



SRI LANKA: Country Dossier

June 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

| | | 1. Private Life | 2. Family Life | 3. Community Life | 4. National Life | 5. Church Life | 6. Violence | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015 | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014 |
|------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Rank | Country | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score |
| 1 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 10.6 | 94 | 92 | 92 | 92 | 90 |
| 2 | Afghanistan | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 10.0 | 93 | 89 | 88 | 81 | 78 |
| 3 | Somalia | 16.0 | 16.2 | 16.1 | 16.3 | 16.4 | 10.4 | 91 | 91 | 87 | 90 | 80 |
| 4 | Sudan | 14.2 | 14.5 | 14.3 | 15.6 | 16.0 | 12.0 | 87 | 87 | 84 | 80 | 73 |
| 5 | Pakistan | 14.4 | 13.5 | 13.8 | 15.0 | 13.1 | 16.7 | 86 | 88 | 87 | 79 | 77 |
| 6 | Eritrea | 15.2 | 14.5 | 15.8 | 16.1 | 15.2 | 9.4 | 86 | 82 | 89 | 79 | 72 |
| 7 | Libya | 15.2 | 15.3 | 14.2 | 15.7 | 15.5 | 10.4 | 86 | 78 | 79 | 76 | 71 |
| 8 | Iraq | 14.7 | 14.7 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 15.1 | 11.3 | 86 | 86 | 90 | 86 | 78 |
| 9 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.4 | 16.5 | 16.7 | 2.6 | 85 | 85 | 78 | 73 | 74 |
| 10 | Iran | 14.0 | 14.1 | 14.5 | 15.8 | 16.4 | 10.0 | 85 | 85 | 83 | 80 | 77 |
| 11 | India | 12.6 | 12.7 | 13.2 | 14.7 | 12.9 | 14.4 | 81 | 73 | 68 | 62 | 55 |
| 12 | Saudi Arabia | 14.9 | 13.7 | 14.2 | 15.5 | 16.4 | 4.1 | 79 | 76 | 76 | 77 | 78 |
| 13 | Maldives | 15.2 | 15.5 | 13.5 | 15.8 | 16.7 | 1.1 | 78 | 76 | 76 | 78 | 77 |
| 14 | Nigeria | 11.8 | 11.5 | 13.1 | 12.1 | 12.1 | 16.5 | 77 | 78 | 78 | 78 | 70 |
| 15 | Syria | 14.4 | 14.3 | 14.1 | 14.5 | 14.7 | 3.7 | 76 | 86 | 87 | 83 | 79 |
| 16 | Uzbekistan | 15.5 | 12.1 | 13.0 | 13.1 | 16.0 | 3.5 | 73 | 71 | 70 | 69 | 68 |
| 17 | Egypt | 11.3 | 12.8 | 12.2 | 11.7 | 9.5 | 12.4 | 70 | 65 | 64 | 61 | 61 |
| 18 | Vietnam | 12.4 | 8.4 | 12.7 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 7.4 | 69 | 71 | 66 | 68 | 65 |
| 19 | Turkmenistan | 15.2 | 10.3 | 12.9 | 12.8 | 15.2 | 1.9 | 68 | 67 | 66 | 63 | 62 |
| 20 | Laos | 12.9 | 8.6 | 13.6 | 13.9 | 14.9 | 3.5 | 67 | 64 | 58 | 58 | 62 |
| 21 | Jordan | 13.2 | 13.3 | 11.5 | 10.9 | 13.0 | 4.3 | 66 | 63 | 59 | 56 | 56 |
| 22 | Tajikistan | 13.3 | 11.3 | 11.8 | 11.8 | 12.9 | 4.3 | 65 | 58 | 58 | 50 | 47 |
| 23 | Malaysia | 12.0 | 14.9 | 12.8 | 12.4 | 9.3 | 3.9 | 65 | 60 | 58 | 55 | 49 |
| 24 | Myanmar | 11.6 | 11.1 | 13.2 | 10.4 | 11.0 | 7.8 | 65 | 62 | 62 | 60 | 59 |
| 25 | Nepal | 12.6 | 11.9 | 10.7 | 11.5 | 12.4 | 4.6 | 64 | | (not in WWL) | | |
| 26 | Brunei | 14.3 | 14.2 | 10.7 | 10.2 | 13.5 | 0.9 | 64 | 64 | 61 | 58 | 57 |
| 27 | Qatar | 13.4 | 12.9 | 11.7 | 11.3 | 14.1 | 0.0 | 63 | 66 | 65 | 64 | 63 |
| 28 | Kazakhstan | 12.8 | 10.0 | 10.2 | 12.2 | 13.7 | 3.7 | 63 | 56 | 55 | 51 | 49 |
| 29 | Ethiopia | 9.8 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 10.9 | 10.5 | 10.4 | 62 | 64 | 67 | 61 | 65 |
| 30 | Tunisia | 11.9 | 13.2 | 10.6 | 10.7 | 12.0 | 3.9 | 62 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 55 |
| 31 | Turkey | 12.5 | 9.7 | 9.8 | 11.7 | 9.6 | 8.7 | 62 | 57 | 55 | 52 | (not in WWL) |
| 32 | Kenya | 12.0 | 10.9 | 10.0 | 7.9 | 11.7 | 9.4 | 62 | 68 | 68 | 63 | 48 |
| 33 | Bhutan | 11.9 | 11.6 | 12.4 | 11.4 | 13.1 | 1.1 | 62 | 61 | 56 | 56 | 54 |
| 34 | Kuwait | 13.4 | 12.6 | 11.6 | 10.9 | 12.3 | 0.4 | 61 | 57 | 56 | 49 | 50 |
| 35 | Central African Republic | 9.0 | 8.1 | 10.1 | 8.9 | 8.8 | 16.1 | 61 | 58 | 59 | 67 | 67 |
| 36 | Palestinian Territories | 12.1 | 12.8 | 10.7 | 10.5 | 12.6 | 1.1 | 60 | 64 | 62 | 58 | 53 |
| 37 | Mali | 11.4 | 9.6 | 11.2 | 8.1 | 9.2 | 9.6 | 59 | 59 | 55 | 52 | 54 |
| 38 | Indonesia | 10.3 | 11.0 | 11.5 | 10.0 | 9.3 | 6.9 | 59 | 55 | 55 | 50 | 46 |
| 39 | Mexico | 8.3 | 7.6 | 12.1 | 10.7 | 9.7 | 10.4 | 59 | 57 | 56 | 55 | (not in WWL) |
| 40 | United Arab Emirates | 13.6 | 12.2 | 10.0 | 10.4 | 11.8 | 0.2 | 58 | 55 | 55 | 49 | 51 |
| 41 | Bangladesh | 10.4 | 8.8 | 11.4 | 9.6 | 7.5 | 10.0 | 58 | 63 | 57 | 51 | 46 |
| 42 | Algeria | 12.3 | 13.1 | 7.5 | 10.4 | 12.4 | 2.0 | 58 | 58 | 56 | 55 | 54 |
| 43 | China | 9.2 | 7.2 | 8.0 | 10.7 | 13.3 | 9.1 | 57 | 57 | 57 | 57 | 51 |
| 44 | Sri Lanka | 11.1 | 7.6 | 10.5 | 11.3 | 10.1 | 6.9 | 57 | 55 | (not in WWL) | 51 | 55 |
| 45 | Azerbaijan | 13.1 | 9.1 | 9.3 | 11.1 | 12.4 | 2.4 | 57 | (not in WWL) | 57 | 50 | (not in WWL) |
| 46 | Oman | 12.1 | 12.2 | 9.9 | 9.4 | 12.6 | 1.1 | 57 | 53 | 53 | 55 | 56 |
| 47 | Mauritania | 11.5 | 11.3 | 11.1 | 12.2 | 11.0 | 0.0 | 57 | 55 | (not in WWL) | 50 | 51 |
| 48 | Bahrain | 12.9 | 13.1 | 10.2 | 9.9 | 10.3 | 0.2 | 57 | 54 | 54 | (not in WWL) | 48 |
| 49 | Colombia | 7.9 | 7.6 | 11.9 | 8.6 | 8.5 | 11.9 | 56 | 53 | 55 | 55 | 56 |
| 50 | Djibouti | 12.2 | 12.2 | 10.3 | 9.9 | 11.7 | 0.0 | 56 | 57 | 58 | 60 | 46 |

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

| | | 1. Private Life | 2. Family Life | 3. Community Life | 4. National Life | 5. Church Life | 6. Violence | TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018 |
|------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Rank | Country | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score | Score |
| 51 | Comoros | 11.7 | 11.5 | 9.1 | 9.4 | 13.9 | 0.4 | 56 |
| 52 | Kyrgyzstan | 11.7 | 9.5 | 10.0 | 8.1 | 11.6 | 2.8 | 54 |
| 53 | Tanzania | 10.1 | 10.3 | 10.1 | 9.5 | 9.0 | 3.9 | 53 |
| 54 | Russian Federation | 11.1 | 8.4 | 10.1 | 8.9 | 10.7 | 2.0 | 51 |
| 55 | Morocco | 10.4 | 11.5 | 7.6 | 8.8 | 12.0 | 0.6 | 51 |
| 56 | Cuba | 8.5 | 4.9 | 10.7 | 10.4 | 12.2 | 2.4 | 49 |
| 57 | Uganda | 10.9 | 8.7 | 9.5 | 8.7 | 4.8 | 3.9 | 46 |
| 58 | Niger | 9.9 | 9.7 | 9.0 | 7.0 | 7.1 | 2.6 | 45 |

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

SRI LANKA – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

| Sri Lanka | | |
|------------------|-------|------|
| World Watch List | Score | Rank |
| WWL 2018 | 57 | 44 |
| WWL 2017 | 55 | 45 |
| WWL 2016 | - | - |
| WWL 2015 | 51 | 44 |
| WWL 2014 | 55 | 29 |

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding SRI LANKA

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611>

Recent country history

With a new government elected in 2015, the long-term ruler (and terminator of the 26 year long civil war) Mahinda Rajapaksa lost power. As a consequence, some radical Buddhist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena lost support too. However, such groups are far from defeated and there has been the rise of another radical group called the Sinha Le (Sinhalese Lions Blood) which is supported by a minister in the present government. Radical Buddhist groups are currently focusing their attacks on the Muslim minority. The level of violence against Christians has lessened to a certain extent and most recent incidents have involved local government officials, legal restrictions and threats.

In the aftermath of the civil war, national reconciliation remains one of the country's biggest challenges. Given that most networks in society are based on religious as well as on ethnic affiliation, the challenge is a big one as ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust. However, it is not clear who can lead this process. The government policy of Buddhist supremacy, although not as strongly emphasized as before, has not been particularly helpful in this respect. The fact that the new government includes a political party like *Jathika Hela Urumaya*, which has attempted in the past to propose anti-conversion laws, is worrying and needs close monitoring.

The religious landscape

Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist and ethnic Sinhala (80% of the population). The country has a long and violent history for religious and ethnic reasons. After decades of ethnic tension, a full-fledged civil war broke out in 1983. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority fought against the Tamil minority (predominantly Hindu, but including a considerable number of Christians). There was a high death toll on both sides. The war ended finally in 2009 with the defeat of the Tamils, especially the Tamil Tigers group (LTTE), but true peace is still far off.

Due to this history, religious nationalism has thrived in Sri Lanka. Radical Buddhist groups have sprouted up across the country and were used by the old government as a means of keeping religious minorities in check. The main victim was the Muslim minority as this was particularly felt to be a threat if Islamic radicalization should occur. Increasing violence led to the killing of Muslims in 2014 and flared up again in May 2017 when several businesses owned by Muslims were destroyed by Buddhist radicals. But Christians have also been facing attacks by local groups, frequently led by saffron-robed monks as well. According to NCEASL, the country's

Evangelical Alliance, there have been 190 incidents of religious violence against Christians since the new government took power in January 2015.⁴

The political landscape

Hopes were high when the new government came into power in January 2015, as it seemed to reflect the fact that ending the civil war in 2009 was not enough for a president to be re-elected. As the former president had relied heavily on Buddhist nationalist groups (and on violence instigated by them), there was hope that the elections would overcome the decades-long ethnic and religious rift which was paralyzing the country.

Such hopes turned out to be premature. Both sides committed war crimes and this has not been addressed sufficiently. There are still many wounds on both sides, and the Tamil part of the country in the northeast still tends to be neglected. Reconciliation is a term frequently heard, but seldom followed up by any concrete action. Churches would be in a unique position to help bridge this gap and address these painful issues as they have members from both sides. But all too often, they find themselves suffering from those self-same divisions.

Finally, ex-President Rajapaksa is still a force to be reckoned with. He is very seasoned in executing power politics and now serves his country as a member of parliament. For the near future, it will be decisive how the country deals with its war legacy and whether reconciliation will also be conducted by legal means, and, if so, whether this will be dealt with by domestic courts or by hybrid solutions such as the United Nations have proposed. The longer these issues remain unaddressed, the stronger dissatisfaction and impatience will get. This could offer leverage for the former president to return to power.

The socio-economic landscape

The army continues to be an important economic factor and also runs businesses one would not usually connect with military operations: e.g. the Navy runs some of the most exclusive holiday resorts. This is also due to the army's size, as it still has almost 280,000 members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009. Tourism is increasingly important for employment as well. One planned resort in Kalpitiya alone should employ 15,000 people directly and 22,500 indirectly. Given this sort of scale, it is understandable that "land-grabbing" for tourism projects is becoming a problem. Indeed, the government has stopped several projects which Chinese investors had already begun. Due to allegations of corruption against the old government and a fear of over-dependence on Chinese money, these cancellations are understandable. On the other hand, Sri Lanka is in need of foreign direct investment.

Concluding remarks

One visible trend is that legal and government restrictions concerning Christians and other religious minorities have been on the rise. Even though (from the perspective of the

⁴ See: <http://srilankabrief.org/2017/05/prosecute-perpetrators-of-violence-and-uphold-the-freedom-of-religion-in-sri-lanka-nceasl/>, last accessed 31 July 2017.

international community) Sri Lanka presently has a more democratic government, the increasing restrictions show that it is sadly only the heads of the states which have changed, not the policies. The ministers and local government officials who caused so much trouble for the churches all remain the same. Therefore, the number of incidents of persecution has not dropped drastically. It is possible that local government officials will increasingly use more strategic methods than just legal restrictions in curtailing the freedom of religious minorities.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

| Pop 2017 | Christians | Chr% |
|------------|------------|------|
| 20,905,000 | 1,925,000 | 9.2 |

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

According to ancient traditions, Christianity made inroads when the Apostle Thomas came to India and preached in Sri Lanka as well. Nestorian Christians lived in the country for a long time. Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island at the beginning of the 16th century by Portuguese traders. In the 17th century Dutch traders brought Protestantism; Methodist missionaries were particularly active later on in the 19th century, especially in the founding of schools. Christians are one of the few groups in society which include a mix of both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups.

What church networks exist today? ⁵

| Orthodox | Catholic | Protestant | Independent | Unaffiliated | Double-aff | Evangelical | Renewalist |
|----------|-----------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| - | 1,555,000 | 276,000 | 223,000 | 9,500 | -139,000 | 225,000 | 399,000 |

Source: WCD, May 2017

Besides the Roman Catholic Church, which is the oldest, largest and most wide-spread church in the country (80% of all Christians), Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and the Salvation Army are also well established. More than 40% of Christians are ethnic Tamils and

⁵ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

many churches run services in Sinhala and Tamil. Although Christians could be a role model in how to bridge the ethnic rift, which is still shaking the country even after the civil war ended in 2009, it causes friction in the Church as well. Despite knowing that their identity should be in Christ first, many Christians struggle with ethnic and political issues.

Religious context (selection)

| Christian | Muslim | Hindu | Buddhist | Ethno-religionist | Jewish | Bahai | Atheist & others ⁶ |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------------|--------|--------|-------------------------------|
| 1,925,000 | 1,827,000 | 2,789,000 | 14,219,000 | 1,000 | 82 | 16,700 | 121,800 |

Also to note: Chinese folk: 12,800 Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD statistics, the main religion in Sri Lanka is Buddhism (68%), followed by Hinduism (13.3%).

Notes on the current situation

- Pastors and church members alike have had little training for facing the challenges of Christian life - especially in rural areas. Due to rising Buddhist pressure, Christians need to be better prepared for persecution and they also need a biblical understanding of why persecution is normal. Christians who have faced attacks on churches are traumatized and often feel insecure. Children are especially vulnerable.
- A government circular from 2008 cites the Christian right to freedom of worship as laid out in the Sri Lankan constitution. An increasing number of pastors use this when neighborhoods threaten - or demand the closure of - their churches. However, the pastors' courage often remains unrewarded as they continue to suffer pressure from local governments, police officers, neighbors and mobs and courts.
- Christians in the Tamil majority in the north are still suffering from the consequences of the civil war (1983 – 2009). Hundreds of families are still displaced and struggling to survive. A hybrid court system was proposed by the United Nations to investigate war crimes committed by all parties of the civil war, but this was never followed through and so injustices and war crimes have never been addressed and continue to be an open wound in society.
- Religious education is a mandatory subject in school. Due to a lack of Christian teachers, Christian students often have to attend Buddhist religion classes

⁶ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 44

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 45

WWL 2016 Not in WWL Top 50.

Where persecution comes from

The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements, at times supported by (local) officials. Although the election of a new government in 2015 led to a slight reduction in the activities of the *Bodu Bala Sena* group, other movements such as *Sinha Le* became active and gained strength. They claim Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation, they also had a wide sticker campaign promoting this ideology. BBS transformed into a political party, but was not particularly successful in this until now. Although BBS focused more on attacking the Muslim minority, Christians and churches are attacked frequently as well. Family members together with village officials in the rural areas have verbally abused and asked Christian converts to leave the village.

How Christians are suffering

Converts from a Buddhist or Hindu background suffer the strongest forms of persecution. They are subject to harassments, discrimination and marginalization by family and community. They are put under pressure to recant Christianity as such conversion is regarded as betrayal: All ethnic Sinhalese (the majority in Sri Lanka) are expected to be Buddhist. Similarly, within the minority Tamil population in the northeast, you are expected to be Hindu. The Christian minority is partly tolerated, but converts to Christianity are not. Additionally, non-traditional churches are frequently targeted by neighbors, often joined by Buddhist monks and local officials, with demands to close their church buildings which they regard as illegal. Again and again, this ends up with mobs protesting against and attacking churches, especially in rural areas.

Examples

- The majority of state schools do not teach Christianity as a subject, and so Christian school-children are forced to study Buddhism or Hinduism. There have also been reports that children were forced to participate in Buddhist rituals.
- On 5 January 2017 a mob, allegedly led by a Buddhist monk, attacked the Kithu Sevana prayer center in Paharaiya, north-western Sri Lanka. The church leader there reported: "First they threatened us verbally. Then they came with wooden sticks, iron bars and knives and destroyed everything."⁷

⁷ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/01/sri-lankan-church-lives-on-despite-destroyed-building-and-death-threats-from-buddhist-monk/>

- In March 2017, a group of about 50 people, including Buddhist monks, forced their way into the Christian Fellowship Church in Ingiriya, Kalatura District, demanding that the Christians stop holding services and accused them of disturbing the peace. When the pastor returned home from the police station he found a mob waiting for him and the windows of his house smashed.⁸
- The Archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, publically claimed in June 2017 that there had been [no attacks or forced church closures](#)⁹ in the country. Given the well-documented cases of attacks against churches in the WWL 2018 reporting period, he seems to see only Roman Catholics as Christians.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 57 / Position: 44

WWL 2017 Points: 55 / Position: 45

WWL 2016 Not in WWL Top 50.

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The score for Sri Lanka increased from 55 in WWL 2017 to 57. This is now a clear trend since WWL 2016, when the country was not in the Top 50. The hopes that Sri Lanka’s religious and ethnic minorities held after the elections in January 2015 have been disappointed. The government has gradually leaned towards and supported nationalist Buddhism, although not as openly as in the previous government under Rajapaksa. Whereas the score for violence only increased by 0.2 points, the levels of pressure in the *Private* and *National spheres of life* in

⁸ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/sri-lanka-20-attacks-christians-year/>, last accessed November 2017.

⁹ See: <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/41372/no-such-attacks-on-churches-cardinal-ranjith>, last accessed November 2017.

particular increased more noticeably. The situation for converts (from Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu background) became more difficult in the *Private sphere*, and all Christians (especially non-Catholics) experienced more difficulties in the *National sphere*. When a Roman Catholic cardinal stated publicly on TV that there was no persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka, he was basically branding Protestants as liars or non-Christians. (For more details see under “Persecution engines”.)

Persecution engines

| Persecution engines in Sri Lanka ¹⁰ | Level of influence |
|--|--------------------|
| Islamic oppression | Weak |
| Religious nationalism | Very strong |
| Ethnic antagonism | Not at all |
| Denominational protectionism | Medium |
| Communist and post-Communist oppression | Not at all |
| Secular intolerance | Not at all |
| Dictatorial paranoia | Weak |
| Organized corruption and crime | Not at all |

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

The Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka is a secular state. However, its Constitution puts Buddhism first and evidently regards Buddhism as the state religion. Chapter 2 of the Constitution states that the “Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana (Buddhist teachings), while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e).” This provision in Article 9 is left [unchanged](#)¹¹ in the new draft Constitution. These rights concerning freedom of religion and belief granted in Articles 10 and 14 can be limited, however, and this is done in subtle ways as will be shown below in Section 5: Spheres of life and violence.

Buddhist supremacy is still a concept widely shared in the country. Every Sinhalese is considered to be a Buddhist, so not only Tamil Christians are treated as second-class citizens, but also Sinhalese Christians are looked at with suspicion and frequently slandered and attacked. Perpetrators are not only state authorities, as the telling name “Ministry for Religious Affairs and Buddhist Sasana” indicates, but also Buddhist monks and local authorities. Radical Buddhist groups, namely the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, translated as Buddhist Force Army) and the *Sinhala Ravaya* (SR), are led by Buddhist monks and these are known to stir up mobs for attacking the Muslim minority and Christians as well. Although they are not as present as they used to be before the government changed in January 2015, their influence is vividly felt and attacks on Christian churches continue at the same level. Buddhist supremacy is still very much felt in the daily lives of religious minorities like Muslims and Christians, but it is no longer the BBS or SR in the driving seat.

¹⁰ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

¹¹ See: <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/new-constitution-state-religion-buddhism/>, last accessed 7 December 2016.

Denominational protectionism (Medium):

It may be surprising to see a new Persecution engine enter the stage for Sri Lanka. In June 2017 the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Ranjith, publicly claimed that there had been [no attacks or forced church closures](#)¹² in the country. It would seem that he only sees Catholics as Christians. This sentiment was echoed a few days later by the country's Minister of Justice: He too [equated](#)¹³ Christianity simply with Roman Catholicism, consequently excluding Protestant denominations and thus concluding that there have been no attacks against Christians in Sri Lanka. This completely neglects the well-documented entries in the [database on violent incidents](#)¹⁴ managed by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). For January-October 2017 alone, it documented 43 cases.

Drivers of persecution

| Drivers of persecution in Sri Lanka | Level of influence |
|---|--------------------|
| Government officials at any level from local to national | Very strong |
| Ethnic group leaders | Very strong |
| Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national | Very strong |
| Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national | Medium |
| Violent religious groups | Strong |
| Ideological pressure groups | Not at all |
| Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs | Strong |
| Own (extended) family | Very strong |
| Political parties at any level from local to national | Strong |
| Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups | Not at all |
| Organized crime cartels or networks | Not at all |
| Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies | Not at all |

The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements and government officials, frequently on the local level. Although the election of a new government in 2015 led to a reduction in the activities of the BBS, other movements such as SR gained strength. They claim Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation and recently had a widespread sticker-campaign promoting this ideology. BBS transformed itself into a political party, but has not been particularly influential in the political arena. Family members together with village officials in rural areas have often abused Christian converts verbally and asked them to leave their villages. Political parties tend to join calls for the protection of the country's Buddhist heritage since this gains votes.

¹² See: <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/41372/no-such-attacks-on-churches-cardinal-ranjith>, last accessed 29 November 2017.

¹³ See: <http://srilankabrief.org/2017/06/open-letter-to-justice-minister-sri-lanka-you-seem-to-be-ignorant-about-the-definition-of-a-christian/>, last accessed 29 November 2017.

¹⁴ See: <https://slchurchattacks.crowdmap.com/>, last accessed 29 November 2017.

Context

To understand Sri Lankan Buddhism it is helpful to understand the traditional Sri Lankan triangle: Sinhalese life has three points of reference, namely the temple, the village and the lake (meaning irrigation and farming). Nothing else should enter this triangle; therefore anything from the outside is viewed with suspicion. Sri Lankan Buddhist groups are therefore not so concerned with the philosophical themes of Buddhism so popular in the West, but rather with the fight to preserve this traditional triangle. All the actions of BBS and SR can in fact be seen as attempts at fending off attacks against this view of society. Even violent clashes and riots against the Muslim minority (as occurred in 2014 and on a lower scale in May 2017) and attacks against Christians can be explained by this wish to preserve the triangle. Muslim and Christian minorities are perceived as a threat. This was shown by another incident in May 2017 as well: In a speech aimed at the Minister for National Co-existence, leading BBS monk, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasera Thero, criticized the presence of “[Christian missionaries](#)”¹⁵, effectively declaring them to be legitimate targets.

Over the last years, Sri Lanka had been affected by two persecution engines, one being *Religious nationalism*, the other *Dictatorial paranoia*. Sri Lanka has a 26 year civil war history which came to a bloody conclusion only in 2009. In Sri Lanka’s civil war the predominantly Hindu minority of Tamils, mainly based in the northern and eastern provinces of the country, fought for independence. The “Tamil Tigers” (or LTTE) gained prominence around the world. Both government forces and LTTE committed war crimes and one of the main challenges now is how best to deal with this fact. Reconciliation, either through purely domestic means or with international help, is still far off.

Another major question connected to this issue is the de-militarization of the country. Due to the long civil war and the ever-increasing business activities of the army, the armed forces currently consist of around 300,000 soldiers. It will be difficult to re-integrate these soldiers into civilian life - and most likely some parts of the army will not want to lose lucrative opportunities, especially if they might face an investigation into war crimes.

Finally, there is the question of how radical Buddhist groups like BBS and SR will act in the future. They seemed to emerge from nowhere and grew in a very short time (BBS held its first national convention in July 2012). And while most of their leaders were naturally already known and even politically active earlier, the groups’ influence and radicalism against religious minorities was unprecedented. Their actions went unchecked, so that the claim that those groups were at least tacitly supported by the former government, especially by the minister of defense, has gained credibility. The fact that the leading BBS monk mentioned above was [released on bail](#)¹⁶ in June 2017 (even though the charges of inciting religious hatred and of hate-speech against the Muslim minority were crystal clear) is a worrying signal for Sri Lanka’s religious minorities. The court case against him has been postponed several times and is making very slow progress.

¹⁵ See: <http://srilankabrief.org/2017/05/govt-silent-as-bbs-continues-its-holy-war/>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gnanasara-released-on-bail-warrant-cancelled/>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

As already stated, Buddhist nationalist monks campaign strongly not just against Christians but also against the country's Muslim minority. Violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims occurred in the southern province of Galle in November 2017 and showed that the serious violence of 2014 could be repeated in the months to come.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Communities of expatriate or migrant Christians are not counted here as a separate category since these Christians integrate into other churches.

Historical Christian communities:

These are groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and the eight denominations belonging to the [National Christian Council](#)¹⁷. They face less persecution or violence, but are affected by the overall atmosphere of Buddhist supremacy and are being hindered in constructing church buildings at times.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

These are communities of Christians coming from a Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu background. They face frequent hostilities and also violent attacks. New converts are most often seen as traitors and are consequently harassed, subjected to physical and verbal assaults and to continued isolation by their local communities. This occurs mainly in rural villages and had in the past only been significantly visible in the southern and north central provinces of the country. However, with the end of the civil war, this trend has spread to the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka as well.

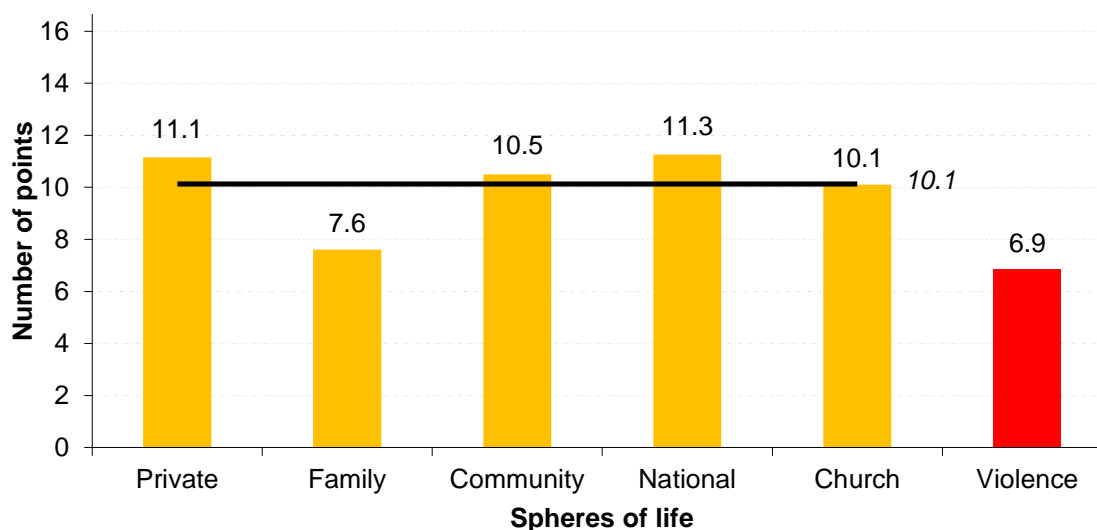
Non-traditional Christian communities:

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations are often affected by violent attacks but the perpetrators have changed since the last elections. While previously most attacks were carried out by the main Buddhist radical groups, now attacks are mainly led by village Buddhist monks and local government officials who impose legal restrictions on Christians or cover up violent incidents against them. While the persecution engine drivers have changed, the ground level situation remains by and large the same.

¹⁷ See: <http://nccsl.org/web/member-churches/>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Pressure is strongest in the *Community, National* and *Private spheres of life*. While pressure in the *National sphere* is typical for countries affected by the Persecution engine *Religious nationalism*, pressure in the *Private* and *Community spheres* points to difficulties faced by Christian converts from other religions. The *Church sphere* shows a high level of pressure as well, reflecting numerous incidents where mobs (frequently led by Buddhist monks) turned up in front of churches, often supported by local officials, disturbing services and demanding that churches be closed down.
- Violence against Christians remained stable, increasing only from 6.7 in WWL 2017 to 6.9 in WWL 2018. Churches and premises of pastors have been attacked. There were also reports of Christians being physically assaulted and two pastors had to leave their villages and go into hiding for some time.

Private sphere:

Converts from a Buddhist background experience opposition from their family and relatives. Even other people from the community oppose them when someone converts to Christianity in their area. Christians from a Muslim or Hindu background also experience this sort of opposition. Therefore, even worshipping by themselves in private poses a risk to converts and many fear hostility from their families. Owning Christian materials can be dangerous for Christians living with non-Christian family members, especially if they are living in areas where Buddhists are very protective towards spreading their religion. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, social media platforms have become the radical Buddhists' new tool for persecuting Christians. When Buddhist groups made attacks they would often capture the Christians on video and upload the clips to Facebook. They portrayed their attacks as implementing justice; Christians and pastors are portrayed as traitors, out to undermine the country's Buddhist

heritage. Pastors who have been targeted in this way now find it almost impossible to post anything online or express their faith in any written form due to fear/intimidation. It is risky for converts to talk to others about their new faith, especially for converts from Islam, and meetings of converts (and of other Christians too) face the risk of disruptions. Villagers, police authorities and local Buddhist monks monitor the activities of Christians in their villages in order to know when to incite attacks against them or to find faults that they can accuse them of.

Family sphere:

Evangelical and Independent churches are being denied the possibility of registering weddings within their church buildings - which is a facility traditionally allowed in churches in Sri Lanka. Converts are facing discrimination and harassment, but are usually not put under pressure to divorce, and registration questions or the change of religion in an ID card or passport are no problem either. This is why the score for this *Sphere of life* is comparably low. Adult baptisms face opposition, especially if they are held publically. In rural areas, Christians are not allowed to be buried in the public cemetery. Christian burial rites have been denied by Buddhist monks, Hindu villagers and even by government officials in the WWL 2018 reporting period (including Divisional secretaries and police officers). Christian children enrolled into state schools have been routinely forced to observe Buddhist or Hindu rituals. Christian children have also been punished by teachers and principals, and in some instances even fined, when majority religion rituals were not observed. At school, religion is a compulsory subject. Although it is allowed to study one's own religion, the lack of Christian teachers forces Christian children most of the time to study Buddhism instead, resulting in harassment, bullying and bad marks. In one case, a head-teacher not only denied a Protestant pupil admission to his school, but also advised the parents to keep the child at home, even though the parents said there was no other state school near their village.

Community sphere:

As already noted, the strongest pressure in the WWL 2018 reporting period has not come from the main radical Buddhist groups, but from local Buddhist monks. (These are of course influenced by the ideology of the radical groups and want to protect the purity of their local Buddhist triangle - see Section 3: Context.) In areas where Hindus and Buddhists are the majority, Christians often become targets for intimidation and forms of social exclusion, frequently being denied access (or only being given delayed access) to community resources such as wells and electricity. During Hindu festivals, Hindus ostracize Christians for not participating in the activities. Christians are frequently monitored and obstructed by villagers and at times even violently attacked. During the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were several incidents where villagers, Buddhist monks, or neighbors complained to the police or local government officials about the activities of pastors and churches in rural villages. Most often, police officials would then keep visiting the church for a period of time or keep questioning the pastors about their activities. Pressure to renounce the Christian faith is frequent and at times businesses run by Christians become targeted for customer boycotts. During the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were incidents where government officials denied pastors water and electricity supplies solely based on the fact that they were

Christians. Christian schoolchildren have been refused enrollment in state schools, despite fulfilling all requirements.

National sphere:

Even though the government, which was elected in January 2015, does not support the radical Buddhist groups openly any more, the level of pressure on Christians in this *Sphere of life* remains substantial, especially as the government is leaning towards supporting Buddhism again. Buddhism is given religious supremacy in the new draft Constitution, and the very few Christians who are in government positions (or work with the government) experience discrimination from nationalists. Christians are portrayed negatively in the media. In July 2017, Christian lawyer Lakshan Dias, who offers legal support for Christians, clearly stated in a television talk-show that persecution against Christians still exists in the country. This led to severe statements being issued by the Minister of Buddha Sasana and the president (as well as several other radical Buddhist groups): All claimed that Lakshan Dias and the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of **Sri Lanka (NCEASL)** were traitors and had tarnished the name of the country (see “Denominational protectionism” above).

Perpetrators against Christians are left unpunished. There is a common pattern prior to violent attacks: the attacker releases false accusation to the media (e.g. a pastor is making forced conversions) which in turn justifies the attack. Perpetrators are left unpunished and, in most cases, Christians are pressed to solve court cases amicably. On a positive note, pastors dare to file cases and call on their constitutional freedoms.

Church sphere:

Mobs, monks, villagers, police and local authorities continue to interrupt the gatherings of Christians, question the legality of their activities, and take these cases to the higher authorities. Often Christian residents in the village will be asked to stop all their activities and/or to leave the village. Registration is often used as leverage against Christian churches. A 2008 circular issued by the “Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs” is still being implemented. It requires religious communities to register houses of worship and demands registration for advance approval of any new construction. Even though this circular has no legal force and would apply only to churches opened after 2008, local authorities, Buddhist monks and mobs use it to justify their at times very violent actions against Christians. In the current situation, even if pastors complain against the use of this circular, local authorities and courts do not listen to them. Generally, it remains very difficult to construct or renovate a church building in rural areas as it disturbs the Sri Lankan triangle described under the section “Context” above.

Violence:

From January-October 2017 there were a series of at least 43 [attacks](#)¹⁸ against [churches](#)¹⁹ (partly with the participation of government officials) and some included physical violence against persons. For the full WWL 2018 reporting period, NCEASL recorded 65 incidents.

¹⁸ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/01/sri-lankan-church-lives-on-despite-destroyed-building-and-death-threats-from-buddhist-monk/>, last accessed 29 November 2017.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/sri-lanka-20-attacks-christians-year/>, last accessed 29 November 2017.

Details can be found in the NCEASL database (see footnote 5). At least 17 Christians suffered physical attacks and at least five houses of pastors were destroyed or damaged. During the WWL 2018 reporting period, two pastors and their families were forced to leave their homes and go into hiding. There are other recorded incidents of pastors and Christians being ordered (or advised) to leave their home-towns or villages if they wanted to continue their Christian activities.

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male: No data currently available.

Future outlook

Although it looks increasingly unlikely, Sri Lanka still has the potential to become one of the positive stories in the World Watch List. If the government finally takes steps to include religious minorities (Muslims and Christians) in its policies and wins the power to act decisively against everyone inciting religious hatred, the situation may improve. Christians are one of the very few social groups which are cutting across the island's huge ethnic divide and many Protestant churches do have both Sinhalese and Tamil members. This is a unique opportunity for building bridges and serving as a role model. But ethnic tensions can and sometimes do hamper churches as well.

National reconciliation remains one of the country's biggest challenges. Given that most social networks are based on religious as well as on ethnic affiliation, the challenge is a big one as ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust and find a way ahead. And it is not clear who can lead this process. The policy of Buddhist supremacy has not been particularly helpful in this respect.

For the time being, *Religious nationalism* will play an important role not just in Sri Lanka's politics, but in society and families as well. The government promised as recently as 17 November 2017 that it is [committed to supporting](#)²⁰ the Buddhist values of Buddha Sasana. The fact that the country relies heavily on China as one important part of the latter's "One Belt, One Road" project (illustrated for instance in July 2017 by China's [investment](#)²¹ in the commercial redevelopment of Hambantota port), means that human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, are likely to take a backseat in the country's future politics.

Policy considerations

Currently under review.

²⁰ See: http://www.eurasiareview.com/19112017-sri-lanka-sirisena-says-govt-committed-to-develop-buddha-sasana/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+eurasiareview%2FVsnE+%28Eurasia+Review%29, last accessed 29 November 2017.

²¹ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40761732>, last accessed 20 September 2017.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Sri Lanka available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Sri Lanka available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/sri-lanka/>

- [Sri Lanka: Over 20 attacks on Christians this year](#)
13 June 2017
There have been over 20 violent incidents against Christians so far this year, according to the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka.
- [Sri Lankan church lives on, despite destroyed building and death threats from Buddhist monk](#)
16 January 2017
The leader of a Sri Lankan church destroyed by a mob earlier this month has vowed that the church will continue to meet.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=sri+lanka> (password: freedom).

- [Sri Lanka: Buddhist mobs attack homes in Kandy](#)
20 April 2018
The Muslim minority in Sri Lanka was again targeted by violent Buddhist mobs at the beginning of March.
- [Sri Lanka: Former president eager to return to power](#)
14 March 2018
The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), former President Rajapaksa's newly formed party, enjoyed a landslide victory in Sri Lanka's recent local elections.

- [Sri Lanka: Radical Buddhist mind-set is the norm](#)
4 August 2017
A radical Buddhist monk from the organization Bodu Bala Sena has been released on bail. The initial charges levelled against him were for inciting racial hatred and for hate speech against the Muslim community.
- [Sri Lanka: Bodu Bala Sena raises its ugly head again](#)
1 June 2017
The radical Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) has sprung back into action, having been suspiciously silent since national elections in January 2015. In recent weeks, mosques and shops owned by Muslims have been attacked.

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