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Sri Lanka: Treatment of journalists, political opponents, protesters and activists by the authorities since the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections; the Online Safety Act (2024−June 2026)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to sources, Sri Lanka's 2022 economic and political crises brought on mass protests ["better known as the *Aragalaya* ('struggle')" (MRG 2025-03, 14)] against the ruling political regime and resulted in the ouster of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Freedom House 2024-02-29; *The Guardian* 2024-09-23; Aamer [2024-10]).

Sources report that Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the leader of the "centre-left" (MRG 2025-03, 14) or "left-wing" (Human Rights Watch 2025-01-16, 435) National People's Power (NPP) alliance [also known as Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB)], won the 2024 presidential election in September 2024 (Human Rights Watch 2025-01-16, 435; MRG 2025-03, 14). According to the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a Sri Lankan NGO that produces research and studies on Sri Lankan public policy to strengthen institutions and promote good governance (CPA n.d.), in Dissanayake's first 7 months in power, "the implementation of confidence-building measures and key governance and legal reforms have been delayed" and "severe socio-economic challenges" and "human rights abuses persist" (CPA 2025-06, 1). For further information on the political situation in Sri Lanka, particularly since the 2024 elections, see Response to Information Request LKA202382 of August 2025.

2. Legislations

INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre (INFORM), a Colombo-based NGO that monitors and reports on human rights issues in Sri Lanka, indicates in June 2025 that Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya announced that the government would be repealing the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (PTA) and taking steps to replace the existing legislation (2025-06, 6). According to the CPA, the PTA, initially adopted as a "temporary provision," was later converted to permanent legislation and

has since been "used to terrorise generations of Sri Lankans, largely targeting those from ethnic and religious minorities, activists, dissidents, and journalists and normalised torture, with it entrenching a culture of impunity" (2025-04-03).

Daily News, a "state-owned" English daily newspaper (Freedom House 2022-09-08), states that for "decades," civil society groups, legal experts and international bodies have "criticised" the PTA for its "impact on fundamental rights" (2026-01-31). According to Human Rights Watch's 2025 annual report, the Dissanayake government "stalled on promised legal reforms," including repealing the PTA (2026-02-04, 418). *Daily News* quotes the Justice Minister of Sri Lanka as stating that in December 2025, the Ministry of Justice initiated the process of repealing the PTA and introduced a draft legislation that would "'ensur[e] national security while respecting democratic values, fundamental rights and the rule of law'" (*Daily News* 2026-01-31). Sources note that the proposed Protection of the State from Terrorism Act (PSTA) aims to replace the PTA (Human Rights Watch 2026-01-18; Amnesty International 2026-02-27). However, Human Rights Watch states that the proposed law contains "numerous provisions similar to the current abusive" legislation and "risks facilitating the same kind of repression" (2026-01-18). Similarly, Amnesty International indicates that the draft outlines terrorism in "broad and vague terms, creating a real risk of arbitrary application and abuse" (2026-02-27). In the *Daily News* article, the Justice Minister indicated that the proposed legislation was "open to substantial revision" based on public feedback gathered until February 2026 (2026-01-31).

A report by the UN Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), covering events from October 2024 to July 2025, states that "[d]espite pledges by the [g]overnment" to repeal the PTA, its continued use has resulted in "further arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions without charge or trial" (UN 2025-08-28, paras. 1, 21). Human Rights Watch states that Sri Lankan police "increased" their use of the PTA in

2025, noting that there were 49 cases between January and May 2025 compared to 38 in all of 2024 (2026-02-04, 421). According to an interview with the CPA by France's Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides, OFPRA) for their fact-finding mission in Sri Lanka conducted in February 2025, the total number of individuals "prosecuted or detained" under the PTA is estimated at "around" 100 (France 2025-09-11, 46).

2.1.Online Safety Act, No. 9 of 2024

Al Jazeera, citing the government of former President Ranil Wickremesinghe [in power 2022-2024 (Aamer [2024-10])], reports that the *Online Safety Act* was introduced to "battl[e] cybercrimes, including child abuse, data theft and online fraud" and gives a 5-person commission the power to decide which content is deemed "'illegal'" (2024-01-24). In its annual report on events occurring between June 2024 and May 2025, Freedom House indicates that journalists and activists continue to face "arrests, threats, and harassment" for their digital activities, including under the *Online Safety Act*, which bans "'false' and 'harmful' online speech such as online harassment and abuse or content deemed to promote ill will and hostility" (2025-11-13). According to International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), an NGO working to defend human rights and the rule of law worldwide (ICJ n.d.), their "[k]ey concerns" regarding the Act include the following:

> - The overly broad powers of the Online Safety Commission and appointed "experts";
> - Vague and overbroad offences;
> - Disproportionate sanctions and punishments;
> - Lack of adequate judicial oversight … (ICJ 2025-09-18).

Amnesty International indicates that the Act grants the Online Safety Commission "broad powers" to define "'prohibited statements'" and directs internet service providers to remove content or disable access for offenders (2024-01-24). *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index* (*BTI*) *2026*, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries," reports that the Act "criminalize[s] the use of social media to organize protests and gatherings" and provides the government with "extensive power to target political opponents" through its "[v]ague definitions" and "high fines" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2026, 2, 9). The BBC states that social media played a "key role" in Sri Lanka's 2022 protests which overthrew then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2024-02-01).

According to the *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan daily newspaper owned by Wijeya Newspapers Ltd. (WNL) which also owns *Sunday Times* (WNL n.d.), a former chairman of the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka accused a number of people of "harassment" in April 2024 in the first case prosecuted under the *Online Safety Act* (2026-04-23). The same source adds that the 2 respondents, the complainant's former assistant and a professor at a foreign university, received a permanent "conditional order" under Sections 24(1) and 24(2) of the Act (*Daily Mirror* 2026-04-23). The *Online Safety Act* provides the following:

Applying for a court order to prevent circulation of prohibited statements

24.(1) Any person affected by the communication of any prohibited statement may apply to the Magistrate's Court by way of petition and affidavit to obtain an order to prevent the circulation of such information.

(2) Upon considering such application, the Magistrate may issue a conditional order to such person or the internet service provider or internet intermediary on whose online location such prohibited statement has been communicated.

(3) The order made under subsection (2) may contain, *inter alia*-

(*a*) the name of the person who is required to stop communication of the prohibited statement with immediate effect; and

(*b*) any other order as the Magistrate deems fit.

…

(9) Where the person against whom any order is made under this section fails to comply with such order within the period and in the manner ordered by the Magistrate, such person commits an offence and shall on conviction be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding two million rupees [(LKR) C$8,393] and the Magistrate may order the Commission to take steps to -

(*a*) disable access by end users in Sri Lanka to the online location containing such communication of the prohibited statement in Sri Lanka; or

(*b*) remove the relevant communication of the prohibited statement in Sri Lanka from the online location containing such communication (Sri Lanka 2024, emphasis in original).

In a different case filed under the *Online Safety Act*, sources report that the Colombo chief magistrate issued a Member of Parliament (MP) a "conditional restraining order" under Section 24 of the Act against a number of individuals, including a former politician and 2 YouTube content creators, who posted alleged "defamatory" content online against the MP (Newswire 2025-06-14; *Daily Mirror* 2025-06-13). Newswire, a Sri Lankan online media platform which focuses on current affairs, sports

and business news (Newswire n.d.), states that the order prohibits the respondents from posting or sharing the content in question and summons all parties to court (2025-06-14).

3. Treatment of Political Opponents and Protesters

A government gazette notification signed by the President on 27 February 2026 ordered the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force to maintain public order in 25 Sri Lankan districts (Sri Lanka 2026-02-27). The OHCHR notes that the Dissanayake government has continued to renew the gazette notifications, which authorizes the President to "deploy the armed forces to maintain public order, including during protests" (UN 2025-08-28, para. 15).

CIVICUS, a global network of civil society organizations headquartered in South Africa that advocates for strong "citizen action and civil society" (CIVICUS n.d.), rates the state of civic space in its report on the Dissanayake-led government as "'repressed'," due to continued "restrictions and disruption of peaceful protests – at times with excessive use of force – and the stifling of journalists," as well as the targeting and criminalization of activists based on "defamation and counter-terror laws" (2026-03-27). According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), an organization focused on improving the legal environment for civil society throughout the world (ICNL n.d.), since early 2026, Sri Lanka's civil society space has faced "continuing restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly" (ICNL 2026-03-15).

According to the Human Rights Watch annual report that covers 2025 events, the Dissanayake government has made "little progress" on its human rights commitments (2026-02-04, 418). Tamil Guardian, a news website covering Tamil issues "from the Tamil point of view," cites the spokesperson of the Democratic Tamil National Alliance political alliance

as stating that the NPP continues to use the PTA to "suppress protests in the Tamil homeland" (2025-04-23). Human Rights Watch indicates that Sri Lanka has historically used counterterrorism laws to "commit rights violations" against those who are Tamil, Muslim, and those perceived to be government critics, and this has persisted under the Dissanayake administration (2026-01-18). Amnesty International notes that Sri Lanka's "misuse of the PTA" shows how "ill-defined and overly broad offences" have been used "repeatedly" to target specific groups, including government critics (2026-02-27). For further information on the treatment of Tamil citizens, including suspected members or supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), see Response to Information Request LKA202631 of August 2026.

The UN's 2025 annual report on human rights in Sri Lanka indicates that "impunity remains entrenched, and the structural conditions that led to past violations persist" (UN 2025-08-28, para. 30). *BTI 2026* notes that those who attacked the 2022 protestors "continue to enjoy impunity" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2026, 9). Citing "in-country sources," a report by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that police were "reluctant to investigate complaints involving state actors, including the military" (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 5.11).

The *Daily Mirror* article indicates that in late 2024, as reported by media sources, 4 men, including a "political and social activist," were arrested under the PTA for disseminating photos and videos related to the LTTE, including on social media, and 7 were arrested for actions against Israel (2025-05-17). The same source adds that there were "at least" 3 Sinhalese, 2 Muslims, and 2 Tamils among those arrested (*Daily Mirror*2025-05-17). Human Rights Watch describes 2 additional cases in which a young Muslim man was detained under the PTA for several months in 2025 for criticizing Israel; both were eventually released with no charges laid against them (2026-01-18).

3.1. Aragalaya Protesters

The DFAT report states that police "occasionally" used "force to disperse" anti-government protests in 2022 and 2023, including the Aragalaya protests (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 2.72). According to an English translation of a letter from civil society representatives and lawyers that does not name the signatories published by Newswire, the police conducted 709 investigations in relation to the Aragalaya protests and have arrested "more" than 3,882 protesters (Newswire 2025-04-10). Sources report that over 4,000 individuals were arrested by the police during Aragalaya protests [although exact numbers were hard to verify (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 3.69)] (*The Sunday Times* 2022-09-11; Australia 2024-05-02, para. 3.69), including "key figures" who were detained for 90 days under the PTA (*The Sunday Times* 2022-09-11). The DFAT report notes that 3 leaders of the Aragalaya protest were detained under the PTA, but since have been released and cleared of the charges (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 4.39). The *Sunday Times,* a Sri Lankan newspaper owned by WNL which also owns *Daily Mirror* (WNL n.d.), quotes the police media spokesperson as stating that "'some'" of the charges include "'trespassing, theft, unlawful gathering and damaging state property'" (*The Sunday Times* 2022-09-11). The DFAT report notes that according to in-country sources, "many" of the arrested individuals were released on the same day, while lawyers and activists reported that "some" arrests did not follow "due process," including delays in revealing detainees' whereabouts and arrests by plainclothes police officers (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 3.69). In an interview with CIVICUS, a Sri Lankan climate activist and researcher indicated that "all known" suspects have been released on bail (CIVICUS 2025-07-22). Sources indicate that in July 2026, the Supreme Court ruled the arrest and detention of an Aragalaya protester by 2 police officers was a violation of the protester's fundamental rights (Newswire 2026-07-23; *The Island* 2026-07-24).

The translated letter published by Newswire states that "proper charges" have not been filed in "many" of these arrest cases, and trial progress has been "extremely slow" (Newswire 2025-04-10). The letter adds that for young people, who constituted the "vast majority" of those arrested, the "legal delay has created difficulties and hardships," including travel restrictions and employment difficulties (Newswire 2025-04-10). The climate activist and researcher stated to CIVICUS that although while campaigning President Dissanayake "promised an independent prosecuto[r]" and a politically "free" legal system for Aragalaya protesters' cases, since taking power his government has not responded "favourabl[y]" to activists' requests, including for presidential pardons (CIVICUS 2025-07-22).

Sources notes that in February 2026, a Sri Lankan court sentenced 12 men to death for the May 2022 killing of a parliamentarian and his bodyguard during the 2022 protests (AP 2026-02-11; Newswire 2026-02-11). The Associated Press (AP), citing the senior state counsel, reports that the High Court convicted the men for "unlawful assembly, assault and the deaths" of the lawmaker and his police bodyguard (2026-02-11). Sources state that the court also sentenced 4 other individuals to 6-month suspended prison terms, while 23 others were acquitted (AP 2026-02-11; Newswire 2026-02-11).

4. Treatment of Journalists

Freedom House's report on events in 2024 notes that the authorities had "continued to disrupt" the work of journalists (2025-02-26). Amnesty International notes that the PTA have been "repeatedly" used against journalists (2026-02-27). According to a 2026 report by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF), Sri Lankan authorities "often use the [PTA] to silence journalists," especially those investigating the living conditions of the Tamil people in the Northern and Eastern provinces (RSF 2026). The same source adds that reporting on Tamil or

Muslim minority issues "[g]enerally" is "extremely sensitive," resulting in "arrests, death threats and attacks" against journalists and media outlets (RSF 2026). The Tamil Guardian indicates that Tamil journalists "across" the north-east regions face "heavy surveillance, interrogations, and intimidation, particularly around memorial and protest events" (2025-09-30).

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), an organization representing "600,000 media professionals" from "more than 140 countries" that "promotes collective action to defend human rights, democracy and media pluralism" (IFJ n.d.), in August 2025, the Counter Terrorism Investigation Department (CTID) summoned a journalist and human rights defender who had been documenting violations against Tamil civilians by security forces in the north and east of the country, as well as covering a mass grave excavations in the Northern Province on social media (IFJ 2025-08-18). Human Rights Watch states that the mass grave contained the remains of individuals "allegedly executed" by security forces during the civil conflict with the LTTE (2026-01-18). The IFJ cites a statement published on the journalist's Facebook account as indicating that he was interrogated for "almost" 7 hours about his journalism, finances, phone records, and overseas travel (IFJ 2025-08-18). The IFJ adds that "'[t]his summons is part of a draconian pattern of surveillance and intimidation against Tamil and minority media that remains in force, despite assurances of increased media protection from the new government'" (2025-08-18). The Tamil Guardian reports that a Sri Lankan government representative speaking before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances in September 2025 accused the journalist of "'terrorist activities and financial crime'," which follows the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders raising concerns regarding the journalist (2025-09-30).

Media sources report that in March 2026, police arrested the editor of the Sri Lankan news website Lanka E News (LEN) at the airport upon his return to Sri Lanka after 16 years abroad (LEN 2026-03-12; Sri Lanka Mirror 2026-03-11; Tamil Guardian 2026-03-11). Sources report that the editor sought "political asylum" abroad following the 2010 disappearance of a [LEN (LEN 2026-03-12)] journalist and an arson attack on the media outlet's office (LEN 2026-03-12; Tamil Guardian 2026-03-11). According to media sources, the arrest was made in connection with a 2016 international warrant for "contempt of court" (CPJ 2026-03-12; Newswire 2026-03-12). Sources report that the LEN editor was released on bail the day after his arrest (Sri Lanka Brief 2026-03-12; Newswire 2026-03-12). According to sources, at the March 2026 hearing of the editor's case, the court [dropped all charges (Newswire 2026-03-27),] released him and lifted his flight ban when the Criminal Investigation Department indicated that the editor was not a party to the case (Newswire 2026-03-27; LEN 2026-03-28) and no contempt proceedings had been filed against the editor (LEN 2026-03-28).

5. Treatment of Minorities

A commentary article by Alan Keenan, a senior consultant on Sri Lanka of the International Crisis Group, notes that the Dissanayake government "was bound to face enormous challenges" in uniting the country as previous leaders have done "little" to address the aftermath and causes of decades of civil conflict (Keenan 2025-09-05). The same source adds that during the civil war, the Sinhalese Buddhists were "generally pitted" against Tamil minority, leaving Muslims "caught in the crossfire" (Keenan 2025-09-05). According to Freedom House, in line with NPP campaign pledges, the Dissanayake administration took "some steps to ease restrictions" on the Tamils (2025-02-26). An article published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [1] and written by David G. Timberman, an independent scholar who has conducted multiple

governance assessments and program evaluations in Sri Lanka, states that the NPP is taking steps to address the demands of Tamil and Muslim communities including "reducing military checkpoints in the north and east, committing to returning military-occupied land to local ownership, and responding to ongoing calls for the repeal of the PTA" (Timberman 2025-08-27, 19, 27). However, Human Rights Watch reports that "despite rhetoric of 'national reconciliation', the Dissanayake administration has done little to build trust with the Tamil and Muslim communities" (2026-02-04, 418). Amnesty International indicates that Sri Lanka has "repeatedly" targeted both Tamil and Muslim minorities through the PTA (2026-02-27). Human Rights Watch notes that Tamil and Muslim minorities face "threats of baseless terrorism allegations" (2026-02-04, 421).

Minority Rights Group (MRG) states that Muslims in Sri Lanka do not have "self-governance or adequate social and political representation" (2025-12a). The same source notes that the Muslim community "regularly faces discrimination in the practice of their religious beliefs, including interference with mosque activities, burial practices and religious observance at workplaces and in public institutions" (MRG 2025-12a). Amnesty International's report on events in 2025 indicates that the government's "continued" use of the "anti-terror law," alongside its "failur[e] to reform other laws, negatively affect[ed] freedom of expression" and the rights of various groups, including Muslims (2026-04-21, 338).

The DFAT report notes that Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups continue to target the Muslim community, particularly through "hate speech" (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 3.38). Citing in-country sources, the same source notes that Sinhala Buddhist national groups "target religious minorities with relative impunity" (Australia 2024-05-02, para. 3.27). However, according to *BTI 2026*, "aggressive rhetoric by prominent Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist" figures targeting Muslim and Christian

minorities decreased during their report's review period of February 2023 to January 2025 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2026, 7). Sources report that the Colombo High Court upheld a 9-month prison sentence for a ["prominent Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist" (Sri Lanka Brief 2026-06-23)] monk for statements he made that were "insulting" to Islam (Sri Lanka Brief 2026-06-23; Sri Lanka Mirror 2026-06-23) in 2016 (Sri Lanka Mirror 2026-06-23). Sri Lanka Brief, a non-profit Sri Lankan media organization that researches and publishes news on human rights issues (Sri Lanka Brief n.d.), indicates that the monk had been linked to "several high-profile" ethnic and religious "controversies" in Sri Lanka and had "frequently been accused by critics and human rights groups of making inflammatory statements against religious minorities, particularly Muslims" (Sri Lanka Brief 2026-06-23).

6. Treatment of Activists

The Centre for Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), an "independent" NGO working towards the global implementation of the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR n.d.), states that in December 2024, the National Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organizations, the government body that regulates "a large number" of NGOs, mandated that all NGOs, regardless of their current registration, register with them, requiring applications to be shared with the Ministry of Defence and other "relevant" ministries for vetting purposes "in practice" (CCPR 2025-10-29). The CCPR adds that the registration process is "complex" with "burdensome bureaucratic steps," and the application will be denied if clearance is not provided from "several" ministries (2025-10-29). Sources report that the new registration rules include obtaining a security clearance from the Ministry of Defence (MRG 2025-12b; Amnesty International 2026-04-21, 46). MRG adds that the new registration requirements "risk disproportionately affecting" northern and eastern organizations, "many of which" are "already" operating "under

sustained surveillance" (MRG 2025-12b). Similarly, the CCPR notes that the registration system "arbitrarily restrict[s]" the freedom of association of "certain groups," including ethnic and religious minorities (CCPR 2025-10-29).

Human Rights Watch indicates that the Dissanayake administration continues to use counterterrorism laws to "violat[e]" the rights of human rights defenders (2026-01-18). According to the OHCHR report, civil society actors faced "threats" for documenting "past violations" (UN 2025-08-28, para. 49). The OHCHR notes

> continued patterns of surveillance, intimidation and harassment of families of the disappeared, community leaders and civil society actors, especially those working on accountability for enforced disappearances and other conflict-related crimes, land seizures and environmental issues, and those working with former combatants in the north and east of Sri Lanka. (UN 2025-08-28, para. 25)

A joint statement signed by 8 organizations, including the ICJ, RSF, CIVICUS, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), notes that Sri Lankan authorities use the PTA and counter-terror police against human rights defenders and journalists, "particularly" targeting Tamil and Muslim advocates in the country's north and east (ICJ, et al. 2025-08-15). MRG states that activists face "intimidation and arrests" under the PTA (MRG 2025-12b).

Human Rights Watch notes that police and intelligence agencies "routinely warned" human rights defenders in the Northern and Eastern provinces that "they will be accused of terrorism" because of their activities (2026-02-04, 421). The OHCHR report states that since August 2024, Sri Lankan security forces have "harasse[d]" or "intimidate[d]" 7 human rights defenders and "families of the disappeared" in the north and east who "engaged" with UN or international actors (UN 2025-08-28, para. 26). The same source indicates that the Terrorism Investigation

Division questioned 3 other human rights defenders regarding their "alleged" participation in events and protests both in-country and overseas, including sessions of the Human Rights Council in Switzerland, while another "allegedly" received "veiled death threats" from a police officer after traveling to Europe (UN 2025-08-28, para. 26).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a non-profit think tank "seeking to advance cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the US" (World Economic Forum n.d.).[back]

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