximately 10 police officers from the Akmeemana police station arrived at the house and told the pastor to stop all religious activities.

On February 15, the director general of health services issued an order stating that COVID-19 testing was no longer mandatory for postmortem examinations. On March 3, authorities removed all restrictions on burials of COVID-19 victims, effectively ending the policy of only allowing burials in the Eastern Province to take place in one remote location, a policy that primarily affected the Muslim population.

A report published by a local NGO said surveillance of minority religious groups was conducted by officers from the Criminal Investigation Department, military intelligence, local police stations, the Terrorism Investigation Department, the army, and the navy. In many cases, officers were dressed in civilian clothing and did not provide identification. Muslim civil society representatives interviewed for this report observed that young persons involved in social work and the parents and relatives of those detained under the PTA were the main targets of state surveillance. The NGO report stated that “national security,” “disturbance of the peace,” and “criminal trespass and intimidation” were used as excuses to harass and intimidate members of minority religions. In some cases, according to the report, law enforcement officers acted in concert with local residents or members of the Buddhist clergy.

A Catholic priest from Mannar also reported that monitoring and surveillance of churches had increased since 2019. He said this included more frequent visits from the army, navy, the Criminal Investigation Department, and state intelligence, and increased physical monitoring of places of worship.

The government continued to require all imported Islamic religious books, including the Quran, undergo review before being released as part of what the Ministry of Defense (MOD) said was a counterterrorism measure to screen for extremist content. In June, the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs issued guidelines regarding the import of Islamic books that included analysis and recommendation from a department-appointed committee of Muslim scholars and approval from the MOD. Some Muslim community members said the process discouraged the importation of Islamic religious books.

In December 2021, the commissioner general of the Educational Publications Department ordered principals of government schools to stop distribution of, and recalled, the Islam textbooks for grades six, seven, 10, and 11 in order to make what it said were minor adjustments after the One Country, One Law Presidential Task Force led by ultranationalist Buddhist monk Gnanasara reported concerns about their contents. On October 3, the Center for Justice, a local civil society organization, complained to the HRCSL on behalf of the students, saying the task force had neither legal power nor authority to review textbooks. The center also asserted that the expectations of the students who study Islam were violated by recalling the books in the middle of the academic

year and delaying distribution of amended books for nine months, which impacted their right to free education. The commissioner general told the *Sunday Times* that after a committee revised the textbooks, the Educational Publications Department placed an order to print new books, which was delayed due to import restrictions on paper. At the end of the year, civil society reported that all books were distributed, and that the books had minor revisions in order to fully incorporate different branches of Islam.

Media reports, ethnic minority politicians, and commentators continued to voice concerns that the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province created in 2020 would be used to further what they termed “the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist agenda,” and stated that the task force was extremely problematic. The task force’s mandate was to conduct archaeological site surveys in the heavily Tamil and Muslim Eastern Province and to recommend measures to preserve religious heritage. Critics of the task force said they feared it would lead to land grabbing by officials in the name of preserving heritage. In March, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom Ahmed Shaheed said the task force designated minority archaeological and holy sites as “Buddhist sites” to limit minorities’ access to their own religious sites. The Ministry of Buddhasasana reported in November that the task force assisted the excavation and conservation of the Deegawapi and Neelagiri Stupas in the Ampara District; provided security for archaeological sites and monuments that the archaeology department identified in the East; helped transcribe epigraphs; and assisted with the reclamation of lands belonging to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya Buddhist temple. Since the end of the war, the archaeology department identified 1,655 archaeological sites in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

In January, then President Rajapaksa visited the Kuregala Buddhist Vihara and Sacred Land Development project, which was initiated in 2021 by Buddhist monk Wathurakumbure Dhammarathana and carried out predominantly by the military. The site was also home to an approximately 800-year-old Sufi Muslim shrine, Dafthar Jailani, and multiple structures built by local Muslims, where Sufi Muslims had worshipped for generations. On the night of February 22, unidentified individuals demolished and removed the entrance minarets of the Dafthar Jailani Mosque. Wathurakumbure Dhammarathana told the newspaper *Vidivelli* that the minarets were removed as part of the Kuragala development work. He said that a year earlier, he had informed the mosque administration, the Islamic clergy body the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, and the Wakf Board of Sri Lanka, which manage mosques around the country, that all the buildings in the area except for the mosque and the main burial site would be removed but said he had not received a response. In March, a group of 26 Muslim organizations condemned the incident and called on the government to protect Muslim heritage sites, arguing that the willful destruction of the Dafthar Jailani

shrine, a significant Muslim heritage site, would fuel hatred and division. On May 15, then army commander General Shavendra Silva presided over an opening ceremony for the Kuregala Buddhist Vihara and Sacred Land Development Project.

Press outlets reported that the archaeology department continued construction of a Buddhist stupa in Kurunthoormalai, the site of a longstanding dispute between Sinhalese Buddhists and local, primarily Hindu, residents. While Tamil Hindus said that Kurunthoormalai is the site of the ruins of the Athi Ayyanar Hindu Temple, Buddhist monks and the archaeology department stated the site was once home to Kurundi Temple, built between 110 and 104 BC, which was later destroyed by Tamils, who built a temple over it. Construction continued despite a 2018 court order decreeing that no changes were to be made to the site. On June 12, local Tamils blocked an attempt by Buddhist monks and army officials to hold a dedication ceremony to consecrate a Buddha statue at the site. On July 14, the Mullaitivu Magistrate's Court ordered that all newly built structures, statues, and buildings must be removed; that devotees of the Hindu temple could continue to worship at the site; and that it was the responsibility of police to ensure peace in the area and submit a report to the court. On July 19, Mullaitivu police, the AGD, and the Department of Archaeology filed a motion requesting the July 14 order be reconsidered. The Department of Archaeology said the building constructed was not a Buddhist temple but a structure to preserve artifacts, and Mullaitivu police and the AGD stated that demolishing the building would create ethnic tension. The Mullaitivu magistrate visited the site and revised the previous order to say that the building should be maintained but that no further construction work should commence.

The conservation work at Kurunthoormalai drew criticism from local residents and activists. On July 24, *Sunday Morning* reported that Tamil National Alliance Member of Parliament (MP) M.A. Sumanthiran had filed a fundamental rights petition at the Supreme Court over the prevention of Tamil devotees from worshipping at the location as well as the damage being done to the Hindu temple. Several civil society groups also raised concerns regarding a social media video released by a Buddhist monk criticizing the court's decision to halt construction activities.

On September 23, ruling party Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP Sarath Weerasekara said in parliament that the archaeology department's development activities at Kurunthoormalai would not be stopped for any reason. Weerasekara accused MPs representing Tamils of inciting racism, saying, "The Tamils chased away archaeologists who had gone to restore a 2,000-year-old obelisk at Kurunthoormalai and chased away the monks who had gone to worship there. The government's plans to carry out development work in such ancient and tourist-attracting places and our opinions about them do not incite racism."

Although religious education remained compulsory in state-funded schools, not all schools had sufficient resources to teach all four recognized religions, and according to civil society groups, some students were required to study religions other than their own. Government schools frequently experienced a shortage of teachers, sometimes requiring available teachers to teach the curriculum of a faith different from their own.

Religious schools continued to receive state funding for facilities and personnel and operated under the purview of the central government or the provincial education ministry.

Religious rights advocates continued to say that across all religious groups, traditional leaders charged with adjudication of religious law were poorly or completely untrained and issued inconsistent or arbitrary judgments.

In October 2021, then President Rajapaksa appointed a 13-member presidential task force to implement his “One Country, One Law” campaign pledge and named ultranationalist Buddhist monk Gnanasara as chairperson. Civil society organizations, opposition politicians, and representatives of ethnic and religious minorities criticized the task force and the appointment of Gnanasara as chair, expressing fears that the task force would “eventually turn towards targeting minorities.” On February 19, the task force met with university students in Colombo. During the meeting, task force chair Gnanasara said that “in Sri Lanka there are over 600 Christian organizations operating to create division in society and there are over 100 extremist (terrorist) Islamic groups operating.” On June 29, the task force submitted its final report with 43 wide-ranging recommendations, ranging from decriminalizing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex relations to education system reform to ensuring Buddhism continues to hold a priority in the constitution. In August, President Ranil Wickremesinghe told the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress that he would neither accept the report nor take any action on its recommendations, and the task force disbanded.

During the year, a Ministry of Justice-led process to reform the MMDA, which many Muslim women said was discriminatory legislation, stalled following the economic and political crisis across the country. Muslim women criticized provisions in the MMDA that allow polygamy, do not require a minimum age for marriage, allow young women to be married without their consent, and bar women from serving as Quazis, or Islamic judges who rule on matters related to the MMDA. On November 8, the Supreme Court rejected petitions filed by Muslim women to lift a ban on women applying for appointment as Quazis and as members of the Board of Quazis.

On April 30, hundreds of Buddhist monks called on then President Rajapaksa and the government to implement a proposal from the Mahanayaka Theros – the leading Buddhist authorities in the country – to resolve the country-wide economic crisis. The monks warned that otherwise, the Mahanayaka Theros would call on monks to shun politicians, adding that “it was thanks to our strength that this government came to power.”

On September 9, while making statements in parliament regarding the dispute at Kurunthoormalai temple in Mullaitivu, ruling SLPP MP Weerasekara said, “This is a Buddhist country. Everyone should accept that this is a Sinhala Buddhist country.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion, language, and ethnicity are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize most incidents of harassment or discrimination as being solely based on religious identity.

Hashtag Generation, a local NGO that analyzes trends in online dangerous speech, said anti-Tamil content increased throughout the year, with 19 posts in September targeting Tamils compared to 15 in August. Many of these posts were in response to protests over the construction of the Buddhist stupa at the Kurunthoormalai site. Content on the issue portrayed Tamil protesters as extremists and terrorists.

Hashtag Generation, a local civic group promoting civic awareness, inclusivity, and accountability, also said anti-Christian content peaked at 25 social media posts in August. Much of the anti-Christian content referenced the involvement of the Catholic clergy in the country-wide protest movement, but some posts also targeted evangelical Christians, referred to as “Born Again Christians.” Media reports indicated this development was largely in response to a popular evangelical pastor, Senior Pastor Jerome Fernando of King’s Revival Church, taking credit for the success of cricketer Bhanuka Rajapaksa at the Asia Cup tournament. In September, the United Nations’ Sri Lanka Risk Monitor report documented antiminority online hate speech increasing throughout the year and stated that from April to September, Christians were the most targeted ethno-religious minority, followed by Muslims. Many online posts accused Christians of co-opting the protest movement for their own religiously motivated goals. Hashtag Generation noted that antiminority online content often grouped Hindu Tamils and Christians together and spread divisive attitudes by portraying these communities as at odds with Sinhala-Buddhist values and ideology.

At year's end, the NCEASL documented 80 anti-Christian cases of intimidation of and violence against pastors and their congregations, obstruction of worship services, discriminatory actions, and attacks on churches during the year, compared with 77 cases in 2021. Of these, 36 involved threats, intimidation, or coercion, and 44 were discriminatory actions or practices. According to NCEASL, in cases of intimidation or attacks by Buddhist groups, sometimes led or instigated by Buddhist monks, on Christian churches, police often said the pastors were to blame for holding worship services and accused the pastors of breaching the peace. Three incidents involved property damage or destruction, four were related to hate campaigns or propaganda, and six involved physical violence, with one incident possibly including multiple factors. The NCEASL also documented 14 incidents against Muslims and 19 incidents against Hindus, including threats, discrimination, and violence.

On February 2, Fathima Famitha Rameez, a Muslim teacher who was assigned to teach at Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in Trincomalee, was confronted and threatened by a group of persons in the principal's office; one member of the group allegedly attempted to strangle her. When police arrived at the school, the principal accused Rameez of pushing her and injuring her leg; both the principal and Rameez were admitted to the hospital. Rameez said she was blocked from working at the school because she wore an abaya. This followed a 2019 ruling from the HRCSL that the school had violated Rameez's rights by not allowing her to teach after her original 2018 appointment. After the February incident, Rameez filed another complaint with the HRCSL and a petition with the Court of Appeal to direct the school to reinstate her. On April 4, the Ministry of Education transferred Rameez to St. Joseph's College in Trincomalee. She assumed duties at the new school after submitting a letter of dissatisfaction to the Ministry of Education, explaining that the transfer was against her wishes. As of the end of the year, Rameez's complaint with the HRCSL and her petition for the Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College to reinstate her were ongoing.

According to NCEASL, in March, a group of individuals entered Gethsemane Gospel Church in Irrudumadu, Mullaitivu District, and vandalized the interior of the church. On March 31, an intoxicated youth vandalized the church exterior. When the pastor's brother went out to stop him, the youth physically attacked him. After this incident, a group of 15 to 25 individuals stormed the premises and again attacked the pastor's brother. On April 1, the pastor and his two brothers filed a complaint at the Puthukkudiyiruppu police station, after which the same group again assaulted them. The pastor and one of his brothers were admitted to the hospital and spent one and two nights in intensive care, respectively.

On May 9, several hotels and houses in Negombo were attacked, set on fire and looted during country-wide protests that turned violent. On May 10, a group of persons attacked the majority-Muslim Deen Junction

neighborhood in Negombo, alleging that the May 9 looters were Muslims. They attacked 16 Muslim-owned shops and set vans, three-wheelers, motorcycles, and bicycles on fire. Three Muslims and one Sinhalese Buddhist injured in the attack were taken to Negombo Hospital. Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic clerics arrived at the scene and sought to de-escalate the situation and restore peace. Together with bishops and nuns from local churches, they were able to quell the riot. Media outlets reported that several activists, including some Buddhist monks, were arrested. Prasanna Ranatunga, Minister of Housing and Urban Development, stated that Catholic clergy and Buddhist monks were behind the riots. Catholic and Buddhist leaders denied the allegation.

On May 21, the Rudra Sena, a Hindu nationalist group, distributed leaflets in Jaffna calling religious conversion a “planned genocide.” The leaflet said, “proselytizers plan to eradicate Tamils in this country by uprooting their way of life, culture, and worship by converting the Shaivites in Tamil homeland. Tamil people of Sri Lanka should no longer allow this to happen. Our identities such as Tamil, Hinduism, and culture should not be given up and we should follow them and live as pure Tamils.” On July 6, the same group distributed similar leaflets against conversion to Islam and Christianity during the consecration ceremony of the renovated Thiruketheeswaram Hindu Temple in Mannar.

Civil society organizations continued efforts to strengthen the ability of religious and community leaders to lead peacebuilding activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees consisting of religious and civic leaders and laypersons from different faith traditions and ethnicities. The NGO National Peace Council of Sri Lanka created the committees in 2010 following the end of the civil war between the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the primarily Hindu and Christian Tamil minority.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officers emphasized the need for respect for and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities as part of the postconflict reconciliation process during meetings with the President, Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, and other officials involved with religious affairs.

Embassy and visiting Department of State officials met with government officials to express concern about government harassment of, and discrimination against, members of religious minority groups and to urge the government to ensure due process for those in prolonged detention, in particular those detained under the PTA.

The Ambassador promoted religious freedom through private diplomatic advocacy and in public statements and speeches. On September 14, the

Ambassador visited the Colombo Dewatagama Mosque, the main mosque of the minority Sufi community Sri Lanka. The Sufis reported increased marginalization due to the spread of more conservative Islam. In her remarks, the Ambassador highlighted the contributions of the Sufi community in Sri Lanka and the United States and emphasized the need for religious freedom for all communities in the country. On September 21, the Ambassador met with a group of youth ambassadors from different religions working on an interfaith dialogue initiative and posted on social media that “tolerance and respect are essential for [a] peaceful and democratic society.”

Embassy and visiting senior Department of State officials met with Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu civil society and religious leaders across the country to better understand the views of the communities they represent and the problems they faced. In April, after a trip to the North and meetings with religious leaders from different faiths, the Ambassador emphasized the value of religious pluralism in a press release. In November, during a trip to the Eastern Province, the Ambassador met with a bishop to discuss ways to strengthen interfaith relations. She also visited a Hindu kovil and posted on social media about the country’s religious diversity.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador or the Chargé d’Affaires offered public greetings, including on social media, and participated in person or virtually in celebrations of the country’s many religious holidays and other occasions. For example, the Ambassador publicly observed religious holidays such as Maha Shivarathri in March, Ramadan in April, Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April, Eid al-Fitr in May, Vesak in May, Eid al-Adha in July, International Day of Peace in September, and Deepavali in October. She visited sites with religious significance and posted on social media her appreciation for the country’s cultural and religious diversity. On International Religious Freedom Day in October, the Ambassador reflected on the country’s religious diversity and the value of interfaith partnerships on social media.

The embassy supported multiple reconciliation projects that identified and resolved local grievances, built empathy and understanding among religious groups, and supported government reconciliation efforts. The embassy led ongoing tolerance and unity programs in cultural centers promoting freedom of religion, as well as peaceful dispute resolution, among Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim youth. Embassy representatives supported the work of civil society organizations in strengthening the capacity of religious and community leaders by fostering peacebuilding activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees. Through community-based civil society organizations and the National Peace Council, the U.S. government funded multiple foreign assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith cooperation, dialogue, and confidence building.

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Austrian Red Cross	Wiedner Hauptstraße	Contact
Austrian Centre for	32, 1041 Wien	Imprint & Disclaimer
Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
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