

World  
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Research

## Sri Lanka: Full Country Dossier

March 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

March 2024

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	35	34	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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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 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Sri Lanka

## Brief country details

Sri Lanka: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
21,649,000	2,027,000	9.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	60	58
WWL 2023	57	62
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Sri Lanka:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Religious nationalism	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, 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 usually tolerated, as far as Christians from the Historical Christian communities are concerned 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, but are frequently matched by pastors claiming their constitutional right of religious freedom.

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 caused fresh hurt among the Christian minority, especially for relatives of the victims. All these efforts have come to nothing so far, even though a [trial](#) against some of

the perpetrators started in November 2021 (Reuters, 23 November 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 bombing victims (Reuters, 13 January 2023). In July 2023, he [paid a first instalment](#) of less than 10% owing to the victims as stipulated by the Court's verdict given in January 2023 (Asia News, 12 July 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. The risk of an economic default was averted when the country agreed with the IMF on conditions for a [seven billion USD loan](#) in March 2023 (Newswire LK, 21 March 2023).

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **In early July 2023**, a Pentecostal church service was disrupted by two Buddhist monks accompanied by ten villagers. On the following Sunday, the church service was disrupted again, this time by a mob of 40 people. However, after the police first sided with the perpetrators, they investigated and found that the church had all legal documents and apologized to the pastor for the disturbances (Source: Open Doors research).
- **16 and 19 June 2023**: Several individuals working at a Christian drug rehabilitation center in Thamankaduwa DS, Polonnaruwa province were assaulted, in one incident with iron rods, resulting in the hospitalization of the victims ([NCEASL Incident Report June 2023](#)).
- **4 June 2023**: Unknown assailants vandalized the Ilavaalai Maarisankudal St. Kaithar Church in Ilavaalai, Sandilipay DS (Jaffna District) and destroyed display cases containing statues ([NCEASL Incident Report June 2023](#)).
- **27 May 2023**: Unknown assailants threw stones against the building of the Church of Messiah in Kottaramulla, Nattandiya DS (Puttalam District). Another round of stones was thrown on 4 June 2023 and this time, neighboring residents were identified. The police wanted to file a case, but the pastor asked them not to do so and the matter was reconciled at the police station. ([NCEASL Incident Report May 2023](#))
- **In May 2023**, a church leader was threatened and assaulted by his landlord in the Northern province, who demanded that all church gatherings should cease in his property (Source: Open Doors research).

### Specific examples of positive developments

In January 2023, the Supreme Court [ordered](#) former President Sirisena to pay compensation to the families of 2019 Easter bombing victims (Asia News, 13 January 2023, see also above: *Brief description of the persecution situation*). This can be viewed as a positive development, although financial compensation has never been central to the main demands of the victims and church representatives affected.



## 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/>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: paid a first instalment - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Easter-bombings%3A-Sirisena-pays-first-compensation-to-victims-58780.html>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: seven billion USD loan - <https://www.newswire.lk/2023/03/20/imf-approves-the-extendedfund-facility-to-sri-lanka-govt/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: NCEASL Incident Report June 2023 - <https://mailchi.mp/a889c729f35d/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-16843800>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: NCEASL Incident Report June 2023 - <https://mailchi.mp/a889c729f35d/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-16843800>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: NCEASL Incident Report May 2023 - <https://mailchi.mp/379310c01e7d/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-16842112>
- Specific examples of positive developments: ordered - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Former-President-Sirisena-ordered-to-compensate-victims-of-the-Easter-2019-attacks-57514.html>

## WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Sri Lanka

### Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Sri Lanka report	AI Sri Lanka Report 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/sri-lanka/report-sri-lanka/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/sri-lanka/report-sri-lanka/</a>	4 September 2023
BBC News Sri Lanka profile - updated 20 March 2023	BBC Sri Lanka profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611</a>	4 September 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI 2022 Sri Lanka report	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LKA">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LKA</a>	4 September 2023
Crisis24 Sri Lanka report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Sri Lanka report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/sri-lanka">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/sri-lanka</a>	4 September 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2022 - Asia pp.45-50	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf</a>	4 September 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	4 September 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Sri Lanka not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-world/2023</a>	4 September 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2023</a>	8 March 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/sri-lanka/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/sri-lanka/</a>	5 September 2023
Girls Not Brides Sri Lanka report	Girls Not Brides Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/sri-lanka/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/sri-lanka/</a>	5 September 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Sri Lanka country chapter	HRW 2023 Sri Lanka country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/sri-lanka">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/sri-lanka</a>	4 September 2023
Internet World Stats 2023 Sri Lanka	IWS 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#lk">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#lk</a>	5 September 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka">https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka</a>	5 September 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/lka">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/lka</a>	5 September 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Sri Lanka - data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Sri Lanka	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/LKA">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/LKA</a>	5 September 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Sri Lanka	IRFR 2022 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/</a>	5 September 2023
USCIRF 2023 Sri Lanka country report – 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Sri Lanka SWL	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Sri%20Lanka_0.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Sri%20Lanka_0.pdf</a>	5 September 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Sri Lanka - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Sri Lanka 2023	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-lka.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-lka.pdf</a>	5 September 2023
World Bank Sri Lanka data – 2021	World Bank Sri Lanka data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=nco untry=LKA">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=nco untry=LKA</a>	5 September 2023
World Bank Sri Lanka overview - updated 6 October 2022	World Bank Sri Lanka overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/overview</a>	5 September 2023
World Factbook Sri Lanka - updated 29 August 2023	World Factbook Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/</a>	4 September 2023

## 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, the 2022 protest movement was exceptional in several aspects (see below: *Political and legal 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. In 2022 and the first months of 2023, all efforts focused on solving the economic and social crisis facing Sri Lanka and the country saw some success in those efforts. 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, subsequent political developments have dampened these hopes, as the present government is dominated by establishment forces. Fresh elections are due to take place in 2024, by September at the latest.

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 progress at the domestic level was delayed any longer (Daily Mirror LK, 11 February 2021). These demands were echoed by the UN OHCHR which called for an [independent inquiry](#) after the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka had issued its compensation verdict (Newsfirst LK, 19 January 2023).

## Political and legal landscape

While 2023 saw a slight easing of economic pressure after an agreement with the IMF was secured, the [political crisis continued](#). The government lacks public support, has continued to crack down on opposition elements and has postponed elections, which could have provided a proof of legitimacy (USIP, 20 July 2023).

The year 2022 saw unprecedented changes and challenges. Sri Lanka faced its most dire economic situation since gaining independence in 1948. This initially led to large-scale, antigovernment demonstrations (known as "Aragalaya protests") and an unprecedented [ministerial reshuffle](#) involving 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 average Sri Lankan was facing shortages of literally everything and had 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 was yet another illustration of just how dire the economic situation was becoming (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 resign 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 parliament on 20 July; 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). The authorities [continued to act](#) firmly against the leaders of the mostly peaceful protests (The Diplomat, 3 November 2022), but the government's main focus was on the country's dire economic situation.

Viewed against the background of the August 2020 election results, the speed of this political development is quite breathtaking. Back then, 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 Ministry of Finance 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*).

The pushing through of the 20th constitutional amendment had 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 parliament's control 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 an effective 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. 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 2023 Sri Lanka country chapter). 10% of girls are currently married before the age of 18, according to Girls Not Brides Sri Lanka. 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	2,027,000	9.4
Muslim	1,977,000	9.1
Hindu	2,800,000	12.9
Buddhist	14,689,000	67.9
Ethno-religionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	82	0.0
Bahai	19,000	0.1
Atheist	18,000	0.1
Agnostic	111,000	0.5
Other	7,930	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Due to the history of civil war in Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has thrived. Radical Buddhist groups have sprung 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 continued to face attacks by local groups, frequently led by saffron-robed Buddhist monks. It is still 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 continued reports throughout the WWL 2024 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 WWL reporting periods.

It is also worth remembering that 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 on trying to unite the country (see below: *Trends analysis*) shows how heavily this government was 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 2021 a bill was announced to propose that conversions be made a criminal offence. The law is still under debate, and would appear to have support in society: A [study](#) in 2022 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).

## Economic landscape

According to UNDP Human Development Report Sri Lanka:

- **GDP per capita (2017 USD PPP):** 12,200
- **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 World Bank Sri Lanka data:

- Sri Lanka has the status of a lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2017 international USD):** 12,200
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** -7.8% (2022)
- **Inflation:** In June 2022, inflation reached 54.6% and was predicted to be rising. Throughout 2022, the rate was 49.7%.
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 16% (2019). 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.

In its [Development update](#) (4 April 2023) entitled "Time to reset", the World Bank summarized as follows:

- "Sri Lanka's economy contracted by 7.8 percent in 2022. While all key sectors contracted, manufacturing and construction sectors suffered the most amid shortages of inputs and supply chain disruptions. High frequency indicators, such as purchasing managers' indices, indicate continued stress in the first quarter of 2023. After peaking at an unprecedented 69.8 percent in September, headline inflation closed at 57.2 percent in 2022, reflecting the impact of elevated global commodity prices, monetization of fiscal deficits, currency depreciation, and food supply constraints due to the 2021 ban on chemical fertilizers. Since January 2022, the central bank has raised policy rates by a cumulative 1,050 basis points to try curbing inflation. Due to the economic contraction, half a million jobs were lost in industry and services and back-up lower-paying agricultural jobs could not compensate for income losses. Combined with increases in the cost of living, this economic contraction led national and urban poverty to double (to 25 percent) and triple (to 15 percent), respectively. The crisis left 52 percent of the population in estate areas living in poverty, exacerbating spatial disparities, and led to an increase in overall inequality."
- "The currency (LKR) depreciated by 78 percent against the US Dollar between March and May 2022 when it was floating. A return to a managed float, amid the ongoing foreign exchange management strategy, restricted the full year depreciation to 81 percent. However, due to low market confidence, bringing export earnings and remittances to Sri Lanka through formal channels has been challenging, despite mandatory repatriation and conversion rules. The unwinding of speculative Dollar holdings led to sharp appreciation of the LKR in early March 2023 amid sluggish import demand. The overall fiscal deficit is estimated to have declined owing to the implementation of several new revenues measures (including a VAT rate increase from 8 to 15 percent), tightly controlled expenditure and a buildup of arrears to suppliers and contractors. Interest payments continued to absorb more than two-thirds of total revenue."

These numbers make it clear that the general public are bearing the brunt of the economic crisis and the measures agreed with the IMF. Although the hardest part of the crisis may be over for now, the way to recovery will still be a long one, despite having secured an IMF loan.

One of Sri Lanka's most important industries - tourism - took a further battering in 2022, although it slowly started to bounce back as the COVID-measures were lifted. 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 in 2022 was 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%.

Concerning the reasons leading to Sri Lanka's economic meltdown and "[temporarily suspension](#)" of foreign debt payment in April 2022 (Reuters, 12 April 2022), [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). 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).

A country expert summed up the situation as follows:

- "While the freefall of economy has been brought under control to a certain extent, the cost of living still remains high, and many people are struggling to make ends meet. This has in turn affected the self-sustainability of churches. The government imposed high taxes at the start of the year as a precondition to an IMF bailout. The taxes imposed ranged from 6% to 36%, and the taxable income was lowered to Rs. 100,000 per month. This tax calculation system severely impacted professionals and middle-income workers. Trade unions staged protests to show their disapproval as they viewed it as unfair. This increased the economic burden on the people."

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 when it came to 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 ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal](#), accessed 20 June 2023), 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](#)). The female [labor force participation](#) rate was 33.1% in 2022, compared to 70.7% for men (World Bank, Gender Data Portal). Besides societal attitudes toward female employment and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the service sector, where women constitute about 49% of the workforce, a [UN study](#) on Gender Disparities concluded that the low demand for female workers is driven, at least in part, by the challenges associated with financing maternity benefits (UN, 2022, p.86). Denial of inheritance has been reportedly 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 HDR Sri Lanka and the World Factbook Sri Lanka:

- **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 12,3 physicians and 42 hospital beds; the pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1

According to World Bank Sri Lanka data:

- **Population/Age distribution:** 23% of the population are below the age of 14, 11.6% 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 6.7%, the rate of vulnerable employment stands at 37.8% (modeled ILO estimate)

According to the [International Organization for Migration](#) (accessed 23 August 2023):

## IDPs/Refugees

Migration from Sri Lanka has always been stronger than migration to Sri Lanka. UNHCR data from mid-2023 reports 567 refugees and 224 asylum seekers in Sri Lanka, most of them from Pakistan ([Al-Jazeera, 2 February 2024](#)).

According to the UNDP HDR Sri Lanka:

- **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. The World Bank figures quoted above (see: *Economic landscape*) make it very clear that the ordinary citizen suffers most, within a framework of high inflation, a strong rupee depreciation and growing unemployment, leading to a doubling (in rural areas) and tripling (in urban areas) of poverty rates. And even the IMF loan does not bring any immediate relief. While the queueing for daily necessities may have become less or even stopped, the increase in VAT from 8% to 15% (as one of the measures agreed upon with the IMF) shows how hard it will remain for the average person to make a living. 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, the dire economic situation led to even more leaving Sri Lanka. Especially highly skilled professionals are leaving: One result is that Sri Lanka is now facing a significant [shortage of doctors](#). According to the Government Medical Officers Association of Sri Lanka, in the period between May 2022 to May 2023, “a total of 842 graded medical personnel have left the country, and 274 specialist doctors have left the country. There were 30 doctors categorized as emergency services, and 23 of them have left the country, leaving only 7 in Sri Lanka” (NewsFirst LK, 14 August 2023).

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](#) was put under the Ministry of Defense by the Rajapaksa government in 2020, so human rights and minority concerns are likely to continue taking a backseat for some time in the future (RSIS, 11 August 2020).

### Gender perspective

Whilst Sri Lanka has deeply entrenched patrilineal 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. The Muslim population is estimated to be 9.1%. Under Sharia law, it is considered that a wife belongs to her husband's 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 (UNFPA, 2023).

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Sri Lanka):

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

According to World Bank Sri Lanka data

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 141 per 100 people

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023:

- "Internet freedom in Sri Lanka improved slightly during the coverage period. The government no longer blocked social media and other communications to repress protests, and the historic *Aragalaya* (Struggle), a countrywide peaceful mobilization calling for reforms to the country's political culture and economic policies, continued during the coverage period. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in response to the protesters demands, former opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was sworn in as acting president following Gotabaya fleeing the country, was appointed president through an election by Parliament. Wickremesinghe's government implemented emergency regulations to bar purportedly false information, continued the brutal crackdown on online activists and journalists reporting on the *Aragalaya* movement, and introduced draft laws that could encroach on online expression and user privacy. Despite these continued restrictions, Sri Lankans continued to engage in digital activism around a range of issues."
- "Sri Lanka experienced improvements in political rights and civil liberties after the 2015 election of President Maithripala Sirisena, which ended the more repressive rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, the Sirisena administration was slow to implement transitional justice mechanisms needed to address the aftermath of a 26-year civil war between government forces and ethnic Tamil rebels, who were defeated in 2009. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election as president in November 2019 and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's (SLPP) victory in the August 2020 parliamentary polls emboldened the Rajapaksa family, which worked to further empower the executive, specifically the powers of the president, roll back accountability mechanisms for civil war-era rights violations, and further militarize the island, while also entrenching themselves in key positions, including the premiership and finance ministry. During his presidency, Wickremesinghe has continued to crack down on protesters and has sought to maintain an image of stability following the height of the unprecedented economic crisis in the country."
- The country is rated as "Partly Free", but increased by four points in score. Next to the capital, Colombo, the Western Province has the most 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". As Freedom House says: "Post-civil war infrastructure development in the Northern and Eastern provinces was delayed. However, the development of telecommunications infrastructure in these provinces has improved and led to increased internet usage. Nonetheless, compared to urban areas, rural and up-country Tamil communities have significantly lower

computer and digital literacy rates. Some 34.2 percent of the population in rural areas and 11.5 percent in estate areas were categorized as computer literate, compared to 49.1 percent in urban areas, while 58 percent in rural areas and 43 percent in estate areas were categorized as digitally literate compared to 72.4 percent in urban areas."

### 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 by armed pro-Rajapaksa supporters (and police), 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). While protests have not completely ceased in 2023, they have tended to be smaller in size and more focused on specific areas of discontent (e.g. student protests and protests against the unfair distribution of financial burdens with the lower and middle classes taking the brunt of rising prices and increased taxes). This may also be a reaction to the constant government warnings against unrest and the authorities' heavy-handedness against opposition demonstrators.

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 became more complicated following the suicide attacks in April 2019. In addition, the army still has a vast number of active members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009.

According to a Financial Times report on 13 January 2023:

- "More than a decade after the end of a brutal civil war, Sri Lanka maintains [one of the world's largest armed forces](#), on a relative basis, with 200,000 army personnel alone. Premitha Bandara Tennakoon, the junior minister of defence, said the government planned to cut its size to 135,000 army personnel by 2024 and to 100,000 by 2030".

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 Islamic State (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). 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). Despite Cardinal Ranjith's

frequent calls for justice and repeated calls from civil society as well, so far [no progress](#) has been made in the trials and much about the motives, perpetrators and political implications remains obscure (Island LK, 29 October 2023).

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

Sri Lanka's leaders have to navigate 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 had an important voice in the restructuring, 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 new government (which took over in July 2022) is facing very similar challenges, even though it is far from sure if China really plans to create a [military port](#) in Sri Lanka within the next two to five years, as one research report claimed (The Diplomat, 15 August 2023). 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 the economic recovery will develop. As of December 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 all political power and influence. Ex-Prime Minister (now President) Ranil Wickremesinghe - who is now serving in office for a sixth time - 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. While the economic situation may have offered a sliver of optimism for 2023, the government's heavy-handedness against any real or perceived opposition and its [lack of public legitimacy](#) to govern bear the seed for continued struggle and unrest (East Asia Forum, 13 January 2023).

New Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena also served earlier as a minister under Mahinda Rajapaksa. This has led observers to state that the present 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, "Aragalaya" is facing an [uphill battle](#) against the establishment forces represented by the government (Freedom House, 26 October 2023). At the same time, some observers claim that the [spirit of dissent](#) among citizens remains strong one year after the uprising (The Diplomat, 12 July 2023). However, it is clear that the establishment is fighting back and *Dictatorial paranoia* is neither down nor out. It remains to be seen how these two dynamics are playing out in the elections, constitutionally due by September 2024 latest. 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). 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

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- Political and legal landscape: directly controlled - <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/Opposition-slams-power-concentration-on-Rajapaksas/26-704979>
- Political and legal landscape: five ministers and several junior ministers - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/rajapaksa-family-tightens-grip-on-crisis-hit-sri-lanka-15180168>
- Political and legal landscape: 21st amendment - <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/21st-amendment-tumultuous-journey-sri-lanka-constitution>
- Political and legal landscape: weakening grip - <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/sri-lankan-presidents-grip-over-power-turns-more-tenuous/>
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- Security situation: adjourned until March 2022 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/12/sri-lanka-resumes-trials-over-2019-easter-sunday-bombings>
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- Trends analysis: hostility against - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/%E2%80%9Cone-country-one-law%E2%80%9D-sri-lankan-states-hostility-toward-muslims-grows-deeper>

## WWL 2024: 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	1,601,000	79.0
Protestant	304,000	15.0
Independent	182,000	9.0
Unaffiliated	9,900	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-70,900	-3.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,027,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	228,000	11.2
Renewalist movement	415,000	20.5

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**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. 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 (see above: *Map of country*). 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. As a country expert stated: "People often say changing one's religion is similar to forgetting one's own mother."

**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 to 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](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 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Sri Lanka

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	60	58
WWL 2023	57	62
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30

The increase in total score in WWL 2024 by 2.9 points was due to the fact that more incidents on violence were reported, resulting in an increase of the violence score by 2 points. The scores for pressure increased slightly across all spheres of life, but mostly in the Community sphere. This may be due to more reports being obtained after the end of the restrictions brought about by COVID-19 and after the chaos in 2022 resulting from the economic and political upheaval had ceased.

## 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 2022 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).

*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 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. 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.
- **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 a country expert explained: "Sri Lankan culture is family-centered and respecting elders is deeply ingrained in each person from childhood. To non-believing parents and elders in the family, someone's conversion is seen as an act of rebellion, which they have the right to correct using whatever means necessary. Converts, on the other hand, are torn between their love for Christ and their respect for the elders in their family, leaving them struggling with feel-

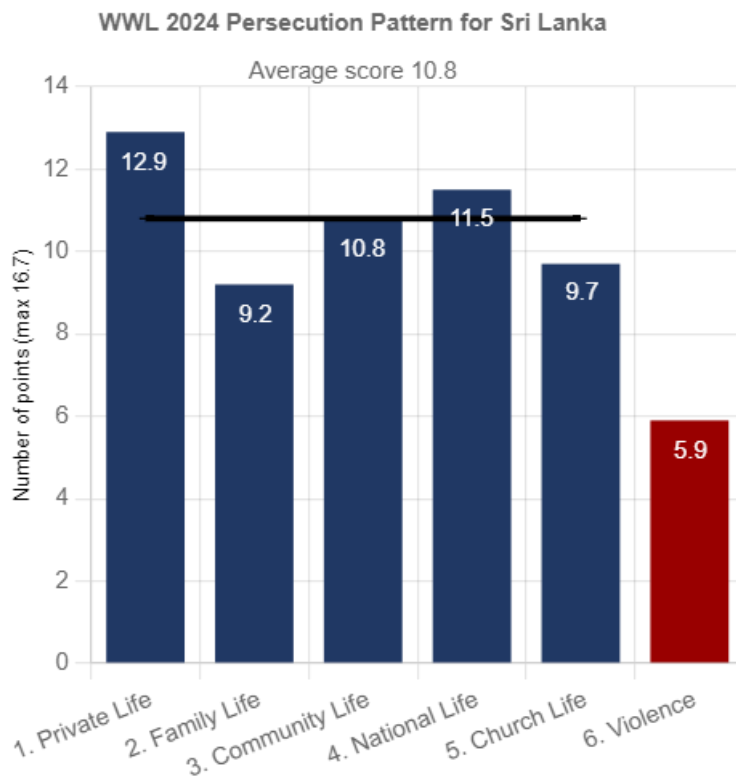
ings of guilt and fear, which heightens the perceived intensity of the persecution."

- **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, have been calling for the protection of the Sinhala majority. As a country expert explained: "Monks also frequently lead mobs when petitions are signed or protests are organized against church constructions. Since Buddhist monks are held in high regard by people, government officials who are devout Buddhists themselves, would bend to the will of these monks. In rural areas, monks tend to have more authority than the police or government officials as a result." Young Buddhist religious leaders have been using social media platforms to promote hatred towards religious minorities in the country. Another 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.
- **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 recent months, political parties were more focused on the dire economic situation. Only the next elections in 2024 will show if invoking *Religious nationalism* in order to gain votes really decreased.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** RSS and Shiva Senai groups are violent religious groups active in the Hindu majority provinces. In their efforts to keep a pure form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and especially in its villages, such groups can act violently towards the Christian minority. This happened less frequently in the past months.

## The Persecution pattern

In the chart below, the WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Average pressure on Christians in Sri Lanka increased very slightly from 10.7 points in WWL 2023 to 10.8 points in WWL 2024.
- 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.
- Violence against Christians increased by 2 points in WWL 2024, reflecting partly a "back to normal" pattern and partly that more reports were obtained after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and the turmoil caused by the economic downturn and political changes had calmed down to a certain extent.



## 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 2024 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. A bill proposing that conversions be made a criminal offence is still under debate, so 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.

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. In some families, parents will not allow converts to speak with younger siblings for fear they too would be converted to Christianity.

**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.

**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.



## 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 a *dhamma* school." (*Dhamma* is the way of life based upon the actions and teachings of Buddha - [BBC Bitesize Religious Studies](#), accessed 8 March 2024).

### **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 Christian 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 at-

tend 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. Since families are close-knit and it is common for relatives or grandparents to live in the same house or close by, children will be told things like "Don't make the same mistakes your parents did," and they try to dissuade children from following Christian 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)**

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 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 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 activi-

ties. 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 3.7: 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 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 was threatened by teachers saying: "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?" A pastor shared that in the WWL 2024 reporting period, there was an incident where the practice of sharing water from one paddy field to the next among farmers, was cut off for Christian converts.

**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.). (3.25 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 2024 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. A country expert also shared that, throughout the WWL 2024 reporting period, there was "a noticeable increase in surveillance targeted at the Christian community. This surveillance is primarily carried out by law enforcement entities, including police officers, military officials, Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Terrorist Investigation Division (TID). These authorities have been consistently visiting places of worship, faith-based NGOs, and pastors, contributing to an atmosphere of scrutiny and apprehension."

## 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.

A country expert added: "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 additional 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. The general culture of venerating Buddhist monks (explained above under *Drivers - non-Christian religious leaders*) is a main reason why perpetrators are generally being left unpunished.

**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. As a country expert said, a common trend is noticeable that individuals belonging to the dominant religion of the respective area are frequently selected for such positions. In Buddhist-dominant regions, Buddhists are predominantly appointed, while in Hindu-dominant areas, Hindus are most often chosen. In many cases, Christians and Christian human rights organizations are accused of creating 'social disharmony' (which can best be understood by 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."

### **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 reported (IRFR 2022 Sri Lanka, p.4): "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."

A more recent circular is likely to cause even more challenges (see 4.1). As the US State Department report says on p.9: "On April 21 [2022], the government issued a new circular outlining requirements for construction, maintenance, and registration of religious places. In November, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana reported that registration requirements included a land deed, approval from the local government authority, at least one trustee, a mechanism to conduct regular religious programs, access to sanitary facilities, sufficient families residing in the area surrounding the site, and non-obstruction of existing religious institutions. Some civil society critics and lawyers said the circular was not based on existing law and thus was not constitutional. NCEASL and other civil society representatives said the government used the regulation to unfairly target minority places of worship. Some Christian groups said that government officials deemed Christian places of worship unauthorized or illegal if they failed to produce proof of registration and threatened them with legal action if they did not register. If the groups tried to register, however, they said the registration process continued indefinitely without resolution."

**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 church communities.

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 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. Villagers also resort to practicing witchcraft in attempts to shut down local 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 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. 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 WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Sri Lanka: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	7	4
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	5	4
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	0
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)?	10 *	21
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?	5	3



Sri Lanka: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
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?	1	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	7	9
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	0

For the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Churches attacked:** At least seven churches were attacked, although various other actions by mobs occurred as well.
- **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 are officially 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:** There have been several detentions, sometimes for the sake of "keeping the peace" in the village, sometimes in connection with false accusations against pastors.

## 5 Year trends

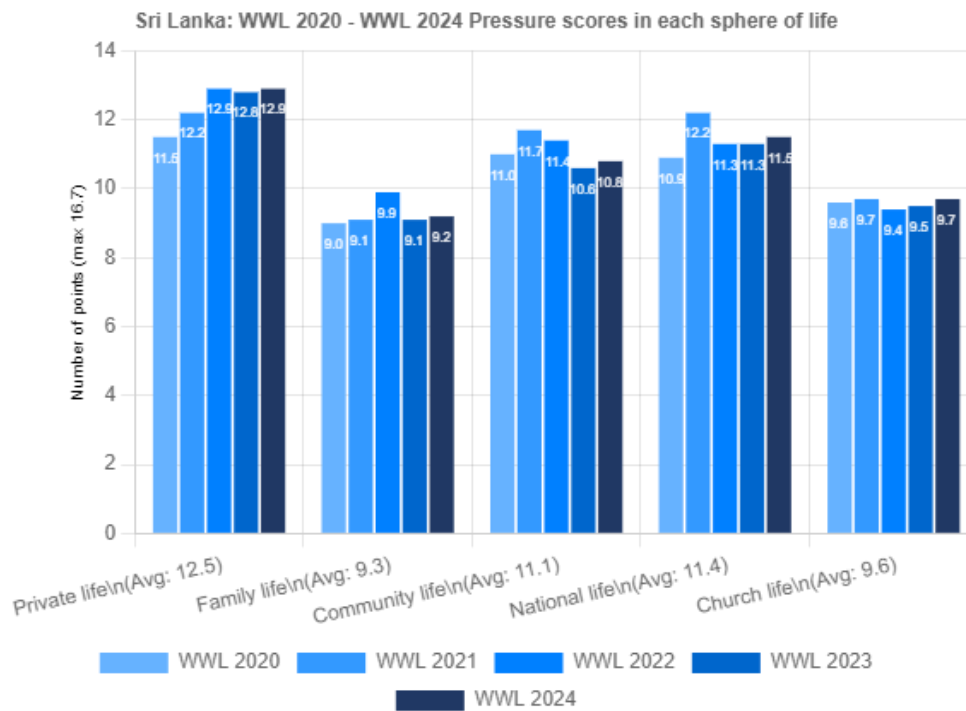
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Sri Lanka: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	10.8
2023	10.7
2022	11.0
2021	11.0
2020	10.4

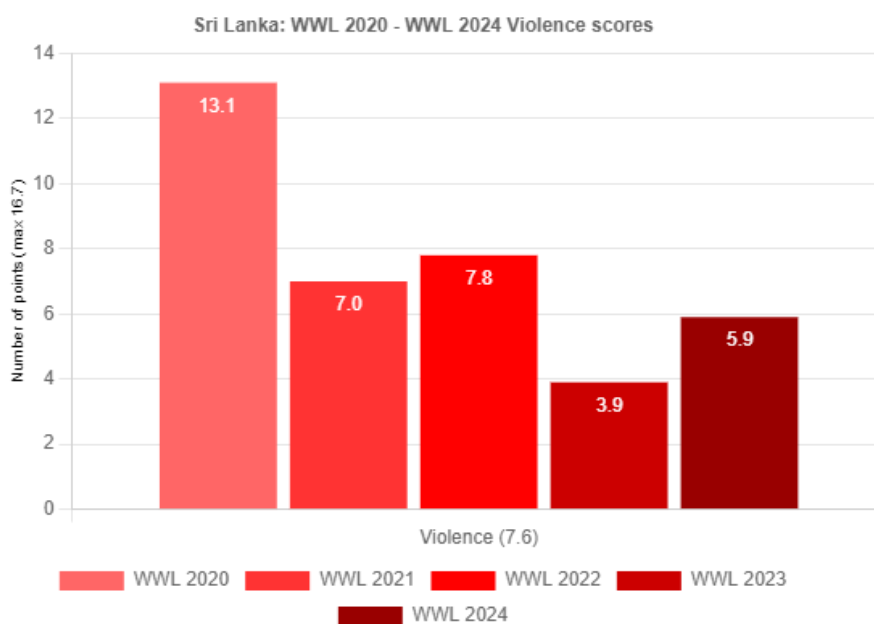
The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians has remained more or less stable in the last four WWL reporting periods, with scores of 10.7-11.0 points.

## 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. With the notable exception of *Church life*, the scores for pressure in all spheres have increased since WWL 2020. Churches have continued to be attacked (often due to allegedly lacking permits), but pastors have been standing up for their and their congregants constitutional rights, even though they do not always succeed.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



For some years before the WWL 2020 reporting period, 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 in WWL 2023, when the authorities and communities were more focused on coping with the country's economic and political crisis than on dealing aggressively with Christians. In WWL 2024, the pattern is returning again to a more "normal" shape, although the level of violence is not back to pre-pandemic and pre-crisis levels.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

The continuing economic crisis, paired with the legacy of COVID-19 and climate emergencies have led to devastating impacts on the security of women in Sri Lanka, with drastically increased violence against women and girls. [UN Women](#) (Asia and The Pacific, accessed 21 March 2024) notes that along with considerable spikes in cases of domestic and/or intimate partner violence, the crises have also led to spikes in human trafficking, sexual bribery, exploitative sex work, rape and femicide.

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, June 2020, "[Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)", p.42). However, the Sri Lankan government has continuously failed to adequately investigate and hold perpetrators accountable for gender-based violence, trafficking and related violence. For example, almost all rape cases committed by soldiers during Sri Lanka's civil war have not been prosecuted resulting in under-reporting and impunity.

Sexual assault is a weapon used against all women, regardless of religion. For a Christian woman however, she 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.”

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. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to this kind of isolation in light of Sri Lanka’s patriarchal society, and ,any female converts find it difficult to overcome the verbal harassment they receive from their families and communities. Women grapple with increasing burdens of unpaid care work and shrinking incomes, along with shrinking social protection systems; this means that women’s access to protection and justice in Sri Lanka also continues to decrease. A country expert comments: “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	Violence – psychological; 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 man is 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 2022 Sri Lanka):

- "Jehovah's Witnesses reported that some religious groups present in the country for decades still found it difficult to register and be recognized as a Christian religion. Jehovah's Witnesses said they had been present and active in the country for over a century and reported more than 7,000 members in the country. Despite multiple meetings with the Ministry of Buddhasasana and the Department of Christian Affairs in 2020 and 2021, they said they did not receive clear guidelines regarding registration and as an unregistered religious group, did not receive the same rights and privileges as registered religious groups."
- "The government continued to require all imported Islamic religious books, including the Quran, undergo review before being released as part of what the Ministry of Defense (MOD) said was a counterterrorism measure to screen for extremist content."
- "On February 2 [2022], Fathima Famitha Rameez, a Muslim teacher who was assigned to teach at Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in Trincomalee, was confronted and threatened by a group of persons in the principal's office; one member of the group allegedly attempted to strangle her. When police arrived at the school, the principal accused Rameez of pushing her and injuring her leg; both the principal and Rameez were admitted to the hospital. Rameez said she was blocked from working at the school because she wore an abaya."
- "On May 9 [2022], several hotels and houses in Negombo were attacked, set on fire and looted during country-wide protests that turned violent. On May 10, a group of persons attacked the majority-Muslim Deen Junction neighborhood in Negombo, alleging that the May 9 looters were Muslims. They attacked 16 Muslim-owned shops and set vans, three-wheelers, motorcycles, and bicycles on fire. Three Muslims and one Sinhalese Buddhist injured in the attack were taken to Negombo Hospital."

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 COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021 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).

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 central 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. In 2023, the middle class in particular has been feeling the financial strain and it is an open question what the outcome of the 2024 elections will be. According to the Constitution, these have to be held somewhere before September 2024. The opposition movement has tended to transcend all ethnic and religious divisions, but it is an open question whether this can translate into actual 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.

## 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>
- Drivers of persecution description: instrumental - <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/621/341/892/6213418929bfa869712586.pdf>
- Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points): BBC Bitesize Religious Studies - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zr7ck2p/revision/1>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: UN Women - <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/sri-lanka/evaw>
- 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>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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