

World
Watch
Research

Sri Lanka: Full Country Dossier

February 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Sri Lanka

Brief country details

Sri Lanka: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
21,576,000	2,010,000	9.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	57	62
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30
WWL 2019	58	46

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Sri Lanka: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Religious nationalism	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups, Political parties

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Converts from a Buddhist or Hindu background face the strongest persecution. They are subject to harassment, discrimination and marginalization by family and community. They are put under pressure to recant Christianity as 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, all are expected to be Hindu, except for those belonging to Historical Christian communities. The Christian minority is partly tolerated (especially Christians from the Historical Christian communities) but converts to Christianity are not. Additionally, non-traditional churches are frequently targeted by the surrounding local community, often stirred up 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. Reports of such incidents come from all over the island.

This longstanding persecution pattern was shattered when on Easter Sunday 2019 there were major attacks carried out by a little-known radical Islamic group. The suicide attacks targeted three Christian churches and three international hotels, claiming 269 lives, most of them Christians. The slow and politically fraught investigation process into the responsibilities for the Easter 2019 attacks has caused fresh hurt among the Christian minority, especially relatives of the victims. A [trial](#) against some of the perpetrators started in November 2021 (Reuters, 23 No-

vember 2021). In January 2023, the Supreme Court held former President Maithripala Sirisena and senior security officials responsible and ordered them to [pay compensation](#) in a civil case brought by families of the 2019 bomb-ing victims (Reuters, 13 January 2023).

While the Rajapaksa family at least formally lost its hold of power, with a dire economic situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Dictatorial paranoia and Buddhist supremacy have once again grown in strength. The devastating economic and social situation (see below) led to a public opposition movement involving all strands of society, including ethnic and religious minorities. So far, it seems that the political turmoil has not resulted in any changes in the persecution situation for Christians.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

27 July 2022: Father Amila Jeewantha Peiris from Ratnapura (Sabaragamuwa province), one of the key figures of the antigovernment protests, was [charged](#) with "unlawful assembly and damage to public property" during a protest rally in June 2022 and his church searched (UCA News, 29 July 2022). He was detained and [released on bail](#) shortly afterwards (UCA News, 12 August 2022).

6 March 2022: A mob of about 600 people, including 60 monks, entered the Mercy Gate Chapel in Amalgama (Galle District) and demanded all worship activities to be stopped and the church to be [shut down immediately](#). One Christian was assaulted and hospitalized overnight. The police were able to defuse the immediate situation and the pastor filed a report with the authorities (NCEASL, Urgent release report, 6 March 2022).

6 February 2022: When the pastor of Gethsemane Gospel Church in Bulathsinhala (Kalutara District) attended the birthday party of a congregant with his wife, child and another church member, they were [surrounded](#) by 60 villagers, including three Buddhist monks, demanding information about whether he had been involved in carrying out forced conversions (NCEASL, Incident Report, February 2022, 16 March 2022).

14 December 2021: The Gethsemane Gospel Church in Kurumanveli (Batticaloa District) was [vandalized](#) by unknown perpetrators. They cut the electricity lines, broke the water meter and the fuse box, broke locks and filled the bathroom with cement. A police report has been filed (NCEASL, Incident Report December 2021, 11 January 2022).

Specific examples of positive developments

The Supreme Court's order to former President Sirisena to pay compensation to the families of 2019 Easter bombing victims (see above: *Brief description of the persecution situation*) can be seen as a positive development, although it remains to be seen if and how the order will be implemented.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: trial - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-begins-trial-25-accused-plotting-2019-easter-bombings-2021-11-23/>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: pay compensation - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-catholic-church-hails-supreme-court-order-ex-president-over-bombings-2023-01-13/>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: charged - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/police-hunt-for-sri-lankan-priest-deplored/98217>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: released on bail - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-catholic-priest-surrenders-gets-bail/98378>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: shut down immediately - <https://mailchi.mp/d6c07455ba65/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-15329784>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: surrounded - <https://mailchi.mp/d6c07455ba65/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-15329784>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: vandalized - <https://mailchi.mp/ebc871650074/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-10599133>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Sri Lanka

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 344-347)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	24 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611	24 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/LKA	24 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/	24 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/sri-lanka	24 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.40)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	24 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	23 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Sri Lanka not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-world/2022	24 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2022	15 February 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/sri-lanka	24 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#lk	24 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka	24 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/lka	24 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/LKA	24 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/	24 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Sri Lanka not included	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/overview	24 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=LKA	24 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp. 16-17)	https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook	24 June 2022

Recent history

The country has a long and violent history of religious and ethnic conflict. The 26 year long civil war only ended in 2009. Although Sri Lanka is not alien to political turmoil, what happened in the WWL 2023 reporting period was exceptional (see below: Political landscape and Trends analysis).

Sri Lanka has not made any tangible progress in terms of national reconciliation, which is so much needed after a generation-long civil war. Given that most networks in society are based on religious as well as ethnic affiliation, the challenge is immense, since ethnic and religious groups need to overcome their mistrust of each other. However, it is far from certain who can lead this process. With the political turmoil, which brought people from all ethnic and religious groups of Sri Lanka together, a somewhat open situation developed and there were high hopes for a more inclusive form of government. However, developments towards the end of 2022 have dampened these hopes.

Christians are still affected by the Easter 2019 attacks and although official investigations uncovered some shortcomings and intelligence failures, there is a feeling that the attacks have been used to serve political ends rather than improve the situation for Christian minorities. More than two years after the attacks, there are still more questions than answers, leading Cardinal Ranjith to threaten to [call for an international inquiry](#) if there is no progress at the domestic level (Daily Mirror LK, 11 February 2021).

Political and legal landscape

While politics and society in Sri Lanka have been in an uproar since 2018 (see [Full Country Dossier, February 2022, pp.8-9](#)), the WWL 2023 reporting period saw unprecedented changes and challenges. Sri Lanka is facing its most dire economic situation since gaining independence in 1948. This initially led to large-scale, antigovernment demonstrations and an unprecedented [ministerial reshuffle](#) involving some members of the Rajapaksa family (Reuters, 4 April 2022). While the crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic, its roots predate the emergence of COVID-19. The government has sought financial help from the IMF and also from China and India, but assistance cannot be expected to materialize quickly nor at the levels needed to keep the debt-laden country afloat. The average Sri Lankan is facing shortages of literally everything and has to queue for long hours in the hope of getting even the most basic of supplies. In response to the protests, which included demonstrations in front of the private home of the president (and of Rajapaksa children living abroad), the government imposed an island-wide curfew in May 2022.

The new Finance Minister, Ali Sabry, [resigned](#) less than 24 hours after being appointed in the government reshuffle mentioned above (although he later revoked his resignation) and 41 lawmakers abandoned the governing coalition. This left the government without a majority. The news that the government had also closed a number of the country's embassies abroad is yet another illustration of just how dire the economic situation has become (Reuters, 5 April 2022). The protests "morphed into a nationwide [uprising](#)" bridging existing gaps between different ethnic and religious groups in the face of the political turmoil (International Crisis Group, 18 April 2022).

Finally, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa heeded week-long demands by protesters and tendered his [resignation](#) on 9 May 2022, stating that he was "quitting to help form an interim, unity government" (Reuters, 10 May 2022). Ranil Wickremesinghe was re-appointed as prime minister just three days later in an effort to bring stability. He has already served five times in this top position. However, the protesters were not satisfied with this replacement and continued to protest and demand that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigns as well. Months of protests with cries of "GotaGoGama" protests ensued. Finally, on 12 July 2022, President Rajapaksa [fled the country](#), first to the Maldives (Reuters, 12 July 2022), then to Singapore, where he resigned from his presidency, and then on to Thailand. He [returned](#) to Sri Lanka on 2 September 2022 (Channel News Asia, 3 September 2022) and was greeted by party members and several ministers of the government.

On 15 July 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as acting president and elected by the parliament on 20 July and a few days later, Dinesh Gunewardena was appointed new [prime minister](#) (Reuters, 22 July 2022). In August 2022, the state of emergency was lifted as the political

protests tailed off (Reuters, 16 August 2022). Authorities [continued to act](#) against the leaders of the mostly peaceful protests (The Diplomat, 3 November 2022), but the government's focus was on the dire economic and social situation of Sri Lanka.

Held against the background of the August 2020 election results, a mere two years ago, the speed of this political development is quite breathtaking. Back in August 2020, the Rajapaksa family won a landslide victory with almost 60% of the votes and subsequently amended the Constitution with the help of some smaller allied parties. [Four members](#) of the Rajapaksa family made it into the cabinet (consisting of 26 members), with Namal Rajapaksa, son of Prime Minister Mahinda, already representing the next generation (Al-Jazeera, 12 August 2020). Through this victory, the Rajapaksas [directly controlled](#) 126 of 434 government departments and entities, which is a stunning 29% (Financial Times LK, 22 August 2020). With Basil Rajapaksa, who took over the finance ministry from his brother Mahinda in July 2021, the family had [five ministers and several junior ministers](#) out of a total of 28 ministers in the cabinet (Channel News Asia, 8 July 2021). As of August 2022, no member of the Rajapaksa family holds executive power in Sri Lanka. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have lost all political power, especially as President Wickremesinghe is regarded as being in close contact with them (see below: Trends analysis).

While the pushing through of the 20th constitutional amendment led to a stronger emphasis on Religious nationalism and Dictatorial paranoia (see below: Trends analysis), the [21st amendment](#), voted into force in June 2022, effectively re-instated the parliament's superior empowerment over a president still holding considerable executive powers (The Quint, 21 June 2022). The 22nd amendment, approved in October 2022, showed according to observers the [weakening grip](#) of the Rajapaksa family on Sri Lankan politics (The Diplomat, 26 October 2022). At the same time, it confirmed the strong presidential position, leading Cardinal Ranjith to warn that it could be used to [punish the government's critics](#) (UCA News, 4 November 2022). No matter which government and under what changing constitutional powers, the main task for the nation's leaders is to find a way of dealing with the financial, economic and social crisis (as described below).

Gender perspective

Although Sri Lanka has made progress towards achieving gender equality, structural barriers and societal norms continue to discriminate against women and girls, particularly in the context of marriage (OECD, 2019). In response to the government's agreement to revise the 1951 [Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act](#), activists are calling for – among other things – the minimum age of marriage to be raised to 18 (without exception) and for women to be able to marry without their guardian's permission (HRW 2021 country chapter). 12% of girls are currently married before the age of 18, according to [Girls Not Brides](#) (accessed 15 February 2023). Whilst Sri Lanka has made positive steps to address the protection of women, sexual violence is prevalent across the country and the justice system is reportedly inadequate ([Report of the UN Secretary General, 3 June 2020, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence"](#) p.42). These legal gaps can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution, particularly against minorities like Christian women and girls.

Religious landscape

Sri Lanka: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,010,000	9.3
Muslim	1,964,000	9.1
Hindu	2,799,000	13.0
Buddhist	14,650,000	67.9
Ethno-religionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	84	0.0
Bahai	18,100	0.1
Atheist	17,400	0.1
Agnostic	108,000	0.5
Other	7,790	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Due to the history of civil war in Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has thrived. Radical Buddhist groups have sprouted up across the country and were used by previous governments as a means of keeping religious minorities in check. Under the Rajapaksa government, it was feared they may see a revival. The main target for radical Buddhists has always been the Muslim minority which is regarded as a particular threat if Islamic radicalization should occur. A rise in violence in 2014 led to the killing of many Muslims, and violence flared up again in March 2018 in Kandy when several businesses owned by Muslims were destroyed by Buddhist radicals.

Christians have also been facing attacks by local groups, frequently led by saffron-robed Buddhist monks:

- In the WWL 2022 reporting period, which saw far-reaching COVID-19 restrictions, more than 80 attacks and incidents of harassment at different levels were recorded. Radical Buddhists used the Easter Sunday attack against Christians by Islamic militants in April 2019 as a pretext for [attacking the Muslim minority](#) (The New Humanitarian, 16 May 2019). Country observers were surprised by President Sirisena's dangerous move when - only a month later - he pardoned [hardline Buddhist monk](#) Gnanasera Thera, head of the radical Bodu Bala Sena in May 2019 (Reuters, 23 May 2019). By giving him a pardon, the Sri Lankan government was effectively allowing him to dictate to them what should be viewed as 'extremism' in society. The fact that President Rajapaksa let this monk head the presidential task force aiming to unite the country (see below: *Trends analysis*) shows how heavily

this government is leaning towards Religious nationalism and Dictatorial paranoia. Buddhist monks also played a significant role in helping the Rajapaksas come back into power at the 2020 elections.

- In the WWL 2023 reporting period, it was too early to judge just how much influence was lost by radical monks through the political upheavals of 2022:
 - On the one hand, the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka caused many people to speak out against the Rajapaksas and those associated with them. Because of this, the influence of Buddhist monks was affected and even online posts from monks were quickly dismissed by many people. At the same time, many Buddhist clerics spoke out against the dismal conduct of the government and criticized the levels of state violence against mostly peaceful protestors.
 - On the other hand, there were persistent reports throughout the WWL 2023 reporting period that monks led mobs of villagers to demand the closing of churches and at times led attacks on them, even though these reports were less frequent than in previous years.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 12.707
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 3%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 14.3%. 4.1% of the people are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** These make up 8% of the total GDP.

According to the World Bank country profile:

- Sri Lanka has the status of an lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2017 international USD):** 13.387
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 2.2%
- **Inflation:** In June 2022, inflation reached 54.6% and was predicted to be rising.
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 17% (2016). Economic growth has translated into shared prosperity with the national poverty headcount ratio declining from 15.3% in 2006/07 to 4.1% in 2016. Extreme poverty is rare and concentrated in some geographical pockets; however, a relatively large share of the population subsists on a level only just over the poverty line.

The World Bank summarized in its country overview (6 October 2022): "Sri Lanka's real GDP is expected to fall by 9.2 percent in 2022 and a further 4.2 percent in 2023. The fluid political situation and heightened fiscal, external and financial sector imbalances pose significant uncertainty for Sri Lanka's economic outlook. The growth outlook is subject to high uncertainty and will depend on the progress in fiscal consolidation, debt restructuring, and growth enhancing structural reforms. Despite tightened monetary policy, inflation will likely stay elevated." Sri Lanka is in negotiations with the IMF for a help program, but it needs its largest debtors to support these efforts. In January 2023, China offered a debt moratorium to the

country, which was reportedly less than Sri Lanka had hoped for and at the time of finalizing this dossier, it was not clear whether this is sufficient according to [IMF standards](#) (Reuters, 25 January 2023).

One of Sri Lanka's most important industries - tourism - took a further battering in the WWL 2023 reporting period. Tourist resorts employ thousands of people and because of the pristine beaches and the natural beauty of Sri Lanka, the country gets a good share of the growing worldwide tourist industry. However, the April 2019 attacks had already caused a devastating economic impact; it was no coincidence that international hotels were targeted. The Islamic suicide bombers did not just want to kill Christians and others who were eating before heading off to Easter celebrations, they also wanted to damage the whole tourist industry. Usually, tourism generates significant levels of revenue (in 2018, the last full 'normal' year, according to one local source, [4.4 billion USD](#)) and creates many jobs, also for less qualified citizens (Daily FT, 10 May 2019). The decline has been most evident in the services sector: While it still contributed 61% of the country's total GDP, it employed 45.7% of the workforce, a decline of more than 10%.

Sri Lanka "[temporarily suspended](#)" foreign debt payment in April 2022 (Reuters, 12 April 2022), echoing the warning of observers which had been reported in [WWR's February 2022 Full Country Dossier](#), p.11-12: "with a background of debts reaching 102.5% of the national GDP in August 2020 (109.7% as per World Bank in April 2021), "[denial is not a strategy](#)" (Financial Times LK, 11 December 2020). China gave a helping hand with a 500 million USD [emergency loan](#) in April 2021 (Channel News Asia, 12 April 2021) and agreed to a [currency swap](#) of 1.5 billion USD in March 2021 (Bloomberg, 22 March 2021)." However, this turned out to be a short-lived respite in a dire economic situation. [Observers say](#) that several Sri Lankan governments weakened the country's public finances, the latest being the Rajapaksa government with deep tax cuts when it took office in 2019. A second reason has of course been the COVID-19 crisis, which strapped Sri Lanka of much needed revenue, and a falling international credit rating made it next to impossible to get loans. Instead, the government depleted the country's foreign currency reserves, resulting in long queues at petrol stations, frequent blackouts and shortages of basic supplies, e.g. medicines (Reuters, 13 July 2022).

A [World Bank press release](#) published on 28 July 2022 stated that it was freeing up 160 million USD for immediate relief, e.g. for supplies in medicines, cooking gas, fertilizer, meals for school children and the poor, but that it would not offer Sri Lanka any new financing until an adequate macro-economic framework has been put in place. This requires, it said, "deep structural reforms that focus on economic stabilization, and also on addressing the root structural causes that created this crisis to ensure that Sri Lanka's future recovery and development is resilient and inclusive." An article in Asia Foundation [summed up](#) the country's situation as follows: "Its economic decline is a cautionary tale of short-sighted policies and weak management of public finances. Rather than being a victim of predatory lending practices, Sri Lanka is a victim of its own crumbling and politicized institutional foundations" (Asia Foundation, 13 April 2022).

As many Christians are working in the hospitality sector and - especially in rural areas - in the agricultural sector, they are struggling with the economic decline as well, but for them, a proper investigation of the April 2019 attacks and a discussion about their rightful place in society is still

very important and would be a positive signal for all minorities. During the waves of demonstrations, Christian leaders, especially the country's Catholic bishops, but also priests and nuns, did not mince words in criticizing the government and [siding with](#) the protesting people (UCA News, 1 April 2022).

Gender perspective

Despite improvements over the last decades in relation to girls' access to education ([Borgen Project, 2018](#)), women and girls remain economically disadvantaged. This is primarily due to patrilineal inheritance practices, reduced employment opportunities and a lack of legal protection of women's land rights ([The Diplomat, March 2021](#); HDI profile - Work Employment and Vulnerability). Denial of inheritance has been used to punish female converts to Christianity, throwing them into economic uncertainty. Male converts on the other hand are more likely to experience persecution in the workplace or lose their job.

Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile and the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%, Indian Tamil 4.2%, other 0.5% (2012 est.)
- **Main languages:** Sinhala (official and national language) 87%, Tamil (official and national language) 28.5%, English 23.8% (2012 est.)
- **Urbanization rate:** 19.2%
- **Literacy rate:** 92.3% (population of 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 10.6 years
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Sri Lanka has 10 physicians and 42 hospital beds; the pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Population/Age distribution:** 23% of the population are below the age of 14, 11.2% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 98% (2020), the primary school enrollment rate is 100.2%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 5.4%, the rate of vulnerable employment stands at 39% (modeled ILO estimate)

According to the [International Organization for Migration](#) (accessed 24 August 2022):

- **IDPs/Refugees:** Migration from Sri Lanka has always been stronger than migration to Sri Lanka, hence the negative net migration rate of -3.6. There are Christians among the Pakistani refugees in Sri Lanka.

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Sri Lanka scores 0.782 points and ranks 72nd among 189 countries.
- **Life expectancy:** 76 years
- **Median age:** 34 years
- **Gini coefficient:** 39.8
- **Gender inequality:** On the Gender Inequality Index, Sri Lanka scores 0.401 points and ranks 90th of 126 countries
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 5.4%, a further 39% are in vulnerable employment, youth (between 15 and 24) not in school or employment is 30.3%.

In the dire economic situation, social challenges abound, especially in the rural and war-torn northern and north-eastern Tamil areas and for the most vulnerable strata of society. According to the World Bank overview mentioned above, the poverty ratio is projected to stay above 25% over the next years. Inflation has reached unprecedented levels, as the World Bank stated: "Year-on-year inflation reached an unprecedented 64.3 percent in August 2022, due largely to high food inflation of 93.7 percent. This reflects the impact of rising global commodity prices, monetization of the fiscal deficit and currency depreciation." The reported 30.3% of youth unemployment and 39% of vulnerable employment seem to come closer to reality and those percentages will have since risen due to the deepening crisis in the country. While migration has always been at a high level, COVID-19 led to a temporary reversed trend, as many migrant workers returned to Sri Lanka. This increased the economic and social pressure in the country.

Christians, especially in the rural areas, struggle with vulnerable or no employment, but another issue for them (as for other ethnic and religious minorities) is to have [their voice heard](#) in a very dominant Sinhala and Buddhist society (International-LaCroix, 2 July 2020). Another sign for more restrictions in society is that the government's [NGO office](#) has been put under the Ministry of Defense by the Rajapaksa government, so human rights and minority concerns clearly take a backseat (RSIS, 11 August 2020).

Gender perspective

Whilst Sri Lanka has deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, the civil war left many women as widows and heads of households. As of 2017, one in four households was female-headed, although these women reportedly face societal pressures and ongoing challenges in accessing government programs and in owning property ([OECD, 2019](#)). The Muslim population is estimated to be 9.3% (WCD 2022): Under Sharia law, it is considered that a wife belongs to her husband's patriarchal family. Within this male-dominated, Islamic context, women continue to assume subservient positions to men. Domestic violence is reportedly widespread, having increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is a known means of punishing female converts ([Colombo Telegraph, 12 March 2021](#)).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 41.2% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 41.2% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 139 per 100 people

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022:

- "Internet freedom in Sri Lanka declined during the coverage period as the government sought to repress historic protests. Prompted by government mismanagement of an economic crisis, Sri Lankans began mobilizing in March 2022, including on social media. The protests coalesced into the *Aragalaya* (Struggle), a countrywide mobilization calling for reforms to the country's political culture. In response to the protests, authorities briefly blocked social media platforms, arrested online activists and journalists reporting on the movement, and passed new criminal penalties to bar purportedly false information. Despite these restrictions, Sri Lankans continued to engage in digital activism around a broad range of issues."
- The country is seen as "Partly Free", with a decrease in scores of three points. Next to the capital, Colombo, the Western Province has the strongest Internet traffic. However, the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces are lagging behind, which is true for all infrastructure, not just the Internet, and also in terms of "digital literacy".

Gender perspective

According to a [2018 report](#) by the GSMA, Sri Lankan women have attained relatively high levels of gender equality compared to most surrounding countries. Efforts continue to close the gender gap, particularly in relation to women's access to mobile Internet and mobile financial services ([GSMA, Mobitel Sri Lanka](#)). A 2017 GSMA report found that unlike other countries where male gatekeepers were the primary barrier to mobile Internet use, in Sri Lanka the main barrier was affordability and perceived lack of relevance/need.

Security situation

In May 2022, peaceful protestors were [violently attacked](#) at Galle Face Green, injuring dozens and killing five (Daily Mirror LK, 10 May 2022). This shows the potential for civil unrest and an increasingly unstable security situation. At the same time, radical Buddhist groups, which have a history of influencing politics, largely remained silent in the political unrest and more moderate Buddhist monks publicly sided with the protestors, condemning the violence. Thousands of protestors [demonstrated](#) against the government's crackdown on opposition protests and its leaders (ABC News, 27 October 2022).

Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist and ethnic Sinhala (around 75% of the population). After decades of ethnic tension, a full-fledged civil war broke out in 1983. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority fought against the Tamil insurgency, represented by the Tamil Tigers group (LTTE)

(Tamils are predominantly Hindu, but include 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 insurgency, but true peace and reconciliation is still far off. In the long-term, it will be important to establish how the country should deal with its war legacy and whether reconciliation will also be conducted by legal means, however, with the Rajapaksa government in power, led by two war-time heroes, all discussions and efforts stopped or were at least postponed. Reconciliation is a term heard less and less and is very rarely 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, mainly in the Eastern, Southern and Northern provinces. This task has become more complicated due to the suicide attacks in April 2019 and all that followed. Also, the army still has almost 347,000 active members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009.

Radical Buddhist groups, namely the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, translated as Buddhist Power Force) and the *Sinhala Ravaya* (SR), are led by Buddhist monks and these are known to stir up mobs for attacking the Muslim minority and, to a lesser extent, Christians as well. They made a comeback in the WWL 2020 reporting period, maybe best reflected in a speech Galagoda Aththe Gnanasera, Secretary-General of the BBS gave at a rally in Kandy in July 2019. In it, he offered his own particular view of the April 2019 attacks on churches and hotels and the later attacks against Sri Lanka's Muslim minority. He said that Buddhism is under threat on the island and the Sinhala people – the majority ethnicity – should rule the country with the help of nationalist monks. He proposed that the government should withdraw from the rule of law and allow Buddhist monks to deal with the Muslim minority. He did not make the slightest mention of the fact that the Easter attacks almost exclusively targeted Christians or that Sri Lanka's Muslim minority faced riots, looting and physical assaults at the hands of Buddhist nationalists. On the contrary, according to a media report, he [accused the Christian minority](#) of converting people and thus of damaging the nation (UCA News, 8 July 2019). This is a very worrying indication that more storms could be brewing in the future. Ex-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who resigned in July 2022, had a track record of not hindering Buddhist radical activity and was even said to be actively supporting it.

The question is worth considering why the Islamist bombers chose to target Christians and not Buddhists in April 2019, especially since the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka has a long history of facing attacks from Buddhist mobs and has even been targeted more during the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. with the policy of forced cremation. Muslims have been persecuted more than Christians and there have been incidents where some were killed. The Easter 2019 attacks by Islamic militants simply do not fit into this pattern. The answer is that IS ideology does not require a pattern to be in place. IS leaders simply [call](#) for Christians to be attacked wherever they are (The Times, 15 April 2019) for being “polytheists”, referring to the Christian foundational doctrine of the Trinity. In this way, the attacks in Sri Lanka show, like so many other attacks in recent years, that ideology is the key for understanding the motivation behind the violence. To search for reasons in the religious, ethnic and socio-economic situations of minorities in Sri Lanka means looking in the wrong direction and asking the wrong questions.

In January 2021, three Sri Lankan citizens faced [terrorism charges](#) in a US court in Los Angeles for the Easter attacks (South Asia Monitor, 10 January 2021). In November 2021, the trial of [25 men](#) accused of masterminding the 2019 Easter bombings began in Sri Lanka: More than 23,000 charges were filed against the suspects, and 1,215 witnesses were called to testify (BBC News, 24 November 2021). However, the trial was [adjourned until March 2022](#) to allow time for the indictments to be translated (Al-Jazeera, 12 January 2022). However, the Catholic Church has long been challenging the government's investigations, claiming that the truth of who was really behind the attacks is [deliberately being hidden](#) (Al-Jazeera, 21 April 2021).

The Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka show that although IS can be geographically defeated (for instance in Iraq and Syria), the influence of its ideology remains strong. It also means that more such attacks are likely in the future, disrupting the persecution patterns observers have seen emerging in many countries over the years.

Trends analysis

1) China is playing a growing role in Sri Lanka

The WWL 2023 reporting period showed how Sri Lanka's leaders continued to have difficulty coping with the balancing act involving the two Asian giants, neighboring India and not-so-far-away China. Although China does play a significant role in Sri Lanka's debts and will be an important voice in any restructuring in the future, its role should [not be overstated](#), as Western countries and institutions are large debtors of Sri Lanka as well (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 13 June 2022). However, the government's disappointment over a perceived lack of help (or bail out) from China became clear when now ousted President Gotabaya Rajapaksa explained this fact with a [shifting of China's focus](#) to Southeast Asia (Bloomberg, 7 June 2022). The now former government was hardly able to withstand Chinese pressure, which became abundantly clear when a shipload of "toxic" [organic fertilizer](#) arrived from China, causing what the BBC called a "diplomatic stink" (BBC News, 13 November 2021). Sri Lanka had introduced a sudden ban on chemical fertilizer, jeopardizing its harvest and leaving the country in great need of importing organic fertilizer. However, the fertilizer from China was tested by local authorities on arrival as not being sterile, hence, the fertilizer was not allowed to enter the country. The Chinese embassy weighed in and in the end, Sri Lanka had to [accept](#) a new shipment of the same standardized fertilizer and honor its payment agreements (The Diplomat, 25 January 2022).

The new government (which took over in July 2022) is facing very similar challenges, as became clear when the Chinese "scientific research" vessel Yuan Wang 5 was denied [entry to the Hambantota port](#) due to Indian reservations about its potential to gather intelligence, only to anchor there a few days later (The Guardian, 16 August 2022). It remains to be seen if Sri Lanka continues to woo China and how it navigates these foreign policy challenges, although much will depend upon how any debt restructuring will take shape. As of January 2023, of the two main rivals for influence in Sri Lanka, it seems that India is currently taking the lead.

2) The Rajapaksas may be down, but they are not out

While the heavy-handed response to the protests after President Rajapaksa resigned is already an ominous sign and led to warnings from Western governments, the mere fact that no member of the Rajapaksa family wields executive power should not be confused with thinking they have

lost their political power and influence. Ex-Prime Minister (now President) Ranil Wickremesinghe - who is serving in office for a sixth time now - is seen as being [close to the Rajapaksa family](#) and has served under them several times before (Nikkei, 20 July 2022). Most people see his presidency as a black mark on democracy as his party did not secure any seats in parliament at the last parliamentary election and Wickremesinghe is the only representative to enter parliament through the National List. Thus, the current leadership of the country is not seen as a reflection of the people's choice. The fact that a man who did not have the people's vote is now in office as president, is very frustrating for many (if not most) of Sri Lanka's population.

New Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena also served earlier as a Minister under Mahinda Rajapaksa. This has led observers to state that the new government is more answerable to the Rajapaksa family than to the Sri Lankan electorate and that the ["Aragalaya" \(Struggle\) has failed](#) since leaders of the uprising are now being hunted down (Daily Mirror LK, 23 August 2022). While such a conclusion may be too early to draw, it is clear that the establishment is fighting back and Dictatorial paranoia is neither down nor out. While the "struggle" brought a sense of unity and bridged ethnic and religious trenches, [hostility against](#) the Muslim minority had been deepening before that (International Crisis Group, 23 December 2021).

The report of the "Presidential Task Force for One Country, One Law" as an advisory group for strengthening Sri Lanka's cultural heritage and for helping develop a sense of unity between all the different ethnic and religious groups in the country, has been [thrown out](#) by the new government, saying that it has to prioritize more important issues (The Morning LK, 17 August 2022). The formation of this task force was one of former President Rajapaksa's election campaign promises. However, the fact that the task force's chairman was the high profile Buddhist monk, Gnanasera Thera (known for his hate-speech against religious minorities, especially Muslims), led minority groups to be wary of hoping too much from such a venture and view it rather as just another method for strengthening Buddhist Sinhala dominance. Meanwhile, all minorities, including Christians, are becoming weary of always seeing more of the same, be it Sinhala supremacy, violence or discrimination.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: call for an international inquiry - http://www.dailymirror.lk/top_story/Compelled-to-call-for-intl-tribunal-to-probe-Easter-Sunday-Mayhem---Cardinal/155-205586
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WWL 2023: Church information / Sri Lanka

Christian origins

According to Church tradition, Christianity made inroads when the Apostle Thomas came to India in the 1st century AD and preached in Sri Lanka as well. Nestorian Christians lived in the country for a long time before Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island by Portuguese traders at the beginning of the 6th century. 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, although ethnicity can be problematic among them as well.

Church spectrum today

Sri Lanka: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,000	0.0
Catholic	1,591,000	79.2
Protestant	301,000	15.0
Independent	178,000	8.9
Unaffiliated	9,800	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-70,600	-3.5
Total	2,010,200	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	222,000	11.0
Renewalist movement	403,000	20.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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:** Christians 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. **Evangelical movement:** 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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Christians can be found throughout the country, but are more concentrated in the eastern, western and northern parts of the country, and are least represented in the south. When the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka, they built Roman Catholic churches along the eastern and western coast and in some towns. There are fewer Roman Catholic churches in rural areas. However, Assemblies of God (AoG) churches can be found in many parts of the country now, especially in rural areas. There are also Anglican mission and Methodist churches in some rural

areas. The Catholic Church of Sri Lanka is spread over 12 dioceses and generally follows the geographic distribution described above. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka comprises the Anglican, (Protestant) Church of South India, Methodist, Baptist, Reformed, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Church of Ceylon, AoG and Foursquare Gospel churches. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka mainly represents evangelical groups and has a membership of more than 200 churches, representing more than 200,000 Christians. The Statistics Office of Sri Lanka published an [overview](#) about the religious affiliation per district in 2012.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The provinces of Sri Lanka are Northern, Central, Eastern, Western, North Central, North Western, Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Southern. In areas where there is less diversity, where one ethnic group is in the majority, there tend to be higher levels of pressure and violence targeting Christians. Some areas that could possibly be considered hotspots are the Southern and Eastern provinces, as well as some areas of Northern province. Even in districts that are not normally considered hotspots, there are certain villages where persecution is more intense (for instance, when the village is almost entirely Sinhalese Buddhist). However, problems for Christians coming from the Hindu minority (especially for converts from Hinduism), mainly occur in the Northern and Eastern provinces where they are living.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: These are groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and some of the eight denominations belonging to the National Christian Council. They are typically less involved in evangelization and face less persecution or violence, but are affected by the overall atmosphere of Buddhist supremacy and are hindered from constructing church buildings at times.

Converts to Christianity: These are Christians coming from Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. They face frequent hostility and violent attacks. New converts are most often seen as traitors by family and community and are consequently harassed, subjected to physical and verbal assaults and to isolation. This occurs mainly in rural villages and had in the past only been significantly visible in the Southern and North Central provinces. However, with the end of the civil war, this trend has spread to the Northern and Eastern provinces as well.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations are often affected by violent attacks but the perpetrators have changed since the elections in 2015. 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 acts of violence against them. While the Drivers of persecution have changed, the ground level situation remains by and large the same. The most frequent accusations concern "worshipping illegally", "unethical conversion" and being connected with Western influence.

External Links - Church information

- Church spectrum today - additional information: overview - http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/PopulationAtla_2012/03_DistrictMaps/Map%20P2.5.1%20Population%20by%20Religion%20and%20District,%202012.pdf
- Christian communities and how they are affected: National Christian Council - <http://nccsl.org/web/member-churches/>

WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Sri Lanka

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	57	62
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30
WWL 2019	58	46

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The large fall in total score in WWL 2023 was due to the sharp drop in the violence score from 7.8 points to 3.9 points. Although, there were less attacks on Christians and churches in the WWL 2023 reporting period, this does not necessarily mean that the situation on the ground improved; it is more likely due to continued COVID-19 restrictions and a consequence of people having to focus on sheer survival in the continuing economic crisis. Apart from that, scores for pressure decreased most in the *Family* and *Community spheres*, most likely for the very same reasons.

Persecution engines

Sri Lanka: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all

Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Strong), blended with Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

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](#) in the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 2015, as well as in the proposed 20th amendment from 2017 (Colombo Telegraph, 14 July 2016). 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 the section describing *Pressure in the 5 spheres of life*.

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 Sinhalese Christians are also looked upon with suspicion, frequently insulted and attacked. Perpetrators are not only the state authorities, as the telling name "Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs" indicates, but also Buddhist monks and local authorities. However, one potential consequence of the current political and economic crisis is that more and more people are becoming fed up with religion being instrumentalized to justify bad politics.

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; anything from the outside is viewed with suspicion. Sri Lankan Buddhist groups are therefore not so much concerned with the philosophical themes of Buddhism so popular in the West, but rather with the battle to preserve this traditional triangle. All the actions involving radical groups and local monks can be seen as attempts at fending off anything that threatens this view of society. All violent clashes and riots [targeting](#) the Muslim minority (as occurred in 2014 and to a lesser extent in March 2018) and all attacks against Christians are grounded in this insistence on preserving the traditional triangle (UCA News, 13 March 2018). As it looks now, religious majoritarianism (the policy of one religion dominating all others) and [militant nationalism](#) are in the ascent (The Diplomat, 19 November 2020).

Dictatorial paranoia has been a very frequent persecution engine in Sri Lanka, but it went into a hiatus when the Rajapaksas lost power in 2015. Their comeback and renewed ouster does not mean that they have lost all influence in politics, especially since the incumbent government is seen to be close to the Rajapaksa family. But even beyond this, political and economic turmoil always provides fertile soil for keeping certain people or parties in power by all means possible,

generally at the expense of the general public and particularly at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities.

Islamic oppression (Weak)

Although categorized as 'weak', it is still mentioned here to indicate the complexity of the country's religious situation. *Islamic oppression* had always been classed 'weak' (being felt most by the rather small number of Christian converts coming from a Muslim background) until a radical Islamic fringe group carried out suicide attacks against three churches in April 2019, causing this Persecution engine to spike in influence. However, that was exceptional. The main persecution engine in Sri Lanka is still *Religious nationalism* and the Muslim community is currently under strong pressure due to the numerous crackdowns on radical Muslims and anyone affiliated with militant Islamic groups.

Drivers of persecution

Sri Lanka: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
		STRONG						MEDIUM	
Government officials		Very strong						Strong	
Non-Christian religious leaders		Strong						Strong	
Violent religious groups		Medium						Medium	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs		Very strong						Medium	
One's own (extended) family		Very strong						Medium	
Political parties		Medium						Medium	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

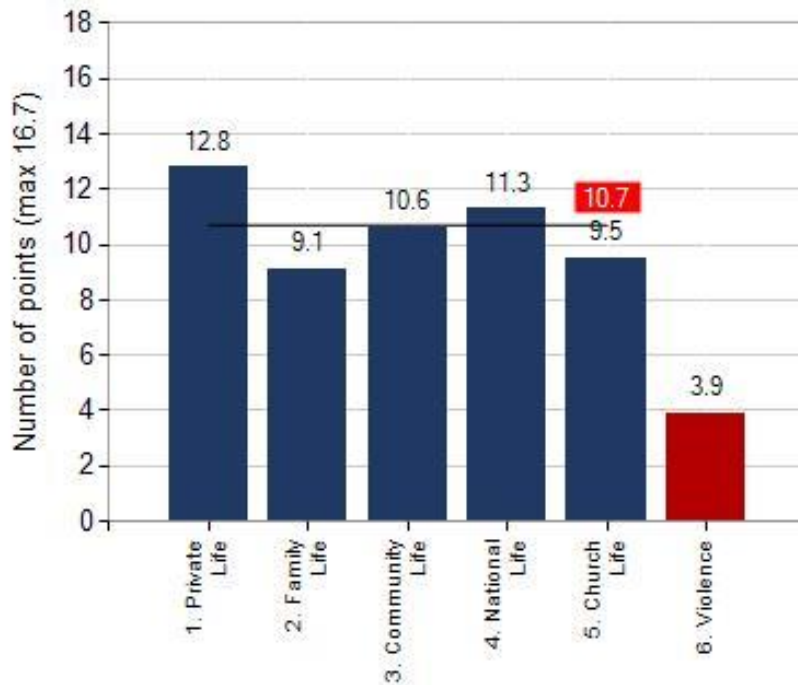
Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist, blended with Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Government officials (mostly local government officials, police officers and provincial council officers), especially in predominantly Buddhist communities, have continued to be highly involved in action or inaction against Christians. Often, government officials have instigated persecution against Christians by simply heeding to the demands of local Buddhist monks and mobs. According to a study by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance (NCEASL) covering the period October 2020 to October 2021, government officials were [instrumental](#) in driving or assisting persecution in more than 60% of all reported cases (NCEASL, Patterns and Risks of Religious Violence against Christians: October 2020 - October 2021, p.16). However, there have been some cases as well where government officials confirmed the constitutional rights of Christians to worship, but these have been rare.

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** The main drivers of persecution are frequently Buddhist monks at the local level. The radical Buddhist movements which drove persecution in earlier years, claiming Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation, seem to have become dormant for the time being. The Bodu Bala Sena movement (BBS) transformed itself into a political party, but has not been particularly influential in the political arena. Religious leaders, which frequently also double as Ethnic Sinhala leaders, often connected with the radical group, have been calling for the protection of the Sinhala majority. Young Buddhist religious leaders have been using social media platforms to promote hatred towards religious minorities in the country. Another recent development is that in the Hindu-majority northeastern areas, groups of radical Hindus belonging to the RSS movement (well-known in India as a strong driver of persecution) are gaining in influence. RSS and Hindu Shiva Senai (HSS) groups infiltrating the country from neighboring countries have been involved in leading violent attacks in the Tamil regions - especially in Eastern province. There have also been incidents in the Northern province.
- **Extended family and normal citizens (Very strong):** Family members together with village officials and society in rural areas have often abused Christian converts verbally and demanded that they leave their villages. Converts are put under strong pressure to return to their faith, while non-convert Christians also face pressure either to leave their villages or at least to cease meeting as a Christian group. Such incidents have been reported from the Hindu (Tamil) minority region in the northeast of Sri Lanka as well. As many church meetings had to be stopped due to COVID-19 and the political crisis, converts have been more confined to their homes, where they were under stronger scrutiny of their families, although they were less able to report on it.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Political parties tend to join in calls for the protection of the country's Buddhist heritage, since this gains votes. However, in the WWL 2023 reporting period, political parties were focused on the dire economic situation. Only the next elections will show if invoking *Religious nationalism* in order to gain votes really decreased.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** In their efforts to keep a pure form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and especially in its villages, groups can act violently towards the Christian minority. This happened less frequently in the WWL 2023 reporting period. RSS and Shiva Senai groups are violent religious groups active in the Hindu majority provinces.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Average pressure on Christians in Sri Lanka went down from 11.0 points in WWL 2022 to 10.7 points in WWL 2023.
- Pressure is highest in the *Private, National and Community spheres of life*. While pressure in the *National sphere* is typical for countries affected by the Persecution engines *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia*, pressure in the *Private and Community spheres* points to difficulties faced by Christian converts from other religions. The *Church sphere* also shows a high level of pressure, reflecting numerous incidents where mobs (frequently led by Buddhist monks) turned up in front of churches, often supported by local officials, disrupting services and demanding that churches be closed down. The decrease in reported pressure on Christians, most visible in the *Family and Community spheres* in the WWL 2023 reporting period, may also be due to the fact that families and communities were preoccupied with sheer survival on account of the severe economic crisis.
- Violence against Christians halved to 3.9 points in WWL 2023, which may well reflect the fact that in midst of the political and economic turmoil, taking action against the Christian community was not a priority. Many Christian activities could not take place anyway.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points)

While conversion is not punishable by law, converts from a Buddhist background experience strong opposition from their family and relatives. Even other people from the community oppose them when someone converts to Christianity in their area. This is one reason why converts try to keep their newfound Christian faith to themselves as long as possible. According to a country expert, "the Minister of Religious Affairs announced this year [2021] that a [Bill](#) to propose conversions be made a criminal offence will be introduced in Sri Lanka" (Barnabas Fund, 17 March 2021). At the end of 2022, the law was still under debate, but as a [study](#) found that more than 40% of Buddhists, Hindus and Catholics believe that there is a prevalence of unethical conversions (Minor Matters, 21 September 2022, p.46), this is clearly an issue that will stay on the political agenda.

Converts from a Muslim or Hindu background also experience opposition.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

It is risky for converts to talk to others about their new faith, especially for converts from Islam. But even other Christians and converts from other backgrounds living in predominantly Buddhist and Hindu villages find it very hard to share their faith within their communities. This is also due to the fear of being accused of "unethical conversions", a term which is not clearly defined and is therefore prone to abuse. Radical Buddhist and Hindu elements are quick to accuse converts and non-traditional Protestant Christians of unethical conversions and file petitions against them. They also mobilize other villagers against them. If converts reveal their Christian faith to relatives and friends, this would result in them receiving insults and being rejected.

Christians report that even when they tried to support the community during the COVID-19 crisis or when they distributed refreshments to those waiting in the long queues for fuel and other basic items, they were often watched with suspicion and their good intentions viewed as an attempt at proselytization.

People in the local community are likely to get angry if Christians try to speak about their faith as this would be seen as trying to convert someone to a foreign religion, betraying the traditions and culture of the community. The fact that even the Roman Catholic Cardinal spoke out against evangelical conversions, shows the pressure within society and the level of self-restrictions many Christians put upon themselves.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.50 points)

A country researcher shared: "New converts are most affected by this type of persecution. They often meet with opposition when they go to church, attend Bible studies, and prayer meetings and when pastors or ministry workers visit home for prayers. If only one person in the family has converted, when pastors visit his/her home, both the pastor and the believer will get subjected to verbal abuse." It is not uncommon for young people who started coming regularly to church to stop coming after a while due to pressure from their families.

Examples in the WWL 2023 reporting period included:

- A Hindu father threatening to take his own life if his wife and daughters kept going to church.
- A Muslim father threatened to hurt the pastor of the church if his daughter continued going to church.
- A young Muslim man was also severely beaten because he got caught going to a local church.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

Revealing one's Christian faith is risky as it can be perceived as an attempt at 'unethical conversion'. Therefore, Christians will be careful in choosing the means and channels they use to refer to their faith. Converts have more limited options and they prefer not to share their faith visibly at all, which is also true for evangelical Christians in rural areas. Most often, both of these categories of Christian community will hesitate to reveal their faith in written form due to intimidation, verbal abuse and the overall surrounding culture of the country. Even Christians serving in the public sector often prefer not to show their religious beliefs at all. The draft law mentioned under Question 1.1 increases this reluctance. Whoever shares Christian content via social media has to prepare for opposition, including disparaging and at times hateful and threatening comments.

Block 1 - Additional information

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. In rural areas, it can be dangerous for Hindu converts as well. 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. There have been reports that due to the COVID-19 crisis, curfew laws have been used against the Christian community in a discriminatory and biased manner.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

Christian children enrolled at state schools have been routinely forced to observe Buddhist or Hindu rituals. At school, religion is a compulsory subject. It is a legal requirement according to the Education Ordinance that if a school has more than 15 pupils belonging to a particular faith, the state must appoint a teacher to instruct those schoolchildren in that particular faith. However, this is not implemented by state schools. Partly owing to the lack of Christian teachers and funds for employing them, Christian children are usually forced to study Buddhism or Hinduism instead, resulting in harassment, bullying and bad marks. In some parts of the country, school teachers and Buddhist monks have made attending *dhamma* schools a requirement. Dhamma schools are where Buddhist children learn more about their religion (comparable with Sunday school classes for Christians). A country expert explained: "Schools ask for a religious education certificate when they reach GCSE level, and the certificate from *dhamma* schools is more respected and widely accepted than certificates from churches. Due to this reason, there is constant pressure on parents to send their children to *dhamma* school."

One pastor explained: "Many children who come to our church are being forced by their school to study Buddhism without any proper explanations." In one example during the WWL 2023 reporting period, a student applied to study Christianity for A Levels at the school she has been attending since she was young. However, the principal refused to accept her application because she wanted to study Christianity. After many discussions with the school management, she was told she would only be accepted for A Levels if she changed the religion she wanted to study.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

Children of Christians have been punished by teachers and are often bullied by their school peers. Teachers at school have also been reported to have scolded children for going to church and questioned them as to why they went. In other incidents, they made Christian students come to school on Sundays or forbade them to read their Bibles in breaks or their free time. Occasionally, this went so far that some pupils refused to continue attending school. There have also been incidents where state-run schools refused the enrollment of students when they learned that they were Christians.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.25 points)

As a country expert pointed out: "Non-traditional Christian churches, such as evangelical and independent churches, have faced difficulties in obtaining permission for marriage registration. When such churches attempt to obtain the right to register marriages, they are forced to produce proof of church registration, which is not a legal requirement." As a result, necessary documents from the state are only issued after long delays.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.25 points)

In some parts of the country, non-traditional Protestant Christians in particular are not allowed to be buried in a public cemetery, as they do not have an assigned area within the cemetery. Additionally, a country expert shared: "Another way problems show, is when people do not attend funerals of converts. When new people convert, one way they are pressured to renounce their faith is by threatening not to give final rites to anyone in their family (Buddhist rites to family members who have not converted)." One pastor added: "This is a very common issue in families where not everyone has converted. If the deceased person's children and relatives are Buddhists, they will want to do it their way."

Additionally, one pastor said: "There are no public cemeteries in villages. There are Hindu cemeteries, Muslim cemeteries, Buddhist cemeteries or Roman Catholic cemeteries. So there is nowhere to bury [Protestant] Christians. In a Hindu village, people will not allow Christians to be buried in a Hindu cemetery. Converts will also lose the privilege of being buried in their family's ancestral grave." According to Hindu tradition, deceased have to be cremated, so Hindu communities will not accept a burial in their cemetery.

Block 2 - Additional information

Converts face discrimination and harassment, but are usually not put under pressure to divorce. However, they can be expelled from their family home. A parents' comment to their daughter's conversion in the WWL 2022 reporting period still illustrates the mindset: "You will always be welcome back at this house whenever you decide to renounce your faith." The denial or loss of inheritance rights is one of the most common threats in trying to bring a new convert back to his or her old faith. If this threat does not succeed, the converts lose their inheritance, convert girls sometimes do not receive their dowry and in other cases all ties to the family are cut. Adult baptisms also face opposition, especially if they are held publicly. As a result, most churches decide to keep baptismal services low-key.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.75 points)

This is a typical reaction by teachers and families of converts alike. If a student converts to Christ, families typically cut all sponsoring of funding for school and livelihood. One pastor also shared: "The school in our village is a Buddhist school and they purposefully try their best to not find a Christian teacher. They always come up with an excuse about why they could not find a teacher. Furthermore, the school applies pressure on new applicants to abandon their faith. They threaten the parents by saying that they will not accept their applications unless they leave their Christian faith. Some parents have given into this pressure as they do not want to their children to left out of school." Another pastor added: "Even in Roman Catholic schools, they accept Buddhist or Hindu students more readily than they accept [Protestant] pastors' kids."

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.50 points)

This is particularly the case for converts in previously homogenously non-Christian areas. But even non-convert Christians, especially Protestants, are urged to follow Buddhism. In one incident, the pressure on a family having recently converted was so high that they stopped attending church again, being intimidated by threats like: "We will not come to your funeral" or "You won't receive any benefits from the committees in the village". In another instance, a student was forced to take part in non-Christian rituals at school and threatened by teachers "if you don't do what we say, we can kick you out of this school." In such a case, parents are put under pressure to choose between the school and their faith, too. People have asked new converts about why they converted. They question them and ask "What made you convert? Did they offer you money?"

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)

The community expects Christians to participate in all local religious ceremonies, either Buddhist or Hindu. When Christians refuse, they are isolated in the community and face threats and discrimination. This is a particular point of pressure for converts, who are in danger of being discovered. During Hindu festivals, Hindus ostracize Christians for not participating in the activities. Pressure can also be applied in the workplace and is not limited to converts, but affects Christians from historical and non-traditional Christian churches as well.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.00 points)

A country researcher explained: "This mostly affects converts and pastors and ministry workers from non-traditional churches in rural areas. Since most villages in rural areas are not diverse in ethnicity, the entire village would belong to one religious group. Converts would then get highlighted in the village and there would not be many of them. They would then get insulted, ridiculed, ostracized in the village. This is usually most intense immediately after conversion, but tends to become less intense as time passes. Villagers might make rude comments when they pass them on the streets, not help them, may not visit their homes, or not allow them to buy groceries from shops." One in-country contact shared: "The Buddhist monks in the area are strongly opposed to the church and have stirred up the people against the Christians in that area. Because of that, we cannot even buy groceries from shops." Another pastor shared: "Because we serve God, there is pressure from neighbors in the form of mental abuse, cursing, ridiculing, and belittling."

Block 3 - Additional information

In rural areas, converts can be denied access (or are given delayed access) to community resources such as wells and electricity. The community often monitors non-traditional Christian communities and new converts in rural areas. Since villages are very closed communities, people would keep an eye on who comes and goes to the church or to houses of converts. As in many

previous reporting periods, the WWL 2023 reporting period also contained 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. At times, businesses run by Christians became targets for customer boycotts. There have been several incidents reported where Christians in rural areas were stripped of membership in funeral endowment societies. These societies are formed at village levels and are important for conducting burials.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Whilst the Constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Article 10 and the freedom to practice one's faith in Article 14 (1) (e), in Article 15 (7) it states the freedom to practice one's religion can be restricted if required by national security, public morality or health matters. Furthermore, Article 9 of the Constitution states that the foremost place should be given to Buddhism. Article 9 and 15 (7) have been widely used against Christians in an arbitrary and biased manner. Moreover, the Sri Lankan judiciary has continued to deliver biased judgements on religious freedom issues - using these two articles as the basis for their argument. In July 2018, the Supreme Court held in Case No 241/14: "In any event, the duty of this Court is to uphold and give effect to the Constitution and as our Constitution now stands, the citizens of this country do not possess a constitutionally protected freedom to 'propagate' their religion or beliefs". This seems to back a long-held practice with legal reasoning which ignores international standards of law.

One country expert adds: "In April 2022 a new circular was issued stating that all places of worship including smaller gatherings for prayer would also require registration with the state. This is being introduced based on recommendations by a Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on the subject of national security, following the Easter attacks in April 2019. However, these demands for registration are firstly not based on any law, and secondly are only demanded of minority places of worship. In instances where churches have attempted to obtain such approval or registration, they have not been successful due to inherent biases in the state sector. When churches fail to provide any documentation proving their registration, such churches or gathering are demanded to shut down or discontinue worship activities." While it remains to be seen how this plays out in practice, it is an addition layer of limitation.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (4.00 points)

There has been no proper conviction of any perpetrator of persecution against Christians, leading one country expert to speak of a "climate of impunity". The judiciary is very biased and there has been no precedence of religious freedom cases. In most instances the judiciary forces the Christian victim to settle the case. The quick release of the Secretary-General of Bodu Bala Sena after only a few months in prison - not because of an attack against religious minorities, but for contempt of court - sets a precedent and shows the prevailing mindset.

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, a church was asked to stop their Easter Sunday service by police officers who came to the church premises, who said that people were waiting with rods to beat up the congregation. The pastor responded saying, "Then shouldn't you stop those people instead of asking us to stop the service?"

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Christians are routinely discriminated against by government officials. When Christians are victims of a Buddhist attack, they experience discrimination at the police station. In most cases, the police officers blame the Christians for the attack and file a 'breach of peace' report which records both Buddhists and Christians as equal parties in causing the incident. Many local officials are biased as well, for example in rural areas, when Christians attempt to construct homes, many find they are continually denied approval - even when all legal requirements are met and especially this is true for pastors. There have been incidents reported with land issues, where Christians faced the authorities' bias, but also in cases where the government runs support schemes, e.g. in providing benefits for children with special needs. One in-country contact shared: "The Grama Sevaka (local administration) doesn't help Christians. Christians get less opportunities to receive benefits like housing and other goods."

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.25 points)

Media networks usually cater to the majority of their viewers and thus, do not report stories about Christians or churches often, but when they do, it is usually in a biased way against Christians. Media reports tend to look down on Christians and portray them in a negative light. One country expert highlighted the role of local media: "There is bias against Christians in the media. The media have been cautious when challenging government policies but have been quiet about corruption of officials who ignore violence against Christians. However, articles often appear in the local media criticizing Christian methods."

Block 4 - Additional information

The level of pressure on Christians in this sphere of life remains substantial, especially as the government is leaning towards supporting Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism. The very few Christians who are in government positions (or work with the government) experience discrimination from nationalists. Local Christian politicians have to be very careful how they support minorities, as they can be immediately threatened with not being re-elected. In many cases, Christians and Christian human rights organizations are accused of creating "social disharmony" (which can best be understood when keeping the 'Buddhist triangle' in mind). On a more positive note, pastors still dare to file complaints and appeal to their constitutional rights; however, the outcome is mostly of little value.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

Speaking out usually simply leads to more discrimination and/or subsequent attacks. There have even been instances where Christians who were viewed as being too outspoken had to leave the country for a while. Representatives of Christian NGOs have been summoned for questioning by security and intelligence officers and then continue to be monitored. One church worker summed up the situation as follows: "There are no restrictions to taking legal action against persecutors, but it won't improve the situation. When we do speak against them, persecution tends to increase. They might then call us and threaten to beat us up." The example of Catholic priest, Father Amila Jeewantha Peiris (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period*) illustrates that even for historical churches it is risky to speak out against persecution (or the government in general).

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)

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. This has however happened less frequently in the WWL 2023 reporting period, since the authorities and communities have been preoccupied with the current economic crisis and protests.

During the WWL 2022 reporting period, one pastor stated: "When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, churches were the first ones to be asked to stop gatherings. Other religious gatherings and political gatherings could continue. There seems to be more obstructions to church activities. In many parts of the country, there have been restrictions to church activities from the community and officials."

Villagers also resort to practicing witchcraft in attempts to shut down local churches.

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

Registration is often used as leverage against 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 anyway, 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. As the US State Department stated (IRFR 2021, p.4) reported: "A 2017 Supreme Court ruling upheld the registration requirements. In 2018 the Ministry of Buddha Sasana ruled that the 2008 circular on registration and construction of religious facilities only applied to Buddhist religious sites."

The new April 2022 circular (mentioned above in *Block 4 / 4.1*), has the potential to add another layer of difficulty in applying for church registration. It remains to be seen how this will be implemented.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.75 points)

It remains very difficult to construct or renovate a church building in rural areas as it disturbs the 'Sri Lankan triangle' described above (see: *Persecution engines/Religious nationalism*). Even when pastors and churches follow all legal requirements and procedures, a building plan is frequently not approved. Most often, a government official alerts the local Buddhist temple or village elders regarding the submitted building plan. Subsequently, the villages will submit petitions to the government office demanding that the building plan should not be approved. In turn, the government officials will use these petitions as an excuse to deny approval, stating that by approving, they would be creating disharmony within the community. As one pastor stated: "In general, building a church is practically impossible. We have to obtain so many unnecessary permissions and its very tough to get those approvals. Non-Christians can easily build whatever they want. When we question the authorities, especially the police, they give their standard answer, 'we have to maintain peace among people'. These answers are only given to Christian churches." In some cases, opposition can even come from historical churches.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*

- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor’s article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Sri Lanka: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	4	10
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	4	3
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	2
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	21	40

6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	2
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	9	1
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	2

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Churches attacked:** Due to the current political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka, few church attacks were reported. However, at least four churches were attacked and the March 2022 incident in Galle, where a mob of 600 villagers led by monks attacked a Protestant church (see above: *Specific examples of rights violations in the reporting period*) is a reminder that mob attacks still occurred.
- **Christians physically or mentally abused:** Often in connection with attacks against churches, Christians have been physically and verbally abused and harassed. Pastors and their families have been a particular target in that respect. As with church attacks, few incidents were reported.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Reports of pastors' and other Christians' houses being targeted were received from several districts. In most cases, the attacks were carried out by mobs.
- **Christians detained:** The case of Father Amila Jeewantha Peiris (see above: *Specific examples of rights violations in the reporting period*) is one example of a Christian being detained for his Christian convictions.

5 Year trends

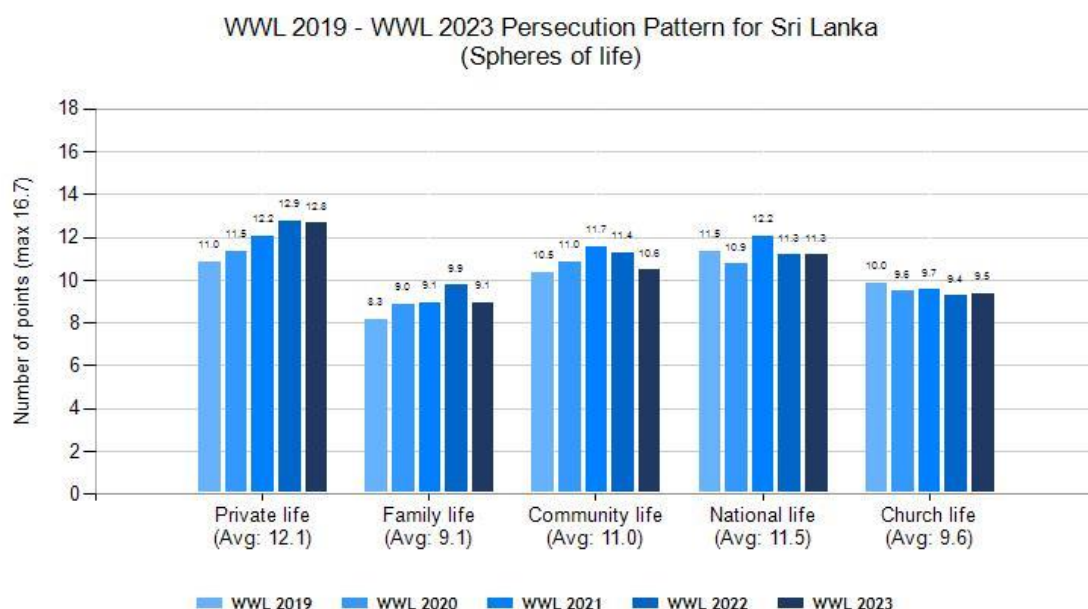
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

The table below shows that the average pressure on Christians shifted from high to very high in the WWL 2021 and 2022 reporting periods. It decreased again in the WWL 2023 reporting period, most likely due to families and communities being busy with securing their survival in the time of economic crisis, leaving less resources available for restricting converts or opposing Christians in a more visible and outspoken way.

Sri Lanka: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023	
Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	10.7
2022	11.0
2021	11.0
2020	10.4
2019	10.3

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

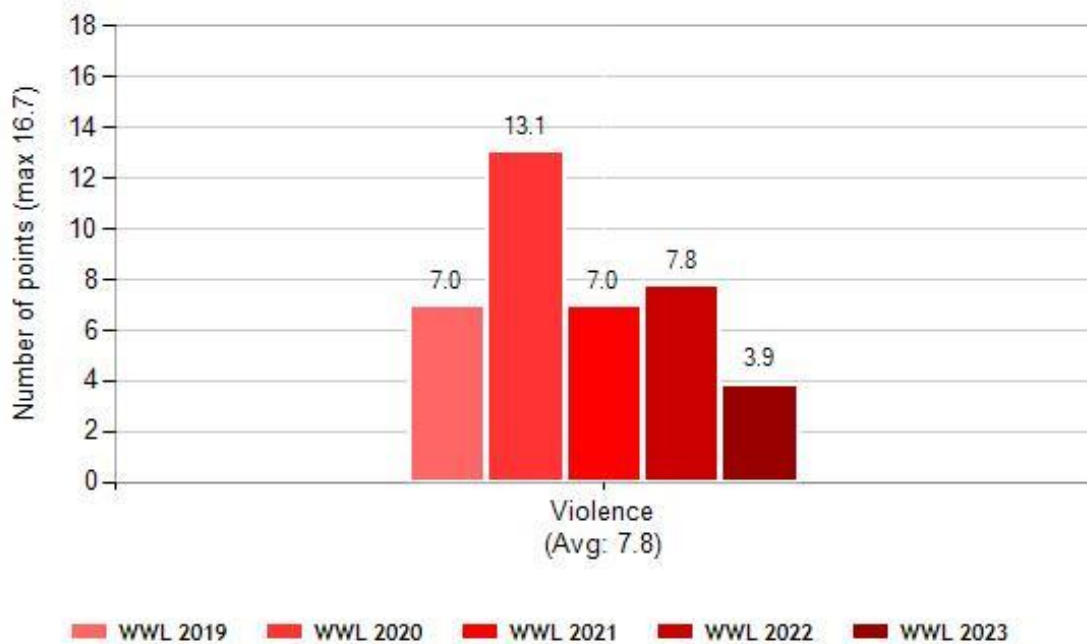


The chart above shows the development of pressure in the individual *spheres of life* over the last five reporting periods. The scores for pressure in all spheres have increased since WWL 2019, with the notable exception of *Church life*, although churches have been regularly attacked, often due to allegedly lacking permits.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

For a number years, the violence score remained stable at a very high level of around 7.0 points. That meant that in each reporting period more than 10 churches were attacked or closed and more than 10 Christians were assaulted. As can be seen in the chart below, in the WWL 2020 reporting period, this pattern was broken; with the suicide attacks against three churches on Easter Sunday 2019, the violence score almost doubled, rising to an extreme level. In WWL 2021, the pattern returned to its 'normal' level, a trend which was continued in WWL 2022, but broken again in WWL 2023, when the authorities and communities were more focused on coping with the national crisis than on dealing aggressively with Christians.

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka (Violence)



For some years, the violence score remained stable at a very high level around 7.0 points. That meant that in each reporting period more than 10 churches were attacked or closed and more than 10 Christians were assaulted. In the WWL 2020 reporting period, this pattern was broken; with the suicide attacks against three churches on Easter Sunday 2019, the violence score almost doubled, rising to an extreme level. In WWL 2021, the pattern returned to its 'normal' level, a trend which was continued in WWL 2022, but broken again in WWL 2023, when the authorities and communities were more focused on coping with the national crisis than on dealing aggressively with Christians.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied communal resources; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

While Sri Lanka has made recent positive steps to address the protection of women (such as establishing the Office on Missing Persons and Office for Reparations), the risk of sexual violence

remains high and perpetrators frequently enjoy impunity (Report of the UN Secretary General, July 2020, “[Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)”, p.43). Sexual assault is a weapon used against all women, regardless of religion. A Christian woman, however, is doubly vulnerable because of her faith. When Christian women and girls - not just converts - are subjected to this kind of persecution, their families are more reluctant to allow them out for any church-related work again. In recent years there have been few reported cases of rape, but sexual harassment has remained an ongoing issue. A country expert summarizes: “If there has been any kind of sexual assault due to their faith, most often it would be considered as a shame towards the whole family. This also in extension impacts their prospects for marriage.” This means that although sexual assault continues to be an issue, such cases are rarely reported.

Female converts are also at risk of being denied access to Christian religious materials and teaching, and can be cut off from churches which are a source of community and fellowship. One of the most common forms of persecution that affects female converts to Christianity is isolation and/or house-arrest. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in light of Sri Lanka’s patriarchal society. As a result, many female converts find it more difficult to follow their faith than new male converts and to overcome the verbal harassment they receive from their families and communities. A country expert comments: “Sri Lanka is a patriarchal society. Although women do play important roles in families, they are often expected to submit to the authority of their husbands and fathers. When pressure arises for women/girls who convert from their husbands/fathers, the community and family see their resistance as being stubborn and disrespectful, which creates an environment where they will receive more hateful comments and rejection from people around them.” On rare occasions, they may even be divorced by their husband due to their conversion.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied communal resources; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian leaders often bear the brunt of attacks against a church. As men are often in such roles, they are most often the victims of physical attack and threats (although Sri Lanka has a comparatively high number of female church leaders). Pastors and Christian leaders (and their family members) who have a ministry or church in Sinhalese-dominated areas are frequently targeted and harassed by Buddhist monks and villagers for faith-related reasons. Pastors have been targeted and intimidated in their own homes and communities.

Sri Lanka is a male-dominated, patriarchal society. As such, when a male gets physically assaulted, it also creates a sense of shame within rural close-knit communities. They can also be

targeted by the authorities. A pastor shares: “Pastors in [some] areas are not given the deeds to the land they live in by government officials to make sure they do not build churches ... Pastors also face challenges when trying to get building plans for their houses approved from the relevant government office. Officials would be reluctant to approve the plans and often suspect pastors of trying to build a church.”

The persecution of men and boys particularly affects the livelihood of Christian families. Especially in rural communities, males are the financial providers of the family, so losing a job or livelihood financially affects the whole Christian family and creates fear. It is mostly men who experience verbal harassment in the workplace. Reports indicate that businesses have been damaged and that Christian men have been denied jobs.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "Muslim NGOs and organizations reported an increase in police harassment and surveillance of their activities since the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. They said harassment included regular phone calls and visits by government security forces to ask about activities of the organizations."
- "During the year [2021], there were no prosecutions for the May 2019 anti-Muslim violence that led to the death of one Muslim and attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned homes and businesses. By year's end, the government had not fully compensated owners for property damage they sustained during the violence across North-Western Province. One observer said he believed it unlikely the government would ever prosecute anyone or provide compensation."
- "At an October 1 [2021] virtual event, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed said that the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings were 'followed by a significant rise in intercommunal tension, specifically targeting members of certain religious minority groups and their places of worship, in particular Muslims'. He said that the UN had 'repeatedly called on the government to take all appropriate measures to curb incitement to hatred and violence against members of minorities'."
- "Jehovah's Witnesses reported that since the April 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, there has been heightened surveillance on places of worship through inquiries and requests for information. This included inquiries from local police and intelligence officers calling or visiting the headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, requesting information about the board of directors of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Lanka (the legal entity used by Jehovah's Witnesses in the country), lists of meeting places, and the whereabouts of specific members. According to a Jehovah's Witnesses report, the surveillance and inquiries created an atmosphere that infringed on Jehovah's Witnesses' freedom of worship."
- "According to Jehovah's Witnesses, during the year the ministry again did not issue any approvals for its building applications. Older applications, such as those submitted in 2015 to build Kingdom Halls in Pugoda and Nattandiya, remained pending at year's end [2021]."

Buddhist nationalist monks campaign strongly not just against Christians but also against the country's Muslim minority. While physical violence has been rare since the pandemic, the government [announced](#) the closing of 1000 Muslim madrassas across the island as well as a ban on the wearing of burqas (AP News, 13 March 2021). A detailed overview of recent developments is provided in USCIRF's [country update](#) published in October 2021.

The Hindu minority continues to be watched with suspicion which is partly due to religious bias, and partly due to the country's history of bitter war, when the predominantly Hindu minority of Tamils in the Northern and Eastern provinces fought for independence (the LTTE was supported by many, but not by all Tamils). These Hindu communities are increasingly becoming drivers of persecution against Christian converts and churches in their midst. Incidents against Hindus include restricting their participation in *poojas* (a form of Hindu worship), constructing Buddha statues in the premises of Hindu temples, taking over land belonging to Hindu places of worship etc. The Department of Archaeology in particular has been accused of being complicit in the appropriation of sacred Hindu sites.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Religious nationalism - Buddhist, blended with Dictatorial paranoia

While the Rajapaksa family may not be at the levers of power any more, it remains to be seen if their influence in the political sphere is limited for good. In any case, President Wickremesinghe is a seasoned politician, who knows how to navigate challenging times and win parliamentary and electoral majorities. Staying in power and invoking Buddhist supremacy will doubtless remain the driving force behind politics, so it is likely that both *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia* are here to stay. However, a wild card is the question how well the government will be able to navigate the economic crisis and national debt, and how swiftly citizens will feel improvements in their own areas of life. The opposition movement tended to transcend all ethnic and religious cleavages, but it is an open question if this can translate into changes in society and more inclusive politics for majorities and minorities alike.

Islamic oppression

The bomb attacks at Easter 2019 were a reminder that not everything is about the Persecution engine *Religious nationalism* in Sri Lanka. The authorities reacted fast by cracking down on suspected networks of radical Islamic groups and those responsible for assisting the attackers. It remains to be seen if there will be more attacks by Islamist groups or 'lone wolves' and if they will target the Christian minority. It is possible that young Muslims will radicalize if attacks against Muslims continue and society offers them no real future perspectives. However, if 2019 taught observers anything, it was to be very cautious about making any predictions about the future.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: unchanged - <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/new-constitution-state-religion-buddhism/>
- Persecution engines description: targeting - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lanka-president-pledges-inquiry-into-religious-riots/81760>
- Persecution engines description: militant nationalism - <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/sinhalese-leviathan-how-gotabaya-rajapaksa-is-remaking-sri-lanka/>
- Drivers of persecution description: instrumental - <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/621/341/892/6213418929bfa869712586.pdf>
- Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points): Bill - <https://barnabasfund.org/news/sri-lankan-government-drafting-new-law-against-unethical-conversions-ami/>
- Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points): study - <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/632/ad8/cad/632ad8cad2ca0916665134.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence - <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: announced - <https://apnews.com/article/cabinets-national-security-islamic-state-group-sri-lanka-eb23fb57fd43ba306c4716b87de026fe>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: country update - https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update_0.pdf

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Sri Lanka>