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2023 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.

The trials of the individuals indicted for their involvement in 2019 Easter Sunday attacks on Christian churches and luxury hotels that killed 268 persons began on October 10 and remained in progress at year’s end. According to civil society groups, as of year’s end, 31 Muslims accused of involvement in the attacks remained in custody, including the 25 who were indicted. The other six were detained in prolonged pretrial detention under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), some for more than three years. In response to allegations of government complicity in the 2019 Easter bombings, President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced he would appoint an investigative committee. Civil society groups said that during the year the government used the country’s International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act to curtail freedom of expression and to arrest persons for threatening religious harmony and inciting religious hatred. On May 15, President Wickremesinghe ordered an investigation into Protestant Christian pastor Jerome Fernando for making derogatory statements about Buddhism and followers of other religions in a sermon on social media. Some civil society critics and lawyers said the 2022 circular mandating registration for all places of worship and outlining requirements for construction and maintenance of religious places was not constitutional. Civil society representatives said the government used the regulation to unfairly target minority places of worship.

During the year the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 43 anti-Christian cases of intimidation of and violence against pastors and their congregations, obstruction of worship services, discriminatory actions, and attacks on churches, compared with 80 cases in 2022. The NCEASL also documented nine incidents against Muslims and 13 incidents against Hindus, including threats, discrimination, and violence. In many of the incidents, the NCEASL said police or other officials played a role, and, in cases of intimidation or attacks by Buddhist groups on Christian churches, the NCEASL reported that police often said the pastors were to blame.

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. 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 the use of the ICCPR Act to arrest individuals for insulting religion, and to urge the government to ensure due process for those in prolonged detention, particularly those detained under the PTA. The Ambassador promoted religious freedom through private diplomatic advocacy and in public statements, public visits to places of worship of all faiths, and speeches. The Ambassador frequently posted on social media about the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. After a September 25 visit with the Chief Sanghanayake of the Sri Maha Viharaya, the Ambassador posted on social media that they “discussed the vital role that religious leaders can play in safeguarding dialogue among faith communities.” 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 21.9 million (midyear 2023). The 2012 national census, the most recent available, 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 the Memons and Bohras, who have Indian roots tracing back to Mumbai and Gujarat. Tamils of Indian origin, who refer to themselves as Upcountry or Hill Country Tamils, are mostly Hindu and identify themselves as a distinctive ethnic group; they 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 mostly 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, the 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, but 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, is the cabinet ministry

responsible for oversight of Theravada Buddhism. Specific subcabinet departments under the ministry are responsible for addressing the concerns of each major religious community.

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 and 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 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.

In 2022, the government issued a ministerial circular that superseded and expanded the scope of an 2008 circular and outlined new requirements for construction, maintenance, and registration of places of worship for all faiths. Like the previous circular, the 2022 ministerial circular requires all groups, regardless of their religion, to receive permission from the ministry to register and to construct new places of worship.

The 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 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Religious minority groups reported incidents of violence by members of local majority religious communities and said that state officials often supported those responsible. Analysts studying incidents of violence against Christians said that in some cases, state officials sided with those 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 agreed with the analysts’ findings, reporting that 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.

On May 23, local media and civil society organizations reported police arrested nine supporters of the political party Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf) for violating a court order as they protested what they said was illegal construction of a Buddhist temple on private land in Thaiyiddy, Jaffna District. Police forcibly removed TNPf Member of Parliament (MP) Selvarasa Kajendren from the site. On May 24, the Mallakam Magistrate Court released all nine on bail and issued an order allowing peaceful protests. According to civil society groups, local farmers owned 12 acres surrounding the temple, but the military had occupied the land since the civil war. Since early May, political groups called for removal of the temple, on which Chief of Defense Staff and former Army commander General Shavendra Silva initiated construction in 2021 for use by security forces. Media reported the temple was completed and opened on May 25. As of year’s end, charges remained pending on the nine arrested, and local Tamils continued to call for the temple’s removal.

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 indicted 25 individuals, charging them with direct involvement in the Easter Sunday attacks. The trials began on October 10 and remained in session at year’s end. According to civil society groups, as of year’s end, approximately 31 Muslim individuals suspected in the attacks 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.

On January 12, the Supreme Court ruled former President Maithripala Sirisena had violated the fundamental rights of victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks and ordered him to pay 100 million rupees (\$309,000) as damages. The court held that Sirisena, who was also Defense Minister, had not convened regular meetings of the national security council and had omitted key personnel from the meetings he held. On July 11, Sirisena sought additional time from the security council to pay the 85 million rupees (\$263,000) still outstanding on his fine.

In response to the September 5 airing of a documentary by UK’s Channel 4 alleging the involvement and complicity of senior government officials in the 2019 Easter bombings, President Wickremesinghe announced on September 10 the appointment of an investigative committee to be chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge. As of year’s end, the investigation was in progress. The national Ministry of Defense refuted the allegations of government complicity in the attacks and the ministry publicly said the Australian Federal Police (AFP) – who assisted the government in its investigation – reaffirmed the findings of local investigations pointing to ISIS-affiliated group members as being responsible. Major General Suresh Sallay, one of the officials implicated in the documentary, filed suit in Sri Lanka for damages, stating he had never communicated or provided financial support to anyone associated with the Easter bombings.

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, released a September 6 statement seeking an independent investigation into the documentary’s allegations and urging previous commissions’ recommendations be implemented. He called on police and intelligence officials implicated in the report to step down, including Senior Deputy Inspector General of Police Nilantha Jayawardena and senior police official Deshabandu Tennakoon. In November, the President appointed Tennakoon as Acting Inspector General of Police.

At the end of the year, the trial of prominent Muslim human rights lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah was in progress. Hizbullah was arrested for hate speech in 2020 under the PTA, and bail was granted in 2022.

On May 18, local media and civil society groups reported the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested four persons under the PTA, all of whom were witnesses in support of Hizbullah in his hate speech case. All four originally recorded statements when Hizbullah was arrested in 2020, but police had not acted against them. Civil society groups said the witnesses' arrests under the PTA opened the possibility of the court disallowing their testimonies in defense of Hizbullah. On June 26, the Puttalam High Court indicted two of the witnesses under the ICCPR Act and released them on bail. At year's end, the ICCPR cases remained pending. The court released and dropped cases against the other two witnesses.

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.

On September 11, Buddhist monk Galagoda Gnanasara, general secretary of Bodu Bala Sena, a Buddhist group described by Human Rights Watch and other organizations as ultranationalist, and six other suspects pleaded guilty to charges in a case related to obstructing a 2014 Colombo press briefing and threatening rival Buddhist monk Watareka Vijitha. The court ordered Gnanasara to pay compensation of 300,000 rupees (\$900) to Vijitha, local media reported. Separately on October 4, the Supreme Court decided to hear petitions filed by local NGO Center for Policy Alternatives and Sandya Ekneligoda, activist and wife of prominent missing cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda, against the 2019 pardon of Gnanasara by then President Maithripala Sirisena. Sirisena pardoned Gnanasara on a contempt of court conviction after Gnanasara disrupted proceedings in the court case surrounding the disappearance and presumed death of Prageeth Ekneligoda.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

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

Civil society groups said that during the year the government used the ICCPR Act to curtail freedom of expression and to arrest persons on charges of threatening religious harmony and inciting religious hatred.

On May 15, local media reported President Wickremesinghe ordered an investigation into Protestant Christian pastor Jerome Fernando for making derogatory statements about Buddhism and followers of other religions while delivering a sermon that was broadcast live on social media. The New Bhikshu Peramuna, a group of Buddhist monks, and several other organizations complained to the police CID. On May 16, the CID imposed an overseas travel ban on Fernando, who had already left the country. Fernando issued a statement saying he had done nothing wrong but apologized to Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim followers "if his words had hurt them." On May 18, a group of Buddhist monks filed a Fundamental Rights (FR) petition with the Supreme Court requesting the police arrest Fernando. On May 26, Fernando filed a FR petition seeking an order preventing his arrest. On December 1, Fernando returned to Sri Lanka. Police questioned and arrested him on December 2 for hate speech under the ICCPR Act. As of year's end, he remained in pretrial detention.

On May 28, local media reported police arrested ethnic Sinhalese stand-up comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya under the ICCPR Act on charges of insulting Buddhism during an April 1 performance. A Buddhist monk complained after a video of the performance circulated widely on

social media. On July 5, the Colombo High Court granted Edirisooriya bail. During the bail hearing, the judge observed that rather than the comedian's remarks inciting violence or hostility, as required by the ICCPR Act, the audience appeared to have attended the performance for enjoyment. The judge cautioned police against prematurely acting based on complaints by monks or religious leaders. As of year's end, the ICCPR Act case against Edirisooriya was ongoing. Amnesty International commented on her case, stating that for speech to be illegal on the grounds of being hate speech it requires "a clear showing of intent to incite others to discriminate, be hostile towards or commit violence against the group in question. When the expression fails to meet the test, even if it is shocking, offensive or disturbing, it should be protected by the state."

Also on May 28, police arrested Rajangane Saddharathana Thero, a Buddhist monk known for provocative and profane remarks about religious and political leaders on social media, under the ICCPR Act for making statements that could disrupt religious harmony, local media reported. On July 12, the court released Saddharathana on bail. As of year's end, the ICCPR Act case against Saddharathana was in progress.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

Some civil society critics and lawyers said the 2022 circular mandating registration for all places of worship and outlining requirements for construction and maintenance of religious places was not based on existing law and thus was unconstitutional. The 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. For example, one church reported it had been trying unsuccessfully to register for decades. Christian groups reported that they experienced difficulties in complying with registration requirements, in part because instructions were inconsistent and not transparent. 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. 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.

The NCEASL reported that on February 11 the pastor of the Thambalagamam Evangelical Church in Trincomalee District received a letter from the local authority stating that worship services should be discontinued as they were conducted without proper permission and registration. The letter further stated that the church should obtain the necessary approval from the Ministry of Buddhism, Religious, and Cultural Affairs.

On August 6, a neighbor threw stones at the Foursquare Gospel Church in Gonawala in Gampaha District and told the pastor to discontinue prayer services in the village. On August 13, during the prayer services, the neighbor threw a brick at the church and attempted to assault a church worker recording the incident. When the pastor and the worker filed a complaint, Kelaniya police requested church documents. The pastor provided the act of parliament through which the church was incorporated. The police officer in charge (OIC) said regular worship services with a group was prohibited without approval from local authorities, that the church's incorporation was invalid, and the church was not registered locally. Subsequently, the church worker lodged a private complaint against the neighbor for attempted assault. When the church worker inquired about the complaint on August 19, a police officer told the church worker that he needed approval from the local

authorities and that worship services could only be held with those on the household's official electoral list. The police said he had asked the neighbor to report if any outsiders visited the church premises. Following this, the church conducted prayer services exclusively with family members, while other congregants joined via Zoom.

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 more than a century and reported more than 7,000 members. 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. A 2023 report released by a religious group said the approval process for construction permits for places of worship lacked transparency and consistency resulting in abuse and discrimination against some religious groups, including minority religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses. The report said the 2022 circular had no provision for applicants to submit complaints or appeals.

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 examinations. Bhikkunis and some Buddhist monks said the problem was due to prejudice against nuns and highlighted a 2009 Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka statement that not registering bhikkunis and refusing to issue them identification cards was a violation of their human rights.

In June, the Ministry of Defense renewed the proscription of nine Tamil diaspora organizations and the designation of dozens of individuals, primarily Muslims, for allegedly supporting terrorist organizations. This included 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. On December 12 local media reported Jazeem was acquitted in the hate speech case against him. On July 26, the government removed a ban on five of 11 Muslim groups it had proscribed in 2021 under the PTA. The delisted organizations were United Thawheed Jamma'ath, Ceylon Thawheed Jamma'ath, Sri Lanka Thawheed Jamma'ath, All Ceylon Thawheed Jamma'ath, and Jamiyathul Ansari Sunnathul Mohomadiya.

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 12, during a Sunday service at the Pentecostal Assembly of Sri Lanka in Dodangoda in Kalutara District, police informed the pastor that local monks complained church services were illegal and requested the church discontinue worship until an inquiry was completed. When the pastor went to the police station the following day for an inquiry, monks and villagers asked him to discontinue services as it was a "Buddhist village." At a later meeting, a monk said the pastor engaged in proselytism, which is not illegal, by offering money and goods. The police OIC ordered the pastor not to meet with congregants outside his family and threatened to file a case against him for breach of peace. A group of monks and villagers threatened the pastor and his family. On February 19, police informed the pastor that no case would be filed but requested the church register through the local authority. On February 24, the pastor lodged a police complaint against the man who threatened him; during the inquiry the police OIC reprimanded the accused for threatening the pastor and said anyone in the country has a right to religious freedom.

On March 22, Immigration Department officials at Palaly International Airport in Jaffna detained and deported Indian evangelist Paul Dhinakaran of Jesus Calls following allegations he misused his visa to hold religious conventions, local media and Christian groups reported. Dhinakaran had

traveled to Sri Lanka to hold religious meetings in Jaffna, but the Hindu organization Jaffna Shiv Sena objected to his visit and posted signs accusing him of unethical conversions. More than 50 Hindus from the Manipai area in Jaffna also wrote to the police DIG requesting they deny permission for Dhinakaran's planned religious program. The Shiv Sena said Dhinakaran's visit would have disturbed interfaith relationships and violated the ICCPR Act.

On August 17, the Secretary of the Karuwalagaswewa Pradeshiya Sabha (local council) in Puttalam District sent a letter to the pastor of the Jesus Lives Glorious Church instructing him to remove Bible verses from his son's gravestone as they could damage religious harmony. The letter also said no one should gather at the cemetery for religious or other activities. On the night of August 29, unknown persons damaged the gravestone. The pastor lodged a complaint at the Suriyawewa police station. When the pastor sought approval from the local Funeral-Aid Society to erect a gravestone, the society said they would not allow Christians to perform burials at the cemetery. On July 11, the Karuwalagaswewa Divisional Secretary gave consent to erect a tombstone without religious symbols.

According to civil society groups, members of the CID, military intelligence, local police stations, the Terrorism Investigation Department, the army, and the navy surveilled minority religious groups. In many cases, officers were dressed in civilian clothing and did not provide identification. Muslim civil society representatives said 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. Civil society representatives said that police and intelligence services used "national security," "disturbance of the peace," and "criminal trespass and intimidation" as pretexts to harass and intimidate members of minority religious groups. They said that in some cases, law enforcement officers acted in concert with local residents or members of the Buddhist clergy.

In March, the chairman of the Parliament Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security and ruling party Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna MP Sarath Weerasekera said that "even though terrorism has been curbed, there is still a risk of religious extremism operating in this country. Special attention should be paid to unregistered madrasa schools that only teach religion and language, and to people who come to Sri Lanka from abroad and give extremist views and lectures..."

The government continued to require all imported Islamic religious books, including the Quran, to undergo review before being released as part of what the Ministry of Defense said was a counterterrorism measure to screen for extremist content. Some Muslim community members said the process discouraged the importation of Islamic religious books.

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.

On February 6, civil society groups reported the Kattankudy Urban Council, the Federation of Kattankudy Mosques, Muslim institutions, and activists protested a police move to establish an office at what was formerly the Dharul Athar Jumma Mosque. The Ministry of Defense had banned the Dharul Athar organization after the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks for allegedly having links to the organizer of the attacks, leading to the mosque's closure. The Defense Ministry took over the mosque building, but the Federation of Kattankudy Mosques stated the mosque had been built with public funds and should be returned to the community. After the February protest, the Kattankudy police OIC assured the public the police would not take over the mosque.

According to civil society organizations, following the July 2022 resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province, created in 2020, ceased to function. 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, including ethnic minority politicians, said they feared the task force would lead to central government land grabs in the name of preserving heritage. Despite the task force becoming defunct, civil society groups said multiple Buddhist monks took control of traditionally Tamil and Muslim lands in the Northern and Eastern Provinces during the year and said security forces continued to provide tacit support to former members of the task force. They said police were reluctant to arrest monks and allowed them to act with impunity. For example, in April, a video circulated widely on social media showing a Buddhist monk's Ministerial Security Guard Division bodyguard pointing a gun at a group of protesting Muslims in Pullmodai, in the Eastern Province. The Muslims were protesting the placement of a Buddhist statue in a majority Muslim village. Police made no arrests.

Press outlets reported that the Archaeology Depa (AD) 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 was 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 May 12, then Director General of the AD Anura Manatunga told the President the AD prioritized the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and that the AD received funding from different agencies, including Buddhist clergy, to carry out archaeological work. This came after widespread Tamil resistance to a 2021 order by the AD that 300 acres surrounding the Kurunthoormalai site, which Tamil farmers cultivated, be handed over to the department for archaeological purposes. On June 8, during a discussion with members of the Tamil National Alliance and other government officials, including Manatunga, the President ordered land around the Kurunthoormalai site released back to local farmers for cultivation, ordered the department to stop seizing public lands, and criticized Manatunga for excessive land acquisition. On June 12 Manatunga resigned. In July, former Army chief of staff Lieutenant General Jagath Diath and two other retired officers petitioned the Court of Appeal against the government's decision to release land around the temple.

During the year there was ethnoreligious tension regarding conducting religious ceremonies at the Kurunthoormalai site. On July 14, an estimated 100 Sinhalese protesters, Buddhist monks, police, and officials from the AD attempted to stop a Hindu Pongal *pooja* (religious harvest festival devotion ceremony), Tamil press reported. The Mullaitivu court had previously granted permission for the pooja and rejected police claims it would cause ethnic disharmony. Two buses of Sinhalese protesters and Buddhist monks arrived from the south, and along with local AD officials, claimed the fire used in the pooja would damage the archeological site, local media reported. Police stamped out the fire and evicted all parties from the site. During a July 18 meeting, the President told Tamil MPs he would order an investigation of police who disrupted the ceremony. As of year's end, the investigation was underway.

Tamil Hindu devotees, politicians, and religious leaders held another Pongal ceremony at the site on August 18, while Sinhalese Buddhists held a prayer service at the same location. Police, including the Special Task Force, were deployed to prevent violence. The AD previously agreed to allow Hindus to worship at the site provided they followed guidelines to protect archaeological artifacts. The Mullaitivu Court rejected a police request for an injunction against the Hindu ceremony and ruled that no one could interfere with Pongal. Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups both urged followers to come to the site to assert their religious rights. The Hindu ceremony and Buddhist prayer service took place without violence.

On August 22, MP Sarath Weerasekara made a speech in parliament referring to Mullaitivu District Judge T. Saravanaraja as "a mentally ill person," and criticized Saravanaraja's court order against construction at Kurunthoormalai. This was Weerasekara's second speech in parliament directly criticizing Saravanaraja regarding the Kurunthoormalai site. Weeresequera said the judge should keep in mind that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation, there is a limit to the patience of Sinhala

Buddhists, and that if racial violence were to occur the judge and Tamil politicians would bear the burden.

On August 31, the Mullaitivu Magistrate Court, including Judge Saravanaraja, ruled the AD failed to adhere to previous court orders by continuing construction of the Buddhist stupa at the Kurunthoormalai site and dedicating a Buddha statue.

On September 23, Saravanaraja resigned and, on September 28, left Sri Lanka citing pressure from the government and death threats from Sinhalese nationalists over his judicial orders against the AD. Civil society groups, international NGOs, and minority politicians raised concern regarding the judge's resignation and threats to the independence of the judiciary.

On August 11, Eastern Province Governor Senthil Thondaman ordered a stop to construction of a Buddhist temple in a predominantly Tamil village in Trincomalee. Monks held multiple protests and on August 28, a group of monks stormed a Trincomalee District Coordination Committee meeting chaired by Thondaman and threatened to "squeeze his neck" if he refused their demands. The governor explained his position and said the ban on constructing the temple would continue. Police did not arrest any monks for disrupting the meeting or for threatening the governor.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

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.

During the year, a Ministry of Justice-led process to reform the MMDA, which many Muslim women said was discriminatory, stalled after the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), comprising Islamic theologians in Sri Lanka, withdrew support for the proposed reforms. Separately, in June, 18 Muslim MPs submitted their own recommendations to the Justice Minister. Both the ACJU and the parliamentarians proposed setting the minimum marriage age to 16 with *qadi* (Islamic judge) approval, rather than raise it to 18 as activists requested, and reintroducing guardian permission for marriage and conditional polygamy. 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 *qadis* ruling on matters related to the MMDA. Discussion of reforms to the MMDA continued at year's end.

On February 14, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena stated that any damage or tampering to Article 9 of the Constitution (which provides the foremost place to Buddhism) would not be allowed, and that Article 9 should be protected to preserve Buddhism. On March 26, Gunawardena rejected allegations the government planned to convert the primarily Tamil and Muslim Northern and Eastern Provinces into Buddhist areas, saying the government had no intention of destroying the religious and cultural identities of Tamils.

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.

During the year, the NCEASL stated it documented 43 anti-Christian cases of intimidation of and violence against pastors and their congregations, obstruction of worship services, discriminatory actions, and attacks on churches, compared with 80 cases in 2022. Of these, 17 involved threats, intimidation, or coercion, and 14 were discriminatory actions or practices. According to the

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. Of nine incidents involving property damage or destruction, one was related to hate campaigns or propaganda, and two involved physical violence. The NCEASL also documented nine incidents against Muslims and 13 incidents against Hindus, including threats, discrimination, and violence.

Sources stated that a land dispute between Tamil livestock farmers and Sinhalese crop farmers in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, on the border of Batticaloa District, exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions in the region. Tamils alleged the central government's Mahawali (irrigation) Authority failed to implement a 2021 court order to evict the Sinhalese farmers. President Wickremesinghe ordered the Mahawali Authority on October 15 to allocate land to Sinhalese farmers and return pastureland to Tamil dairy farmers. On October 16, local monk Ambitiya Sumanaratna Thera and former Eastern Province Governor Anuradha Yahampa installed a Buddha statue. Upon instructions from the President, the military removed the statue and cordoned off the disputed land on October 19. A nationalist Buddhist group filed a police complaint seeking an investigation into the statue's removal, and a Batticaloa-based Buddhist monk called for 500 monks to take control of the land.

The February 2022 case of Fathima Fahmidha Rameez, a Muslim teacher who was assigned to teach at Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in Trincomalee, was settled on May 22 at the Trincomalee Magistrate Court after the Shanmuga College principal accepted that any future Muslim teacher, including Fahmidha, would be allowed to wear the abaya, a full-body dress common in some Islamic traditions. The principal acknowledged that the abaya was a cultural right for Muslim women. Based on the agreement, three pending cases related to the incident were also resolved. On May 23, Fahmidha, wearing an abaya, visited Shanmuga College with her lawyers and the principal signed documents related to Fahmidha's promotion and salary increase, as agreed upon in the settlement.

According to the NCEASL, unknown persons set fire to the vegetable stall and motorbike of the Mahimai Jesuvitke Sabai pastor in Kalluvankeni, Eravur, in Batticaloa District. The pastor informed police and said as his family was the only Christian family in the neighborhood, they faced longstanding animosity from neighbors, including persons throwing stones at his house. He said a local sports club opposed him and feared he would build a church in the village. On June 1, the pastor said those allegedly responsible for the arson attack lodged a police complaint against him, accusing him of attempting to create unrest in the area. During the investigation, individuals from the sports club confessed they had started the fires.

On February 18, Rudra Sena, a Hindu nationalist group, distributed leaflets against Christians and Muslims during the Hindu Maha Shivaratri festival at the Thiruketheeswaram Temple in Mannar District, 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 September 13, the same group distributed approximately 5,000 similar leaflets in the Nallur Hindu Temple area entitled "Am I a responsible Hindu?" calling to stop conversions of Hindu Tamils to Abrahamic religions.

According to a Pew Research Center study, entitled "Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia," 62 percent of Sri Lankans surveyed expressed positive sentiments about religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The survey also found that 50 percent of Sri Lankans viewed Islam as "compatible with their country's culture and values," compared with 68 percent of respondents having the same view about Hinduism and Christianity.

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 U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers emphasized the need for respect for and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities as part of the post-conflict 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, the use of the ICCPR Act to arrest individuals for insulting religion, and to urge the government to ensure due process for those in prolonged detention, particularly those detained under the PTA. Embassy officials observed court hearings in high-profile cases to demonstrate international attention on the issues and to encourage due process and fair trials.

The Ambassador promoted religious freedom through private diplomatic advocacy and in public statements, public visits to places of worship of all faiths, and speeches. For example, the Ambassador visited the ancient city of Anuradhapura, a sacred city for Buddhists, paid respect at the country's oldest Bo tree (a sacred Buddhist tree) and met with the Atamasthana Adhipathi of Anuradhapura and Chief Priest of the North Central Province. She also visited the Dawoodi Bohra mosque in Colombo, the country's only Shia community, and highlighted the community's contributions to Sri Lankan society and discussed ways to promote religious harmony. In June, the Ambassador participated in Buddhist rituals at the Gangaramaya Temple to mark Poson Poya. During an August trip to the north, the Ambassador met with the Catholic Bishop of Mannar to discuss the role of religious leaders in promoting interfaith harmony and tolerance, followed by a visit to the Catholic Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu. The Ambassador also visited the Thiruketheeswaram Hindu Temple and discussed religious tolerance with temple administration. After a September 25 visit with the Chief Sanghanayake of the Sri Maha Viharaya, the Ambassador posted on social media that they "discussed the vital role that religious leaders can play in safeguarding dialogue among faith communities." During a meeting with the ACJU, the Ambassador discussed the importance of including Muslim and all minority community voices in combating extremism and urged unity in reconciliation efforts.

In October, embassy officials met with government representatives, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu civil society and religious leaders in Colombo and Sri Lanka's north and east to better understand the views of the communities they represent and the problems they faced and to advocate for religious tolerance. The U.S. embassy tweeted "These conversations are invaluable as we explore interreligious relations & the importance of religious freedom for all faiths."

Throughout the year, the Ambassador 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. She visited sites with religious significance and posted on social media her appreciation for the country's cultural and religious diversity.

The embassy supported multiple reconciliation projects that identified and resolved local grievances, built empathy and understanding between religious groups, and supported government reconciliation efforts. The embassy led continuing 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 and 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 between communities.