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Freedom in the World - Sri Lanka (2007)

Population:
19,900,000

Capital:
Colombo

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 4
Status: Partly Free

Ratings Change

Sri Lanka's political rights and civil liberties ratings each declined from 3 to 4 because of heightened political intimidation by the rebel Tamil Tigers, increased harassment of the media, and higher levels of violence directed at members of the Tamil ethnic minority by the government and Tamil rebels.

Overview

The southern political parties were less fractious during 2006 as newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse of the ruling People's Alliance coalition gradually consolidated his own position within his party and his coalition's strength in Parliament. However, an escalation of violence beginning in December 2005 by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), possibly intended to provoke the new president into an aggressive stance, initiated a slow slide back into civil war during the year. Although the February 2002 ceasefire technically remained in place, it was flouted on a daily basis by a growing multitude of violations, including military skirmishes between government troops, the LTTE, and a breakaway faction of the Tigers; aerial bombardment of Tiger-held territory; LTTE attacks and bombings directed at both military and civilian targets; politically motivated killings and abductions; and the forcible conscription of child soldiers. A humanitarian crisis unfolded, with more than 3,500 people killed and 250,000 newly displaced by the conflict during the year, mostly in the north and east. In a prevailing climate of impunity, numerous human rights abuses occurred, and rights to freedom of expression and association were increasingly restricted.

Since independence from Britain in 1948, political power in this island nation, formerly known as Ceylon, has alternated between the conservative United National Party (UNP) and the leftist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). While the country made impressive gains in literacy, basic health care, and other social needs, its economic development was stunted and its social fabric tested by a long-running civil war that has killed an estimated 70,000 people. The conflict initially pitted several ethnic Tamil guerrilla groups against the government, which is dominated by the Sinhalese majority. The war, although triggered by anti-Tamil riots in 1983 that claimed hundreds of lives, came in the context of long-standing Tamil claims of discrimination in education and employment opportunities. By 1986, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), which called for an independent Tamil homeland in the merged North Eastern Province, had eliminated most rival Tamil guerrilla groups and was in control of much of the northern Jaffna Peninsula. At the same time, the government was also fighting an insurgency in the south by the leftist People's Liberation Front (JVP). The JVP

insurgency, and the brutal methods used by the army to quell it in 1989, killed 60,000 people.

In 1994, Chandrika Kumaratunga ended nearly two decades of UNP rule by leading the SLFP-dominated People's Alliance (PA) coalition to victory in parliamentary elections and then winning the presidential election. Early in her term, she tried to negotiate a peace agreement with the LTTE, but following a renewal of hostilities by the rebels, she reverted to focusing on a military solution to the conflict. Kumaratunga won early presidential elections in 1999, but the UNP and its allies gained a majority in parliamentary elections held in December 2001, and UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe became prime minister.

In response to an LTTE ceasefire offer, the new government declared a truce, lifted its ban on the LTTE and its economic embargo on rebel-held territory, and restarted Norwegian-brokered peace talks. A permanent ceasefire accord (CFA) with provisions for international monitoring was signed in February 2002; the accord prohibited political assassinations and recruitment of child soldiers but left large chunks of territory under LTTE control. By December, the government and the Tamil Tigers had agreed to share political power in a federal system. Although the LTTE suspended its participation in peace talks in April 2003, it stated that it remained committed to a political solution.

The peace process remained constrained by conflict between the main political parties about how to approach the Tigers, as well as intransigence by the Tigers themselves. In November 2003, Kumaratunga declared a state of emergency and temporarily suspended Parliament, stating that recently revealed LTTE proposals for the establishment of a Tiger-dominated interim self-governing authority (ISGA) in the North Eastern Province were a threat to national security. Although the state of emergency was pulled back and Parliament resumed functioning, Wickremasinghe claimed that his ability to govern had been severely curtailed by the fact that Kumaratunga continued to hold the important defense portfolio.

The impasse was broken when the president dissolved Parliament and called for elections to be held in April 2004. Bolstered by the direct support of the Marxist JVP, Kumaratunga's new PA-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition won 105 out of 225 seats and managed to form a minority government. Apart from the JVP, other extremist and ethnic-based parties also made inroads, including a new party formed by Buddhist clergy, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, or National Heritage Party), which won nine seats. The new government's tenuous grip on power became immediately apparent when it failed to secure the election of its candidate to the post of Speaker of Parliament; instead, the UNP was able to win the position with the help of votes from the smaller ethnic parties.

Though Kumaratunga remained committed to finding a political solution to the ethnic conflict, progress in resuming meaningful peace talks was complicated by the addition to the ruling coalition of the JVP, which adamantly opposed granting more powers to the provinces or to the LTTE, and by the presence of pro-Sinhalese forces such as the JHU in Parliament. Such stances were completely at odds with the LTTE's insistence that any future talks include discussions on the formation of an ISGA, which would give the LTTE effective rule over the North Eastern Province, and Kumaratunga was unwilling to risk the stability of her coalition government by proceeding with talks on the Tigers' terms.

Meanwhile, the ceasefire with the LTTE continued to hold, despite an increasing number of violations. Further instability emerged in March 2004 when Colonel Karuna (the nom de guerre of Vinayagamoorthis Muralitharan), an LTTE commander in the east who controlled an estimated 6,000 out of the total 15,000 LTTE troops, formed a breakaway faction, alleging discrimination in the treatment of eastern Tamils by the LTTE leadership. His rebellion was initially quashed with relative ease by the LTTE; after fierce internecine fighting in April, Karuna disbanded his forces and went into hiding. However, he gradually rebuilt his cadres, and armed clashes between the two groups continued as both attempted to reassert their control over the east. By 2006, the reinvigorated Karuna faction had become loosely allied with the government, which provided it with logistical support in exchange for valuable intelligence information. As with the other parties in the conflict, the faction also increasingly engaged in killings, abductions, forced conscription, and other abuses against civilians.

The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated parts of the Sri Lankan coast, killing 35,000 people and displacing up to 500,000. Initially, observers expressed hope that the disaster would force the LTTE (whose cadres had been weakened by the destruction) and the government to work together on the extensive rehabilitation efforts required, but after a short period of cooperation, tensions emerged over the details of the proposed Post-Tsunami Operations Management Structure (P-TOMS) agreement. While some alleged that it discriminated against Tamils and Muslims, the JVP opposed the overall framework of the agreement, arguing that it gave the LTTE too large a role in the reconstruction effort. Although Kumaratunga signed the agreement in June 2005, the Supreme Court (in a case brought by the JVP) rejected several of its provisions, thereby hindering overall implementation. With diminished strength in the legislature, the ruling coalition was further weakened and unable to move forward with its policy objectives, including restarting the peace talks.

In another key decision, the Supreme Court ruled in August 2005 that the presidential elections, which Kumaratunga had controversially tried to postpone until 2006 on technical grounds, should be held in 2005. As Kumaratunga was barred from standing again because of term limits, the PA nominated Mahinda Rajapakse, prime minister since 2004, as its candidate. Against the wishes of Kumaratunga and some other party leaders, Rajapakse immediately took a hard line, alienating minority groups and forging preelection alliances with the JVP and JHU by committing himself to abolishing the P-TOMS mechanism and renegotiating the CFA. Largely as the result of an LTTE boycott, which led to extremely low voter turnout in the Tamil-majority northern and eastern areas (1.2 percent in Jaffna, for example, compared with more than 70 percent nationally), Rajapakse narrowly won the November presidential election with 50.3 percent of votes cast, as opposed to 48.4 percent for Wickremasinghe, the former prime minister. Calls for the vote to be re-administered in certain areas were rejected by the election commission.

Rajapakse began 2006 with a narrow mandate, and his primary political objectives were to consolidate his position within the SLFP and solidify his UPFA coalition's position in Parliament. The UPFA scored an early victory with a strong showing in the Colombo municipal elections in March, winning 225 out of 266 seats contested with 48.2 percent of the overall vote. The poll also considerably weakened the opposition UNP and the hard-line JVP and JHU. Rajapakse then strengthened his position within the SLFP by engineering his election as president of the party, thus

sidelining former president and party leader Kumaratunga. Under the terms of a groundbreaking memorandum of understanding signed between the SLFP and UNP in October 2006, the UNP agreed to support the government in six key areas for two years. Despite the memorandum of understanding, UNP members were urged by the ruling party to defect and join the government, which several of them did during the year, further weakening the party's morale. Rajapakse also wooed smaller parties with promises of cabinet seats and other perks, thus assembling a loose parliamentary alliance.

In addition to consolidating his position within the party and his coalition's position within Parliament, Rajapakse cultivated a more authoritarian style of rule, whereby political power became centralized around the presidency and Parliament played a secondary role. According to a report by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), the president and his brothers—Gotabaya Rajapakse, who was appointed defense secretary, and Basil Rajapakse, who was named a presidential adviser—made all the crucial decisions, with the cabinet and other party stalwarts basically serving as implementers and advisers. The governmental appointments process, by which a constitutional council nominates members of key independent commissions, was sidestepped; the council itself was not reconstituted after the terms of the previous members expired, and in its absence the president unilaterally appointed loyalists to official posts.

The president tried to address one serious shortfall of previous administrations by building a consensus among the main southern political parties on the government's approach to the peace process. Shortly after being elected, he convened an All-Party Representatives Committee, tasked with discussing possible solutions to the conflict. It met on several occasions during the year and was expected to submit a report in January 2007. After a hiatus of almost three years, talks between the government and the LTTE took place in February 2006, but they accomplished little except to bring both sides to the negotiating table. Further rounds of talks planned for April and June were postponed because of disagreements between the two parties, and a final round held in October similarly achieved little of substance.

By year's end, following the December death of Anton Balasingham in London, the prospects for a resumption of peace talks looked even more unlikely. Balasingham, the LTTE's chief negotiator, had been the only senior rebel who spoke English fluently enough to conduct meaningful dialogue. The government's hands may also have been further tied by a final Supreme Court decision handed down in October (prompted by a petition submitted by three JVP members), in which the court ruled that the 1987 merger of the northern and eastern provinces was illegal. Although both sides professed a commitment to upholding the 2002 ceasefire and working toward a negotiated settlement, these statements seemed to be largely for the benefit of the international community and were eclipsed by events on the ground.

The defining trend of the year was one of escalating conflict, as the government and LTTE appeared more interested in pursuing military options and slid inexorably back into an undeclared war. Levels of violence started to rise after Rajapakse's election as president in November 2005, when the LTTE launched a series of ambushes on government forces in the north and east. In the two months that followed, at least 150 people were killed in the conflict, including a prominent pro-LTTE member of Parliament who was assassinated in a church on Christmas Day.

Rajapakse appointed several hard-line generals to key positions, and planned to increase the military budget by 23 percent. After a suicide attack targeting the army chief of staff in April, the government responded by launching air strikes on LTTE positions in the first major military operation since the 2002 ceasefire. During the year, a pattern of daily attacks in the north and east resumed, punctuated by a number of LTTE land-mine and suicide attacks throughout the country, each of which killed dozens of people. The bombing of a bus in Anuradhapura district in June killed at least 58 civilians, and an attack in October struck the tourist city of Galle. Government forces focused on trying to weaken the LTTE's military capacity, particularly in the east, through attacks on its camps and on several high-profile leaders. The LTTE simultaneously targeted the security forces as well as the Karuna group in the east. Military operations intensified after June 2006, and the advantage shifted back and forth between the government and LTTE, favoring the government by year's end. More than 3,500 soldiers, rebels, and civilians died in the conflict in 2006, in what was termed a "low intensity war" by the international monitoring mission.

Conditions in the north and east dramatically deteriorated during the year, with the rising hostilities creating a humanitarian crisis and leading to a variety of human rights abuses. Largely indiscriminate aerial shelling by the Sri Lankan military in Tiger-controlled territory, including attacks on a school and a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), led to the death of dozens of people and the displacement of tens of thousands. People's mobility as well as their commercial and social activities were curtailed by curfews, road closures, and security checkpoints. All parties to the conflict—the security forces, paramilitary groups, the LTTE, the Karuna faction, and other armed groups—engaged in a pattern of human rights violations, including civilian killings; abductions and disappearances; arrests and detentions; political assassinations; child conscription; and extortion. Young Tamil males were most at risk of harassment by all sides.

This drastic increase in violations was accompanied by the international monitors' growing inability to track the situation. After the European Union (EU) designated the LTTE a terrorist group in May 2006, the Tigers demanded the withdrawal from the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) of members who were citizens of EU states. Threats to the monitors intensified during the year, forcing the SLMM to reduce the scope of its activities—it suspended naval monitoring in May and temporarily closed its office in Trincomalee. Under international censure, the president did agree to establish a commission to investigate some recent abuses, but it had not been constituted by year's end.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Sri Lanka is an electoral democracy. The 1978 constitution vested strong executive powers in a president who is directly elected for a six-year term and can dissolve Parliament. The prime minister leads the ruling party in Parliament but otherwise has limited powers. The 225-member unicameral Parliament is directly elected for a six-year term through a mixed proportional representation system. Elections are open to multiple parties, and fair electoral laws and equal campaigning opportunities ensure a competitive political process.

While elections are generally free and fair, they continue to be marred by some irregularities, violence, and intimidation, and the LTTE generally refuses to allow free elections in the areas under its control. The interim report issued by the independent Center for Monitoring Election Violence noted that with 368 incidents

on election day, the 2004 parliamentary elections were considerably less beleaguered by violence and malpractice than previous polls had been. The interim report of the EU's Election Observation Mission on the November 2005 presidential election noted that it had proceeded fairly smoothly in the south, despite some inappropriate use of state resources for campaign purposes and biased reporting by both state-run and private media outlets. However, voting in the north, held under a boycott enforced by the LTTE, was marred by violence and intimidation—including political killings and grenade attacks on polling stations and on the buses designed to carry voters into government-controlled territory—and featured very low levels of voter participation. During 2006, intimidation by armed groups dramatically shrank the space for nonviolent Tamil politics in the north and east, while the warlike situation led to more muted opposition from southern political parties.

Governmental coherence has been improved by the fact that the executive and legislative branches are now controlled by the same political party. Although President Mahinda Rajapakse began his term without a strong mandate, he gradually consolidated his position and introduced a more centralized, authoritarian style of rule in which he and a small circle of trusted advisers made most key decisions. However, some observers charge that this has led to a lack of transparent, inclusive policy formulation.

The seventeenth amendment to the constitution was designed to improve governance and depoliticize key institutions by creating a constitutional council responsible for appointing members to a number of independent commissions that would oversee the police, judiciary, and public servants. Owing to a parliamentary impasse, Rajapakse failed to reconstitute the council during 2006 after the terms of the previous council members expired, and instead made unilateral appointments to the public service commission and national police commission in April, and to the human rights commission, judicial services commission, the Supreme Court, and other judicial bodies in May. Some local groups allege that these actions have threatened the independence of the institutions and created a class of appointees who owe their positions and loyalty to the president.

Official corruption, particularly in the executive and legislative branches, is a continuing concern, and the legal and administrative framework currently in force is inadequate in terms of either promoting integrity or punishing the corrupt behavior of public officials. Sri Lanka was ranked in 84 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index. Although hundreds of cases are under investigation or prosecution by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption, no current or former politician has been sentenced. The trial of former deputy defense minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, who was indicted in September 2005 on charges of bribery, was ongoing at the end of 2006.

Media freedom was one of the main casualties of the slide into war in 2006, as increasing numbers of journalists, particularly Tamils, were targeted and media outlets faced censorship and other restrictions. Although freedom of expression is provided for in the constitution, this provision was severely tested during the year. Official rhetoric toward journalists and media outlets perceived to be "unpatriotic" or critical has become more hostile. In September, unofficial prepublication censorship concerning issues of "national security and defense" was imposed by the government's Media Centre for National Security. Antiterrorism regulations

introduced in December 2006 led to overt self-censorship on the part of journalists, and several were summoned for questioning under the new law. Several groups, including the Colombo-based Free Media Movement (FMM) and the EU's Election Observation Mission, noted that state-run media—including Sri Lanka's largest newspaper chain, two major television stations, and a radio station—remained heavily influenced by the government, citing cases of pressure on editors, unwarranted dismissals of staff, and biased coverage of the November 2005 election. While private media are diverse, they have become even more polarized, shrinking the space for balanced views.

A sharp increase in tension and violence during 2006, both between the government and LTTE and between the LTTE and other Tamil factions, severely affected journalists' ability to cover the news freely, particularly in the troubled north and east. The LTTE does not permit free expression in the areas under its control and continues to terrorize a number of Tamil journalists and other critics. The Karuna faction and security forces have also been responsible for abuses. A number of Tamil newspapers have been banned or seized by various factions, and distributors have been attacked or warned not to sell certain papers. According to a Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) report, over two dozen Tamil journalists were abducted, severely assaulted, or killed during the year. The largest-circulation daily in Jaffna, *Uthayan*, faced repeated harassment in 2006 despite calling for protection; staff members were killed by unidentified gunmen in May, and an arson attack hit its printing facilities in August. Journalists throughout Sri Lanka, particularly those who cover human rights issues or official misconduct, continue to face intimidation and threats from security forces and government officials. In a growing trend, those perceived as being supportive of Tamil interests have also drawn ire from Sinhalese nationalist groups. Internet access is not restricted.

Religious freedom is respected, and members of all faiths are generally allowed to worship freely, although the constitution gives special status to Buddhism and there is some discrimination and occasional violence against religious minorities. The LTTE discriminates against Muslims in the areas under its control and has attacked Buddhist sites in the past. The U.S. State Department's 2006 Report on International Religious Freedom notes that Christian missionaries are occasionally harassed by Buddhist clergy and others opposed to their work. Tensions between the island's Buddhist majority and the Christian minority—and in particular, evangelical Christian groups, who are accused of forced conversions—are worsening, according to a 2004 report released by the U.S.-based Jubilee Campaign, with a sharp increase in attacks against churches and individuals noted from the end of 2003 and the introduction of anticonversion legislation in July 2004. This trend continued in 2006, although attacks have abated somewhat since 2005, when dozens of incidents were alleged and government leaders promised to crack down on Buddhist extremists. In April, a special parliamentary committee met for the first time to discuss the JHU-sponsored Prohibition of Forcible Conversions bill, and it remained under consideration at year's end.

The government generally respects academic freedom. However, the LTTE has a record of repressing the voices of intellectuals who criticize its actions, sometimes through murder or other forms of violent intimidation. Groups such as the University Teachers for Human Rights–Jaffna have faced particularly severe harassment at the hands of the LTTE. Local watchdog groups noted an increase in attacks on academics in 2006, particularly in the areas affected by conflict.

Freedom of assembly is generally respected, although political parties occasionally disrupt each other's rallies and gatherings. On several occasions during 2006, police used excessive force to disperse demonstrations. The LTTE does not allow for freedom of association in the regions under its control and reportedly uses coercion to force civilians to attend pro-LTTE rallies. Caught between both sides, aid workers were increasingly unable to operate safely in conflict-affected areas. In a particularly chilling example, 17 local staff for the international humanitarian group Action Against Hunger were killed execution-style in their compound in Mutur in August, allegedly by government forces. International staff of groups such as Doctors Without Borders were subject to new visa and work-permit regulations imposed by the Ministry of Defense, and were on occasion barred from working in rebel-held areas. During the year, human rights and social welfare nongovernmental organizations throughout the country, particularly those considered "unpatriotic" or unwilling to support the official line, faced greater threats and harassment from authorities, including assaults on their gatherings and a proposed parliamentary investigation into their activities.

Sri Lanka has a strong workers' rights tradition, with more than 1,500 trade unions registered. Most unions are independent and are legally allowed to engage in collective bargaining. Except for civil servants, most workers can hold strikes. However, under the 1989 Essential Services Act, the president can declare a strike in any industry illegal. Even though more than 70 percent of the workforce on tea plantations is unionized, employers routinely violate the rights of the mainly Tamil workforce. The government has increased penalties for employing minors, but thousands of children continue to be employed as domestic servants, and many face abuse.

Successive governments have respected the constitutional provision for an independent judiciary, and judges can generally make decisions in an atmosphere free of overt intimidation from the legislative and executive branches. However, there is concern about the growing politicization of the judiciary, particularly with respect to the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Sarath Nanda Silva. According to the FMM, in recent years Silva has narrowed the scope of human rights litigation, dismissed a number of judges without holding an inquiry or disciplinary hearing, and consistently defended the government in legal actions relating to political disputes. During 2006, there were several questionable judicial rulings in favor of members of the government, and two senior Supreme Court judges resigned. At the lower levels of the judiciary, corruption is fairly common among both judges and court staff, and those willing to pay bribes have better access to the legal system.

The rule of law remains weak, and conditions deteriorated during the year. In November 2005, the new government transferred authority over the police force, including the paramilitary Special Forces, to the Ministry of Defense. Heightened political and military conflict in 2006 led to a sharp rise in the number of human rights abuses committed by police and security forces, including extrajudicial executions, torture, custodial rape, and prolonged detention without trial. Such practices are facilitated by legislation such as the emergency regulations reintroduced after the August 2005 assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, under which detainees can be held for up to a year without trial. In December 2006, the government reinstated certain provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which had been suspended as part of the 2002 ceasefire accord (CFA), giving security personnel powers to arrest and detain suspects indefinitely

without court approval. Additional legislation introduced in December, the Prevention and Prohibition of Terrorism and Specified Terrorist Activities Regulations, was criticized for providing an overly broad definition of terrorism and granting immunity to those accused of rights abuses.

The independent National Human Rights Commission, established in 1997, is empowered to investigate human rights abuses but has traditionally suffered from insufficient authority and resources. During 2006, it recorded several hundred instances each of politically motivated disappearance, torture, and prolonged detention without charge. Torture by the security forces and police occurs in the context of fighting the insurgency as well as during routine interrogations to extract confessions. A lack of aggressive prosecution of the majority of past abuses, coupled with inadequate protections for witnesses, contributes to a climate of impunity for those who have overstepped the bounds of the law. Throughout 2006, as a result of the continuing impasse over reconstituting the constitutional council, appointments to key bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission and the National Police Commission were made unilaterally by the executive branch, raising questions about the suitability and independence of the appointees and further weakening these institutional mechanisms.

The LTTE has effective control over sections of the north and east constituting approximately 10 percent of Sri Lankan territory, and operates a parallel administration that includes schools, hospitals, courts, and police and other law enforcement personnel. The Tigers raise money through extortion, kidnapping, theft, and the seizure of Muslim property, and have used threats and attacks to close schools, courts, and government agencies in their self-styled Tamil homeland. The LTTE also imposes mandatory military and civil-defense training on civilians living in areas under its control. Rebels continue to engage in summary executions of civilians, disappearances, arbitrary abductions and detentions, torture, and the forcible conscription of children. All of these forms of abuse reportedly worsened in 2006. The Tigers typically deny all involvement in politically motivated violence, as well as in the abduction of children, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Press reports indicate that the Tigers continue to recruit hundreds of teenage girls and boys to serve as soldiers or in support functions despite their June 2003 pledge to release all children within their ranks. Recruitment efforts, which increased in 2004 as the LTTE tried to replenish forces that joined the Karuna faction, are at times so intense that parents keep their children home from school to prevent their abduction. More than 1,400 children reportedly remained in LTTE custody at year's end. Such practices were not confined to the LTTE; the Karuna faction was reportedly responsible for the abduction of hundreds of boys and young men in eastern Sri Lanka, often with the complicity of security forces and police.

During the year, the incidence of politically motivated violence increased dramatically, creating a humanitarian crisis in the north and east. All groups were responsible for the violence, including government forces, the LTTE, the breakaway Karuna faction, and other Tamil armed groups. From February 2005 through December 2006, the SLMM recorded 346 violations of the CFA by the government and 3,827 by the LTTE, with the majority occurring in late 2005 and 2006. The LTTE targeted Tamil political parties, journalists, and human rights activists that challenged its claim to represent the Tamil people. Hundreds of people were killed

as a consequence of their political affiliation during the year, including Tamil political party activists, followers of the breakaway Karuna faction, military intelligence agents and suspected informers, elected officials, and members of civil society. Kethesh Loganathan, the Tamil deputy head of the government's peace secretariat, was assassinated by suspected LTTE gunmen in August. In retaliation, the government and the Karuna faction targeted LTTE officials and members of pro-LTTE political factions such as Joseph Pararajasingham, a Tamil National Alliance member of Parliament who was assassinated while attending church in December 2005.

Tamils maintain that they face systematic discrimination in several areas, including government employment, university education, and access to justice. Legislation replacing English with Sinhala as the official language in 1956 continues to disadvantage Tamils and other non-Sinhala speaking groups. Thousands of Tamils whose ancestors were brought from India to work as indentured laborers during the nineteenth century did not qualify for Sri Lankan citizenship and faced discrimination and exploitation by the native Sinhalese. However, in October 2003, Parliament approved legislation granting citizenship to about 170,000 previously stateless "Indian" Tamils. Tensions between the three major ethnic groups (Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims), which lead to occasional violent clashes, remain a concern. Human Rights Watch noted an increase in communal violence during the year, often in response to LTTE or military strikes. Attacks by Sinhalese against Tamils in Trincomalee in mid-April left at least 20 people dead and over 75 injured, 100 homes and 32 businesses damaged or destroyed, and more than 1,000 people homeless. Both the government and the LTTE generally failed to prevent incidents of communal violence from spiraling out of control.

According to Refugees International, as of 2005 an estimated 350,000 IDPs remained unwilling or unable to return to the north and east, and continued to live in government-run camps throughout the country or as refugees in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Separately, at least 350,000 remain displaced as a result of the December 2004 tsunami. While the total number of IDPs shifted throughout the year, an additional 250,000 people were displaced at various points during 2006 as a result of increased fighting in the north and east; an estimated 80 percent of those were Tamils and 14 percent were Muslims. An army attack that hit an IDP camp in November killed at least 50 people.

Women are underrepresented in politics and the civil service. Female employees in the private sector face some sexual harassment as well as discrimination in salary and promotion opportunities. Rape and domestic violence against women remain serious problems, with hundreds of complaints reported; authorities weakly enforce existing laws. Although women have equal rights under civil and criminal law, matters related to the family—including marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance—are adjudicated under the customary law of each ethnic or religious group, and the application of these laws sometimes results in discrimination against women. The government remains committed to ensuring that children have good access to free education and health care, and has also taken steps to prosecute those suspected of crimes against children, including pedophilia. A general increase in violence during the year also resulted in greater violence against women in conflict areas, including attacks and rapes.