

Sri Lanka: Freedom of religion or belief

September 2018 · For public use

Introduction

Although freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) always intersects with other human rights issues, this is especially the case in Sri Lanka. FoRB is also affected by the wider climate of fear among the minority community and the restrictive climate in which civil society organisations operate.

Positive steps

In March 2014 the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) adopted a resolution on reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, requesting the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to undertake a comprehensive investigation into alleged serious violations of human rights. The resolution noted that the HRC was ‘alarmed at the significant surge in attacks against members of religious minority groups in Sri Lanka, including Hindus, Muslims and Christians.’

In 2015 Sri Lanka co-sponsored a resolution entitled ‘Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka’, by which the government pledged to implement a robust transitional justice process and reaffirmed that ‘all Sri Lankans are entitled to the full enjoyment of their human rights regardless of religion, belief or ethnicity...’

Continued violence against religious minorities

Despite these positive steps and the international attention given to FoRB violations, religious intolerance in Sri Lanka has been on the rise since 2000, and especially since the end of the civil war in 2009. Acts of violence motivated by religious hatred have increased since 2012, and these crimes are committed in an environment of impunity. Nationalist groups continue to discriminate against, intimidate and attack Muslim and Christian communities.

The Secretariat for Muslims recorded over 450 incidents of violence and intolerance against Muslims between 2013 and 2015, the majority triggered by hate speech. In June 2014 the southern coastal towns of Aluthgama and Beruwala witnessed Sri Lanka’s largest ever anti-Muslim violence, led by the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organisation Bodu Bala Sena. Four people were reported killed and approximately 10,000 were displaced. On the second anniversary in June 2016, Bodu Bala Sena threatened to repeat the violence.

A ten-day state of emergency was imposed in the wake of communal violence between Buddhist nationalists and the Muslim community in Digana and Teldeniya, in Kandy administrative district on 27 February 2018. The violence reportedly resulted in the torching of dozens of houses and business establishments belonging to the Muslim community, with at least four mosques destroyed. There was one reported death.

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) estimates that Christians were subject to 195 incidents of discrimination, intimidation and violence between 2015 and June 2017. For example, in some instances church leaders are forced to sign documents to say that they will not carry out religious activities. Such statistics are denied or ignored by the government.

Although Sri Lankan legislation does not require the registration of religious places of worship or any religious body, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment (presently the Ministry of Buddha Sasana) issued a Circular on 16 October 2008 concerning the construction of new places of worship. This has been used by law enforcement and local government officials to discriminate against religious minority groups and their places of worship, and to close churches arbitrarily and with force.

Those who attempt to defend or speak out for religious minorities are also subject to persecution. Prominent human rights lawyer Lakshan Dias quoted the NCEASL statistic (see above) during a television interview and was consequently threatened with disbarment unless he retracted his comment and apologised within 24 hours.

CSW everyone
free to believe

Recommendations

- Ensure that the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights undertakes a comprehensive investigation into alleged serious violations of human rights in Sri Lanka.
- Encourage the Sri Lankan government to fulfil its obligations under the 2015 resolution on 'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka', which stated that 'all Sri Lankans are entitled to the full enjoyment of their human rights regardless of religion, belief or ethnicity...' and where the government pledged to implement a robust transitional justice process.
- Call on the Sri Lankan government to bring an end to the culture of impunity surrounding religious intolerance and persecution by launching full investigations into instances of discrimination or persecution of religious minorities, and bringing the perpetrators to justice where possible.
- Encourage the government of Sri Lanka to prosecute those responsible for hate speech against religious minorities, and ensure that justice is done.
- Ensure the government of Sri Lanka provides aid to the internally displaced persons from Aluthgama and Beruwala.
- Call on the government of Sri Lanka to repeal the 2008 circular on construction of places of worship and/or ensure that it is not misused to intimidate members of religious minorities.
- Encourage the government of Sri Lanka to ensure that the right to freedom of expression is respected and defended, and that those speaking out on behalf of religious minorities are permitted to do so.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.