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SRI LANKA

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Introduction

1. ADF International is a global alliance-building legal organization that advocates for religious freedom, life, and marriage and family before national and international institutions. As well as having ECOSOC consultative status with the United Nations (registered name “Alliance Defending Freedom”), ADF International has accreditation with the European Commission and Parliament, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Organization of American States, and is a participant in the FRA Fundamental Rights Platform.
2. This report explains how Sri Lanka needs to assess and follow its commitment to freedom of religion.

(a) Religious Freedom

1. Sri Lanka provides all citizens the freedom to adopt, practice, and teach any religion of their choice in Articles 10 and 14(1)(e) of its Constitution, but grants to Buddhism “the foremost place” in the country, and that “accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana.”
2. Buddhism has been present in Sri Lanka since the third century B.C., and while there are local traditions concerning the introduction of Christianity in Sri Lanka during the Indian mission of the Apostle Thomas in the first century A.D., Christianity’s numbers on the island country only became significant in the wake of Portuguese missions in the 16th century. This has led to many Sri Lankans considering Christianity to be a foreign and colonial religion.¹
3. Sri Lanka is approximately 70% Buddhist, 13% Hindu, 10% Muslim, and 7% Christian.² The law of Sri Lanka has historically afforded a great deal of consideration to religious tolerance and coexistence, but recently it has been alleged that authorities have acted in concert with or at least given tacit and passive approval to Buddhist nationalist organizations, such as when mosques and churches are destroyed while security forces stand by.³
4. There have also been reports of formal and informal attempts at clamping down on attempted conversions, as well as of unfair and inconsistent restrictions on registration and permit approvals with respect to evangelical denominations.⁴

¹ Release International, Country Profile: Sri Lanka, 2016, <http://www.releaseinternational.org/sri-lanka/>.

² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2015/sca/256317.htm>.

³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2014, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2013/sca/222341.htm>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2011 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2012, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2011/sca/192935.htm>.

5. It has been reported that a network of extremist Buddhists has been growing across Asia, and that Sri Lanka is one of the hubs, with allegations that in 2014 the Ravana Balaya organization contacted over twenty evangelical prayers services, telling them to cease their activities and accusing them of proselytizing Buddhists and Hindus through bribery and offering gifts and money.⁵
6. Numerous testimonies have been gathered by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, some of which involve Buddhist militants attacking churches and the homes of Christian ministers, including the use of petrol bombs, mob confrontations, and death threats to try and intimidate Christians into ceasing their church-related work or leaving their Buddhist-dominated communities entirely.⁶
7. In 2014 alone, 79 pastors were reported to have been beaten, threatened, assaulted, arrested, or humiliated, and 32 churches were reported to have been attacked, closed, or desecrated.⁷
8. One such incident in February 2014 involved a pastor and his wife being dragged from their home and beaten by a 250-strong mob led by eleven monks from the *Bodu Bala Sena* or Buddhist Strength Force, demanding that the couple cease holding their religious services and warning other villagers against “traitors” and levelling threats at them if they were to support Christian worship.⁸
9. As recently as 5th January 2017, a church building in the north-western region of the country was destroyed by a mob of Buddhist extremists, who allegedly threatened the Christians present. 200 witnesses have testified that the mob was carrying sticks, iron bars, and knives, and despite many of them having identified and named the monk leading the crowd, he remains free on bail.⁹
10. Reports have also alleged that the legislative framework surrounding the registration of religious communities is discriminatory, due to the use of the vague term “traditional religions” when informing government authorities on how to treat any given religious group, as well as the misuse of guidance from the then-Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs to lend a legal veneer to closing down existing churches and restricting the religious freedom of Christians not belonging to either the Roman Catholic Church or the National Christian Council.¹⁰

⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Sri Lanka Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2015, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2015/04/23/report/2566/article.htm>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Release International, Country Profile: Sri Lanka, 2016, <http://www.releaseinternational.org/sri-lanka/>.

⁸ ACNS, Sri Lanka: Cautious welcome for police unit for religious disputes, 2014, <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2014/04/sri-lanka-cautious-welcome-for-police-unit-for-religious-disputes.aspx>.

⁹ Premier Radio, UK Government condemns destruction of Sri Lankan church, 2017, <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/UK-Government-condemns-destruction-of-Sri-Lankan-church>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

11. In 2014 a special police unit was established specifically to deal with religious complaints, prompting members of Ravana Balaya to occupy the buildings of the Ministry in the capital city of Colombo in order to demand its dissolution, calling it “a conspiracy led by the Western powers” and saying that “nowhere else in the world has there been a special police unit set up to investigate religions.”¹¹
12. The establishment of the unit was itself met with a cautious and lukewarm response from faith groups who have been targeted by militants, due to government authorities already having had adequate power to protect religious freedom (and failing to properly utilize it) and worries that it would only serve to embolden extremists further.¹²

(d) Recommendations

13. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Sri Lanka:
 - a. Recognize and respect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all citizens and residents of Sri Lanka, and avoid privileging the Buddhist faith to the point that the fundamental rights and freedoms of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and other religious and ethnic minorities are infringed upon;
 - b. Fight sectarian and vigilante violence perpetrated by or against any religious, ethnic, or cultural group, and work to prevent and end any passivity towards or tacit approval of such by government and security authorities;
 - c. Work to eradicate complicity or passivity on the part of government officials when it comes to vigilante and mob violence against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities;
 - d. Continue to investigate crimes that have been committed against religious minorities, condemn all acts of intimidation of or violence against members of religious minorities, and bring all perpetrators to justice; and
 - e. Work to prevent and end any State-based discrimination, both in law and in practice, against churches and Christian individuals and communities, especially those which are not part of either the Roman Catholic Church or the National Christian Council.

¹¹ Al Jazeera, Sri Lanka monks occupy ministry building, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/05/sri-lanka-monks-occupy-ministry-building-2014528103425654560.html>.

¹² ACNS, Sri Lanka: Cautious welcome for police unit for religious disputes, 2014, <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2014/04/sri-lanka-cautious-welcome-for-police-unit-for-religious-disputes.aspx>.