

SRI LANKA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. In certain instances, local authorities failed to respond effectively to communal attacks, including attacks on members of minority religious groups.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Sporadic violent attacks on Christian churches by Buddhists and some societal tension due to ongoing allegations of forced or "unethical" conversions (i.e., the use of bribes to persuade people to convert) continued, although the number and scale of attacks were reportedly fewer than in recent years. Intolerance of, and discrimination against, Muslims by some Buddhists increased during the year.

U.S. embassy officials conveyed U.S. government concerns about religious freedom, particularly attacks on churches, to government leaders and urged them to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. The ambassador and other embassy officials also met regularly with representatives of all religious groups to review a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom concerns. During meetings with religious group leaders, senior U.S. officials discussed religious freedom, including reconciliation efforts and harassment of minority groups. The U.S. embassy supported interfaith efforts to promote a peaceful resolution of the underlying causes of conflict, and the embassy undertook a number of projects promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a U.S. government estimate, the population is 21.5 million. Approximately 70 percent is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent Muslim. Christians tend to be concentrated in the west, Muslims populate the east, and the north is predominantly Hindu.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhists. Most Tamils, the largest ethnic minority, are Hindus. Most Muslims are Sunnis; there is a small minority of Shia, including members of the Bohra community. Almost 80 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic; other Christian groups

include Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, members of the Dutch Reformed Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Although membership remains small, Evangelical Christian groups have grown in recent years.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. According to the constitution, every person is "entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." The constitution gives a citizen "the right either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching." The constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place" and commits the government to protecting it, but does not recognize it as the state religion.

The Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs has four departments working specifically with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups. By law, each department is mandated to formulate and implement programs to inculcate religious values and promote a "virtuous society."

Religious groups are not required to register with the government. To conduct financial transactions and open bank accounts, however, they must be incorporated under the Societies Ordinance, under the Trust Ordinance, or by an act of parliament under the Companies Act. Until the 1960s, most churches were either Catholic or Anglican, and were incorporated by acts of parliament. Beginning in the 1970s, as new Christian groups emerged, the government more commonly registered churches under the Companies Act. Registration under the Societies or Trust Ordinances, while providing some financial benefits, limits a church's ability to conduct certain financial transactions.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and inheritance, are adjudicated according to the customary law of the applicable ethnic or religious group. In order to solemnize marriages, religious groups must register with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs.

Religion is a mandatory subject in the public school curriculum. Parents may choose for their children to study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity.

Students belonging to other religious groups may pursue religious instruction outside the public school system. All schools follow the Department of Education curricula on the subject, which is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary/Level exams. International schools following the London Ordinary/Level syllabus may opt not to teach religious studies in schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Buddhist Poya days (each full moon day is a Poya Day); Hindu Thai Pongal, New Year, and Deepawali festivals; Islamic Hadji and Ramadan observances, and the Birth of Prophet Muhammad; and Christian Good Friday and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom. Although the government publicly endorsed religious freedom, in practice there were problems in some areas. Authorities were reluctant to investigate or prosecute those responsible for attacks on churches, Hindu temples, or mosques.

While efforts to pass anti-conversion legislation reportedly declined, some Christian groups occasionally complained that the government tacitly condoned harassment and violence aimed at them. Police generally provided protection for these groups at their request. In some cases, the police response was inadequate and local police officials reportedly were reluctant to take legal action against individuals involved in the attacks.

Some Christian groups, in particular newer denominations, reported an increase in complications obtaining local permission to construct church buildings.

Evangelical groups reported it was increasingly difficult to register new churches or to reregister under the Companies Act. Several smaller congregations were denied permission to register with the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs as churches during the year, reportedly because they were not members of the National Christian Council (NCC). This prevented them from obtaining authority to solemnize marriages. The National Christian Council, an umbrella organization representing “traditional” Protestant churches, coordinated often with the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), which represented the newer denomination churches. The government reportedly used membership in the NCC as an administrative obstacle to newer denominations. Local authorities sometimes did not want these groups operating in their districts

due to allegations of so-called “unethical” conversions and pressure by local Buddhist groups.

Some evangelical Christian groups reported incidents of governmental discrimination in the provision of services. Advanced-level public schools required all students to take a course in religion. Some government schools with small numbers of Christian students told their parents there were no teachers available to teach Christian-based religion classes, and therefore their children would be required to attend Buddhist religion classes instead. There were also reports of government schools refusing to enroll Christians on the basis of their religion.

The government continued to limit the issuance of temporary work permits for foreign religious workers and clergy. Work permits for foreign clergy were issued for one year, rather than five years as in the past, but could be extended.

Religious tensions continued in the north following the conclusion of a 27-year conflict between the Buddhist-majority government and the Hindu-majority Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Government troops continued to build Buddhist shrines in Tamil areas of the north. Some Tamil groups alleged this demonstrated government-sponsored Sinhalese colonization of former LTTE-held areas. The number of Buddhist statues, viharas, and stupas in the northern districts of Jaffna and Kilinochi increased during the year.

In November the Sri Lankan Army warned Tamils against celebrating Kaarthigai Deepam, a Hindu festival of lights. The festival coincidentally fell on the same day as “Heroes Day,” which commemorated fallen LTTE fighters. The military reportedly attempted to curb participation in the northern districts of Jaffna and the Vanni, instructing temples and the public not to light lamps and not to toll bells.

The Department of Buddhist Religious Affairs provided financial assistance to maintain temples in remote areas and conducted religious school tests and teacher training examinations. It also assisted in the conduct of Buddhist ceremonies at national events. The Department of Christian Religious Affairs developed infrastructure facilities at places of worship and provided financial assistance to churches in need. It also conducted evaluations of teachers providing instruction on Christianity. The Department of Hindu Religious Affairs gave financial assistance to reconstruct temples destroyed during the conflict in the north and east, developed Hindu Aranery Schools (religious-based primary schools), and conducted seminars and workshops for teachers of Hinduism. The Department of

Muslim Religious Affairs organized Muslim religious events, contributed towards development needs of Islamic institutions, and issued identity cards for Islamic clergy. It also issued letters of recommendation for students pursuing Islamic studies in foreign countries.

Government Inaction

On June 11, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that a 14-year-old Catholic student attending a Buddhist school was beaten by his teacher, a Buddhist monk, in Kandy district. During a Buddhism class, the boy (the only non-Buddhist in the class) was called upon and questioned on Buddhist history by the monk. In response to the boy's lack of knowledge of Buddhism, the monk reportedly struck the boy. The boy was subsequently hospitalized for four days. The father filed a complaint with the police, but authorities had not begun an investigation by year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although discrimination based on religious differences was much less common than discrimination based on ethnicity, societal discrimination based on religious belief increased during the year. In general, members of different religious groups tended to be tolerant of each other's religious beliefs, although there was at times an atmosphere of distrust. Incidents such as the destruction of places of worship by Buddhist monks exacerbated such tensions.

A survey by the Asia Foundation, an international NGO working in the country, found that religious tension continued to be a problem among Muslim, Tamil, Christian, and Buddhist groups. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed believed that attempts to convert people from one religion to another should not be tolerated, a perception that was relatively consistent across all religious groups. The survey also found that religious minorities considered themselves free to express religious opinions in their local areas; however, higher percentages of Muslims and Hindus did not feel free to express religious opinions in public.

Christians, particularly those from evangelical denominations, sometimes encountered harassment and physical attacks on property and places of worship by local Buddhists who were opposed to conversion and believed Christian groups threatened them. The number and severity of the attacks reportedly diminished

somewhat during the year. The NCEASL reported attacks on Christian churches, organizations, religious leaders, and congregants; many of the attacks were reported to the police. Credible sources confirmed some of these attacks.

On December 9, in the southern town of Weeraketiya (Hambanthota District), a mob of approximately 350 persons led by up to 80 Buddhist monks stormed and attacked a church during services. The mob caused serious damage to furniture and equipment within the building, as well as to vehicles belonging to church members. The attackers injured the pastor and reportedly assaulted two police officers when they attempted to stop the violence. Authorities deployed additional police and soldiers to control the mob; however the police made no arrests.

One day prior to the Weeraketiya violence, a group of Buddhist monks and laypersons had visited the church and informed the pastor that he could not conduct Christian worship in the town without permission from the Buddhist clergy. The monks issued an ultimatum to the pastor to stop the church services, and threatened to destroy the church.

Buddhist monks were under the protection of the ruling coalition government. Some monks, particularly outside the capital of Colombo, operated with impunity in trying to eliminate Christian and Muslim places of worship. At least 50 incidents of violence against Christians were recorded by Christian groups during the year. On August 9, for example, a mob attacked the pastor of an Assembly of God church, as well as his wife and a female worker of the Methodist church in Deniyaya.

On August 19, independent media reported that Buddhist monks forcibly occupied the premises of a Seventh-day Adventist church and converted it into a Buddhist temple in Deniyaya town in Southern Province's Matara District. On August 27, a mob of approximately 100 people assaulted two church leaders outside the Deniyaya police station for reporting the incident to the police. The case was under investigation at year's end.

NGOs reported several incidents of discrimination against Muslims. On April 20, Buddhist monks attacked a Dambulla mosque during Friday prayers, claiming the mosque (built in 1962) was an illegal structure built on sacred Buddhist land. Reportedly, the government ordered the removal of the mosque.

On May 25, around 250 Buddhist monks gathered at a mosque in Dehiwala and began throwing stones and rotten meat over the gate. The protestors demanded the

closure of the mosque, claiming it performed regular animal sacrifices, an accusation the mosque denied. The mayor of Dehiwala called for an inspection, and reported he found the mosque to be an illegal construction.

In July during Ramadan, Buddhist monks forcibly entered a mosque in Kurunagala and demanded it be shut down. Members of the mosque filed a complaint at the Welawa police station, and subsequently the police ordered the mosque to be shut down.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials conveyed U.S. government concerns about religious freedom, particularly attacks on churches and mosques, to government leaders and urged them to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators. The ambassador and other embassy officials also met frequently with representatives of all the country's religious groups to discuss a wide range of human rights, ethnic, and religious freedom concerns. Embassy officials met with displaced Muslims and other citizens in the Puttalam area multiple times during the year to discuss ongoing efforts to return these displaced persons to their areas of origin or resettle them in host communities. The U.S. government strongly supported political reconciliation, and the embassy encouraged interfaith efforts by religious leaders to promote a peaceful resolution to the underlying causes of the conflict.

The embassy undertook several projects to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperative engagement, including interfaith panel discussions, workshops, and other events. These events involved key regional religious leaders and reached several thousand participants. The ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss efforts for further development in the war-affected north and east. The ambassador and other embassy officials also regularly participated in religious conferences, ceremonies, and other events promoting religious freedom around the country.