

SRI LANKA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change religion. The law recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The constitution and other laws accord Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths and commit the government to protecting it while respecting the rights of religious minorities. According to representatives of minority religious communities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government officials continued to engage in systematic discrimination against religious minorities. Local government officials and police reportedly responded minimally or not at all to numerous incidents of religiously motivated violence against minorities. Religious minorities reported government officials and police often sided with religious majorities and did not prevent harassment of religious minorities and their places of worship. On Easter Sunday, April 21, the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), a local Islamic group swearing allegiance to ISIS, carried out suicide attacks on three churches and four luxury hotels, killing more than 250 civilians and injuring more than 500. In the aftermath, the government banned three organizations it labeled Muslim extremists, including NTJ, and temporarily banned face coverings. Although the government deployed security forces and police to control subsequent anti-Muslim violence, Muslim religious and civil society leaders reported some police stood idly by while attacks occurred. On May 12-13, mobs led by Buddhist monks and encouraged online by Sinhalese nationalist politicians from small parties affiliated with the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party attacked and vandalized mosques, Muslim-owned businesses, and homes in Kurunegala, Gampaha, and Puttalam Districts, resulting in the death of one Muslim man and extensive property damage. An investigation by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka found, “Mobs appear to have had a free hand to engage in the destruction of mosques” in several Northwestern Province towns, as well as in destruction of Muslim homes, businesses and vehicles. These attacks started to subside in May. NGOs reported in April police arrested writer Shakthika Sathkumara and held him for four months after a group of Buddhist monks said a short story he published had insulted Buddhism. Religious rights groups reported police continued to prohibit, impede, and close Christian and Muslim places of worship, citing government regulations, which legal scholars said did not apply. Media reports stated police and military personnel were complicit in allowing Buddhists to build religious structures on Hindu sites.

During the year, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 94 incidents of attacks on churches, intimidation of and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services, compared with 88 in 2018. According to NCEASL, on September 21, a group of approximately 10 villagers assaulted six Christians from the Berea Prayer House in Kalkudah, Batticaloa District while on their way to church. Five individuals were hospitalized. According to civil society groups, highly visible social media campaigns targeting religious minorities continued to fuel hatred and incite violence. According to media, on May 15, Gnanasara Thero, a senior Buddhist monk, called for the stoning to death of Muslims, and propagated an unfounded allegation that Muslim-owned restaurants put “sterilization medicine” in their food to suppress the majority Sinhalese Buddhist birthrate. Buddhist nationalist groups, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, Buddhist Power Force), used social media to promote what it called the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrated religious and ethnic minorities. Media reports said some Muslim businesses were failing due to anti-Muslim boycotts.

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday terror attacks, the U.S. Ambassador issued a statement condemning the attacks and urging the country’s citizens to remain unified. Embassy officials repeatedly urged political leaders to defend religious minorities and protect religious freedom for all, emphasizing the importance of religious minorities in the national reconciliation process. Embassy personnel met often with religious and civic leaders to foster interfaith dialogue and hosted a national Youth Forum workshop in November, bringing together religiously diverse youth from across the country. The U.S. government funded multiple foreign assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith and interreligious cooperation, dialogue, and confidence building.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The 2012 national census lists the population as 70.2 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian. According to census data, the Theravada Buddhist community, which comprises nearly all the country’s Buddhists, is a majority in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western Provinces.

Most Sinhalese are Buddhist. Tamils, mainly Hindu with a significant Christian minority, constitute the majority in the Northern Province and constitute the second largest group, after Muslims, in the Eastern Province. Most Muslims self-

identify as a separate ethnic group, rather than as Tamil or Sinhalese. When a woman of any religion marries a Muslim, she must convert to Islam and is identified as Muslim. Tamils of Indian origin, who are mostly Hindu, have a large presence in the Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces. Muslims form a plurality in the Eastern Province, and there are sizable Muslim populations in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Western Provinces. Christians reside throughout the country but have a larger presence in the Eastern, Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces, and a smaller presence in Sabaragamuwa and Uva Provinces.

Most Muslims are Sunni, with small Sufi, Ahmadi, and Shia, including Dawoodi Bohra, minorities. An estimated 82 percent of Christians are Roman Catholic. Other Christian groups include Church of Ceylon (Anglicans), the Dutch Reformed Church, Methodists, Baptists, Assembly of God, Pentecostals, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Christian evangelical and nondenominational Protestant groups have grown in recent years, although there are no reliable estimates of their numbers. According to the government, membership remains low compared with the larger Christian community. There is a small Jewish population living in different parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, every person is “entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” including the freedom to choose a religion. The constitution gives citizens the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, or teaching, both in public and in private. The constitution accords Buddhism the “foremost place” among the country’s religious faiths and requires the government to protect it, although it does not recognize it as the state religion. According to a 2003 Supreme Court ruling, the state is constitutionally required to protect only Buddhism, and other religions do not have the same right to state protection. The same ruling also holds that no fundamental right to proselytize exists or is protected under the constitution. In 2017 the Supreme Court determined the right to propagate one’s religion is not protected by the constitution.

The law recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. There is no registration requirement for central religious bodies of these four groups. New religious groups, including groups affiliated with the four recognized

religions, must register with the government to obtain approval to construct new places of worship, sponsor religious worker (missionary) visas/immigration permits, operate schools, and apply for subsidies for religious education. Religious organizations may also seek incorporation by an act of parliament, which requires a simple majority and affords religious groups state recognition.

The government adheres to a 2008 ministerial circular, introduced by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana (the cabinet ministry responsible for oversight of what the constitution describes as the country's foremost religion, Theravada Buddhism), requiring all groups, regardless of their religion, to receive permission from the ministry to register and construct new places of worship. A 2017 Supreme Court ruling upholds 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.

Specific government ministers are responsible for addressing the concerns of each major religious community. Departmental and ministerial assignments are based on the religion of the respective incumbent minister and change when a new minister of a different faith takes office – a customary political tradition that has spanned the past several governments.

Religion is a compulsory subject at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools. Parents may elect to have their children study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity, provided enough demand (at least 15 students) exists within the school for the chosen subject. Students may not opt out of religious instruction even if instruction in their religion of choice is not available, or if they do not choose any religion. All schools, including private schools founded by religious organizations, teaching the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus must use the Ministry of Education curriculum on religion, which covers the four main religions and is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary Level exams (equivalent to U.S. grade 10). International schools not following the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus are not required to teach religious studies.

Matters related to family law, including divorce, child custody, and property inheritance, are adjudicated either under customary law of the ethnic or religious group in question or under the country's civil law. According to the 1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, Islamic personal law governs marriages and divorces of Muslims, while civil law applies to most property rights. According to civil society groups in the Northern Province, civil law governs marriages, while the *Thesawalamai* (Hindu) customary law often governs the division of property.

Similarly, civil society activists report that for Sinhalese, Kandyian personal law governs civil matters, such as inheritance issues, and works within the caste system. Civil law governs most marriages of Sinhalese and Tamils of various religions, including mixed marriages or those of individuals who state no religious affiliation. Religious community members report practices vary by region, and numerous exceptions exist.

The Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951 does not stipulate a minimum age for marriage, permitting Islamic religious court judges to allow children as young as 12 to be married. Written consent from the bride is not required. The religious marriage ceremony and marriage registration do not have to take place concurrently, which can complicate divorce and child support cases.

There is no national law regulating ritual animal sacrifice, but there are laws prohibiting animal cruelty, used to prevent religious ceremonies involving animal sacrifice.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The country's ICCPR Act, which is designed to incorporate the international covenant into domestic law, criminalizes propagating or advocating religious or racial hatred. Punishments range from fines to up to 10 years imprisonment.

Government Practices

On Easter Sunday, April 21, the NTJ, a local Islamic group swearing allegiance to ISIS, carried out suicide attacks targeting Easter Sunday services attendees at three churches and patrons of four luxury hotels that cater to foreign tourists. According to the government, more than 250 civilians were killed and more than 500 were injured.

On April 22, the government declared a nationwide state of emergency, during which it banned face coverings, such as the burqa and *niqab*, citing national security and public safety. It also banned three Islamist organizations described by the government as extremist: NTJ, Jamathe Millathe Ibrahim, and Vilayath As Seylani. The state of emergency expired on August 22, but the government continued to ban the three Islamist groups under the Prevention of Terrorism. The ban on face coverings lapsed with the end of the state of emergency.

In the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings, media reported several days of mob violence occurred in towns primarily across Northwestern Province; mosques and Muslim-owned homes and businesses were attacked. One man was killed with a sword. Through emergency regulation, the government restricted access to social media and deployed police and security forces to prevent anti-Muslim violence. An investigation by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, however, stated, “There appeared to be no preventive measures taken although retaliatory violence against the Muslim communities was a distinct possibility after the terror attacks,” and noted also that despite many villagers in affected areas phoning police and requesting protection in the hours prior to the mob violence, “No preventative measures were taken.”

Damage estimates from the May mob violence varied widely, with former government minister Nalin Bandara conservatively estimating the damage to include the destruction of 14 mosques, 86 houses, and 96 shops. In the ethnically and religiously mixed area of Minuwangoda, Gampaha alone, the local government divisional secretariat reported 12 houses, 64 business places, one mosque, and nine vehicles damaged. At the same time, in the mostly Sinhala Buddhist area of Kurunegala, the NGO Muslim Aid assessed that 147 houses, 132 business places, 29 mosques, 52 vehicles, and two common facilities were damaged due to the anti-Muslim violence.

Police reported a total of 60 persons were arrested in connection with the mob violence, but there were only nine arrests in Hettipola, 10 in Kuliyaipitiya, and 14 in Minuwangoda, despite traditional and social media video reports showing that mobs were far larger in these areas. Among those arrested were leaders of the Sinhalese nationalist groups: Amith Weerasinghe of Mahason Balakaya, Dan Priyasad of New Sinha Le, and Namal Kumara of the “Anti-Corruption Front.” All were subsequently released. Weerasinghe was previously arrested for inciting violence during anti-Muslim riots in Kandy district in March 2018. In a May 15 interview with the *Daily Mirror*, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) General Secretary and Member of Parliament Dayasiri Jayasekara admitted he took the arrested rioters in his personal car from one police station to another police station, where they were later released on bail. At year’s end, there were no prosecutions related to the May mob violence. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka investigation found police inappropriately released suspects detained for mob violence and concluded this “clearly prevented equal protection of the law to affected citizens and also to the public at large.”

At year's end, no convictions were reported in the 2018 anti-Muslim attacks in Kandy District that left two dead and 28 injured and resulted in significant damage to mosques, houses, shops, and vehicles. Media reported 81 arrests in connection with the violence.

Media reported Amith Weerasinghe, leader of Mahason Balakaya, who was arrested in March 2018 in connection with the Kandy riots, stayed six months in pretrial remand before authorities released him on bail in October 2018. He was arrested again in May for organizing anti-Muslim mob violence, and the Colombo additional magistrate granted him bail of two million rupees (\$11,000) on June 4. The magistrate advised him to refrain from making statements that could be identified as hate speech or statements that could result in public unrest. Authorities also banned Weerasinghe from attending political rallies.

By year's end, the government had not fully compensated owners for property damage they sustained during the March 2018 riots in Kandy District, even though the prime minister instructed that all compensation should be paid by July 2018. Media reports and public statements from Muslim politicians affirmed many victims of the 2018 violence continued to await compensation.

NCEASL said Christian evangelical groups continued to state police and local government officials were complicit in physical attacks on and harassment of religious minorities and their places of worship. Christian groups said officials and police often sided with the religious majority.

On April 14, Aadara Sevana (Abode of Love), a social service and prayer center run by the Methodist Church in Kundichchaankulama, Anuradhapura, came under attack during its Palm Sunday service. According to media reports, a group of 20-25 Sinhalese Buddhists shouted death threats and threw stones and firecrackers. The attackers then locked the gates and held the 15 congregants and two clergy for nearly two hours until police arrived. Police requested the church not permit worshippers from other villages attend their services; no arrests were made. A similar group led by SLPP Party *Pradeshiya Sabha* (local council) Councilor Nalin Siriwardene previously attacked the same church in March, with no arrests made. According to press reports, at an April 18 public meeting with then-prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Bishop Asiri Perera, president of the country's Methodist Church said, "I wonder if the police act only for a segment of society, and don't believe it must protect everyone equally. Each time a church comes under attack, we hear about how the church was barely able to make a complaint to the police. Victims go seeking protection and return feeling utterly insecure."

According to Christian, Hindu, and Muslim civil society groups, official harassment often occurred in concert with harassment by local Buddhist monks and Buddhist nationalist organizations. According to civil society sources, on February 24, a group of approximately 200 individuals led by four Buddhist monks forcibly entered the Christian Family Church premises in Galgamuwa. They demanded the pastor stop her worship service and threatened congregants using obscene language. The Buddhists damaged furniture and vandalized the building. Some of them seized a female congregant, dragged her into the street, threw her at the feet of the monks, and beat her. The pastor lodged a police complaint against the assailants; the Buddhist monks also filed a police complaint stating the pastor had breached the peace in the area. At year's end, the breach of peace case was dismissed; however, the assault case continued.

Media reported that on April 1, police arrested writer Shakthika Sathkumara and held him for four months after a group of Buddhist monks, led by Agulugalle Siri Jinananda Thero of the Buddhist Information Centre, filed a complaint under the ICCPR Act, which has thus far only been used to arrest individuals deemed to have offended Buddhism. Sathkumara had published a fictional short story *Ardha* (Half) that referred to homosexuality and child abuse at a Buddhist temple. Sathkumara was released on bail on August 5; the charges against him remained pending at year's end. On July 29, Amnesty International declared Sathkumara a prisoner of conscience. Sathkumara filed a fundamental rights petition challenging the constitutionality of his arrest, which the court scheduled to review on July 28, 2020.

Media reported that on October 17, the police Organized Crimes Prevention Division (OCPD) questioned playwright Malaka Devapriya for four hours about a series of radio dramas he directed. Police acted after Buddhist monk Jinananda Thero of the Buddhist Information Center filed a complaint under the ICCPR Act, stating the dramas were a blasphemous distortion of Buddhist terminology.

Commenting in October on the Sathkumara and Devapriya cases, representatives of NGO Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice said, "The readiness of the police to pursue spurious complaints against artists perceived to have insulted Buddhism lies in stark contrast to the shocking lack of action against the hate speech of Buddhist extremists, including those who have incited physical violence against Muslim communities and other minorities in Sri Lanka in recent times."

Despite a public awareness campaign by the Department of Christian Religious Affairs that began in 2016 to encourage local congregations of nondenominational groups to register as religious organizations, at year's end the government did not register any new groups. Instead, unregistered Christian groups continued to incorporate as commercial trusts, legal societies, or NGOs to engage in financial transactions, open bank accounts, and hold property. Without formal government recognition through the registration process, however, nondenominational churches said they could not sponsor religious worker visas for visiting clergy and faced restrictions on holding meetings or constructing new places of worship. According to Christian groups, they experienced two major difficulties in complying with local officials' registration requirements. First, rural congregations often could not obtain deeds to land due to the degradation of hard-copy Land Registry documentation and incomplete land surveys. Second, without the consent of the majority of the local community or the local Buddhist temple, local councils often opted not to approve the construction of new religious buildings. Church leaders said they repeatedly appealed to local government officials and the ministry responsible for Christian religious affairs for assistance, with limited success.

On January 12, according to NCEASL, the pastor of Foursquare Church, Kalkudah, Batticaloa District, filed a police complaint stating that neighbors were shouting obscene threats at the church. On January 22, Kalkudah police officials, after recording statements from both parties, sided with the pastor's neighbors and ordered him to stop his religious worship activities until he registered his church. According to NCEASL, the congregants moved their service to a different location for a few weeks but moved back to Kalkudah and continued their services without further reports of harassment.

NCEASL reported that on October 26, two officers in civilian clothes from Deniyaya Police Station arrived at the Hokma Bible Center in Deniyaya, Matara District, ordered the pastor to stop the prayer service immediately, and told the congregants to leave. According to the NCEASL report, the police stated the church was unauthorized and needed to be registered if the pastor wished to continue. Police verbally ordered the congregants to leave, but the pastor asked police to convey this order in writing, which they did on October 27. On October 28, while the pastor and his family were away, police and three villagers surveyed the perimeter of the pastor's home and took a series of photographs, but no police action followed.

Media reported that on June 3, crowds gathered in Kandy District in support of an influential Buddhist monk, Athuraliye Rathana, who began a hunger strike and

called for the resignation of three Muslim politicians whom he accused of having links to the Easter Sunday attackers. Rathana did not provide any evidence to support his accusation. Two Muslim provincial governors and all Muslim ministers resigned from their posts to protest threats they said the community faced. All nine Muslim ministers subsequently returned to their posts. Media reported on May 22, then-president Maithripala Sirisena pardoned Buddhist monk and general secretary of the BBS Gnanasara Thero, who served less than one year of a six-year prison sentence for intimidating human rights activist Sandya Eknaligoda on court premises during a hearing at which military intelligence officers were accused of abducting her husband, journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda.

According to government gazette notifications, the ban on face coverings instituted by the government following the April 21 bombings lapsed when the state of emergency ended on August 27. Due to confusion about the status of the ban, police arrested four women in Colombo on August 31 for wearing the *niqab*, but released them the same day. Media reported the cabinet discussed legislation to permanently ban full-face covering in public places but delayed any decision after Muslim political leaders asked for time for deliberation within the community.

Muslims widely reported being harassed by security forces, especially at police and military checkpoints set up after the April 21 attacks. Media reported that in June in Marichchukaddi, Mannar, Muslim women were forced to remove their abayas in front of male military personnel. In another incident at the same location, female military officers cut off a Muslim woman's head covering.

Human Rights Watch reported that Abdul Raheem Masaheena, a resident of Kolongoda, was arrested on May 17 for wearing a *kurta* (a loose collarless tunic) decorated with an image of a ship's wheel, which police mistook for a Buddhist sacred symbol, the *dharmachakra*. In a fundamental rights petition filed with the Supreme Court, Masaheena said her arrest was arbitrary and malicious, she suffered degrading treatment in custody, and she had been "singled out and subjected to hostile inimical discrimination based on both grounds of race and religion." Her petition remained pending at year's end.

According to members of Christian groups, local authorities sometimes demanded their groups stop worship activities or relocate their places of worship outside the local jurisdiction, ostensibly to maintain community peace. Local police and government officials reportedly continued to cite a 2011 government circular requiring places of worship to obtain approval to conduct religious activities. The Ministry of Buddha Sasana, however, revoked the 2011 circular in 2012. Police

also reportedly cited the 2008 circular on construction of religious facilities to prohibit, impede, and close Christian and Muslim places of worship. According to some legal experts, however, there was no explicit basis in national law for compulsory registration of places of worship with the state.

According to NCEASL, in early September during a meeting at the Koralaipattu Divisional Secretariat to discuss issues surrounding the Berea Prayer House in Pasikuda, Batticaloa, the divisional secretary (DS) said the prayer house was unauthorized and further stated the 2008 circular empowered him to intervene. The DS also demanded an end to the pastor's religious worship activities. Subsequent to advocacy from NCEASL and an inquiry by the SLHRC, the DS verbally told the pastor he could continue his activities, and authorities allowed the church to continue operating.

According to NCEASL, on June 6, approximately 50 villagers, 12 Buddhist monks, and six members of the Divulapitiya local council in Gampaha District protested outside an Assemblies of God church, demanding it stop its religious activities. Buddhist monks and members of the council threatened the pastor and her husband in the presence of police. On June 9, the pastor and her lawyer filed a complaint with police. When they went to record a statement on June 10, the acting inspector general of police, the officer-in-charge, six Buddhist monks, and four members of the Divulapitiya council were present. The acting inspector general instructed the pastor's lawyer to register the church with the Department of Christian Religious Affairs through the Divulapitiya Divisional Secretariat, stating it was a requirement under the 2008 circular. He further instructed the pastor to cease her religious worship activities until the church was registered. According to NCEASL, the pastor continued her religious worship activities in the area despite opposition. Five Christian families from her church, however, left the village following this incident.

Civil society groups and local politicians continued to state the construction of Buddhist shrines by Buddhist groups and the military in the predominantly Hindu and Muslim Northern and Eastern Provinces constituted religious intimidation, as some shrines were built in areas with few, if any, Buddhist residents. According to local politicians in the north, the military sometimes acted outside its official capacity and aided in the construction of Buddhist shrines. Reports published by various civil society groups indicated security forces continued to be involved in constructing Buddhist religious sites, citing archeological links in places where there were no Buddhist populations. In July prominent Tamil twitter activist

Garikaalan posted on Twitter that soldiers had constructed a Buddhist shrine on private land in Thyiddy, Jaffna.

Media reported that on September 23, a Buddhist group led by BBS monk Gnanasara Thero defied a Mullaitivu Magistrate Court order by cremating the body of a Buddhist monk in an open field next to the Neeraviyadi Pillayar Hindu temple in Mullaitivu District in the north of the island. BBS supporters shouted insults at the lawyers representing the temple association when they questioned police officers for failing to implement the court order. On October 21, the Court of Appeal ordered Gnanasara to appear before the court on November 8 for violating the Mullaitivu magistrate's order. At year's end Gnanasara remained free on bail while the case continued.

In May the Mullaitivu Magistrate's Court ruled in favor of the Neeraviyadi Pillaiyar Hindu Temple, which a Buddhist monk occupied in 2013 and subsequently constructed a Buddhist shrine on the site. With the endorsement of the government archeological department, the monk said the site was an ancient Buddhist temple. In its ruling, the court said the monk should no longer interfere with the temple's operation by expanding the shrine, and any future building work on the shrine should only take place with the permission of the local government.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses community, it continued to have difficulty obtaining approval to build houses of worship. Local government officials cited the 2008 circular and forwarded all new Kingdom Hall construction applications to the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Affairs. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, during the year the ministry again did not issue any approvals for building applications, even when local authorities had no objections. Applications to construct new houses of worship in Pugoda and Nattandiya were submitted to local councils in July and August 2015 and forwarded to the ministry. Relevant authorities did not reply to those applications, which remained pending at year's end.

Although religious education remained compulsory in state-funded schools, not all schools had sufficient resources to teach all four recognized religions, and according to civil society groups, some students were required to study religions other than their own. Government schools frequently experienced a shortage of teachers, sometimes requiring available teachers to teach the curriculum of a faith different from their own.

Religious schools continued to receive state funding for facilities and personnel and to fall under the purview of the central government and/or provincial ministry of education. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka reported several dozen cases of schools refusing students admission on religious grounds during the year, even though the law requires government and private schools receiving government funding, some religiously affiliated, to accept students of all faiths.

On August 21, the Cabinet of Ministers approved amendments to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951 to end child marriages in the Muslim community. These amendments awaited parliamentary approval at year's end. The proposed changes would set the minimum age of marriage at 18, and marriages of anyone between the ages of 16 and 18 would require permission from a sharia court judge. Further amendments included stipulations for mandatory written consent from the bride and for the religious marriage ceremony and marriage registration to take place concurrently. According to Muslim human rights activists, lack of these requirements created difficulties during divorce and child support cases.

On October 8, a video featuring well-known singer and politician Madhumadhawa Aravinda using derogatory language to describe the Muslim community at a village meeting went viral. Aravinda was the deputy leader of the Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, a small political party aligned with the ruling Podujana Peramuna Party. In the video, Aravinda said, "You [Muslims] will not be able to practice sharia for as long as the Sinhalese live in this country." On October 8, he announced he had resigned from the party. Authorities questioned Aravinda but did not arrest him for anti-Muslim social media postings that civil society groups said incited anti-Muslim riots in Northwestern Province in May.

On June 24, chairman of the Wennappuwa local council K.V. Susantha Perera issued a directive temporarily banning Muslim traders from participating in the Sunday farmers' market in Dankotuwa, 30 miles north of Colombo. He told media the Sinhalese traders were afraid to work with Muslims. Following a police complaint against the chairman, a magistrate court on June 28 ordered Muslim vendors to be allowed in the market.

Media reported that on July 16 in Kanniya, regular police, riot police, and military personnel blocked several hundred Hindu protesters from worshipping at the site where a Buddhist temple was to be built on the ruins of a Hindu temple. Police allowed Sinhalese merchants and counterprotesters to enter the site. According to media, Sinhalese counterprotesters assaulted members of the Hindu crowd while

police looked on. When police allowed Hindu priests and the landowner onto the site for mediation talks, the Sinhalese merchants pelted them with objects and hot tea. Police took no action against the assailants. On July 18, then-president Sirisena announced a ban on construction of the Buddhist temple and appointed five Tamil archeologists to the board of the government archeological department. The president also ordered the staff of the archeological department to permit Tamils into the area. On July 22, the Trincomalee High Court issued an order banning construction of the Buddhist temple and permitted the Hindu temple trustees to enter the area to maintain the Maariyamman Kovil Hindu Temple at the site. The court ordered that Hindu devotees be allowed to engage freely in religious activities.

On July 18, the Court of Appeal set aside the 2016 judgment of the Jaffna High Court in a case brought by Hindu temple leadership prohibiting ritual animal sacrifice at Narasimma kovil in Kavunawatte in Northern Province.

Religious rights advocates said across all religious categories, traditional leaders charged with adjudication of religious law were poorly or completely untrained and issued inconsistent or arbitrary judgments.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion, language, and ethnicity are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to civil society groups, social media campaigns targeting religious minorities fueled hatred and incited violence. According to press reports and civil society, Buddhist nationalist groups such as the BBS continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrated religious and ethnic minorities, especially in social media. These groups said authorities did not act against those inciting violence against the Muslim community.

On June 16, prominent monk Gnanasara Thero delivered a nationally televised speech in which he said Muslim-run restaurants were seeking to suppress the Sinhalese Buddhist birthrate by putting “sterilization medicine” in their food. “Don't eat from those [Muslim] shops. Those who ate from these shops will not have children in future,” he said. “Some female devotees said that they [traitors] should be stoned to death. I don't say this, but what should be done is this.”

Muslim civil society activists described a vast outpouring of anti-Muslim hate speech on social media and in parts of the broadcast and print media, often making similar claims that the small Muslim population was plotting to outnumber the Buddhist population. Human rights activists pointed to social media calls for the country's Muslims to be "erased," and praise for atrocities committed against Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

On May 24, media reported police in Kurunegela arrested obstetrician Shihabdeen Shafi. The initial justification for his detention under the Prevention of Terrorism Act was an investigation of allegedly suspicious assets. According to a fundamental rights petition filed on his behalf and numerous media reports, however, a newspaper article and social media posts then immediately insinuated Shafi had been responsible for sterilizing thousands of Sinhalese women during caesarean section operations. Police invited women to come forward to make allegations against Shafi, who was free on bail. These allegations were echoed by anti-Muslim preachers such as Gnanasara Thero. Shafi's hospital colleagues and medical experts said the allegations were highly unlikely. In June lawyers representing police conceded in court that they found no evidence against Shafi. In a December hearing, lawyers representing police argued that a new investigation was required, and stated there had been political interference in the previous investigation that had absolved Shafi. In the December hearing, the magistrate ordered an expert panel of physicians and academics from University of Colombo to evaluate all available medical evidence to determine if the charges had merit. The court was scheduled to reconvene in January 2020 to review the findings of the expert panel.

NCEASL documented 94 cases of attacks on churches, intimidation of and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services during the year, compared with 88 cases in 2018.

According to the NCEASL, on September 21 a group of approximately 10 villagers beat six Christians from the Berea Prayer House in Kalkudah, Batticaloa District while the individuals were on their way to church. Five of the victims were admitted to the Batticaloa and Valachchenai hospitals. According to NCEASL, both hospitals discharged the victims before they had fully recovered from their injuries, denying them adequate medical care. The Valachchenai Hospital also refused to issue them reports on their injuries. Police arrested two perpetrators on September 22, with no trial date set at year's end. The pastor and his congregants faced continuous harassment throughout the year from the same group of individuals, according to NCEASL.

On May 14, NCEASL issued a statement condemning attacks on Muslims in Kurunegala, Gampaha, and the Puttalam Districts following the April 21 church bombings. The statement said, in part, “We are extremely troubled that some of the incidents were reportedly perpetrated by mobs during police curfew...we request authorities to speedily compensate the losses suffered by these communities and take proactive action to prevent any further violence.”

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported multiple incidences of discrimination and abuse. For example, on February 23, they reported that four Jehovah’s Witnesses were speaking to individuals about their religious beliefs in a neighborhood in Adikarimulla, Divulapitiy, when two men walked over to the group and assaulted them. When the wife of one Jehovah’s Witness arrived, the two men held her and punched her. The Jehovah’s Witnesses filed a complaint on the same day and police arrested the two men. Charges were downgraded, and the case remained pending at year’s end. On March 17, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that Angmaduwe Vimala Himi, chief monk of the Weralugahamulla temple, with a group of followers, approached four female Jehovah’s Witnesses. The monk and his followers verbally abused the women and beat them with a cane. They seized religious literature from one of the women and burned it, while issuing threats to all of them against returning, saying they would “face worse.” One of the women was hospitalized after the attack. On the same day, the same monk and group confronted another group of Jehovah’s Witnesses, confiscated their literature, and assaulted them, resulting in the hospitalization of two. The Jehovah Witnesses filed complaints in both instances, which remained pending at year’s end. Multiple cases from previous years also remained pending.

There were multiple reports of Muslim businesses failing due to anti-Muslim boycotts. In May video footage emerged on social media showing Buddhist monks entering a Muslim-owned shop in Padiyathalawa, Ampara District and chasing out Sinhalese customers. The monks also threatened the Muslim shop owner not to operate his business in the area.

According to representatives of a Muslim Sufi community of approximately 10,000 based in the Eastern Province town of Kathankudy, the majority Sunni community discriminated against them by harassing them, vandalizing religious and community centers, and denying them access to local government resources. The Sufis noted the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, the country’s main body of Islamic theologians, issued a directive labelling the group as nonbelievers. The

Sufis said members of the NTJ assaulted them and vandalized their community centers on multiple occasions.

On July 18, media reported that a Buddhist monk raised a Buddhist flag over the Madasami Hindu Temple in Kanthapallai, Nuwara Eliya City. He also tried to remove the statues of Hindu deities from the temple. After local politicians and police intervened, temple custodians removed the flag from the temple.

Civil society organizations continued efforts to strengthen the capacity of religious and community leaders to lead peacebuilding activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees that consisted of religious and civic leaders and laypersons from different faith traditions and ethnicities. The National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, an NGO founded in 1995, created these committees in 2010 following the end of the civil war between the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the primarily Hindu and Christian Tamil minority.

According to NCEASL, the number of Christian groups worshipping in “house churches” continued to grow.

In September Colombo hosted the Ashara Mubaraka, an annual global Dawoodi Bohra Muslim Convention, five months after the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks and four months after incidents of anti-Muslim violence occurred throughout the country. The convention, titled “We Believe in Sri Lanka,” proceeded peacefully, drew 21,000 Bohra Muslims from 40 countries, and generated an estimated 10 billion rupees (\$55.2 million).

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with the president, prime minister, and other senior government officials, the Ambassador emphasized the need for respect for and inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities as part of the post-conflict reconciliation process. Following the April 21 bombing, the Secretary of State condemned the terror attacks “in the strongest possible terms.” The Ambassador issued a statement saying, “These terrible attacks are the work of a few individuals and not of an entire community. Sri Lankans of all backgrounds and faiths have come together to condemn these atrocities. Unity is the most powerful answer to terrorism.” During times of heightened religious and ethnic tensions, such as during the May Kurunegala, Puttalam, and Gampaha riots, the Ambassador urged political leaders to defuse the immediate crisis and called on citizens to disavow religious violence. Embassy officers also met regularly with cabinet ministers holding religious

portfolios to encourage them to build ties across religions. The Ambassador also conducted numerous television and print media interviews addressing the attacks and the aftermath and held a Facebook live chat on the topic.

Embassy officials met with Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu civil society activists and victims of reported attacks across the country to gauge the climate for religious minorities. In addition, embassy and visiting Department of State officials met with religious groups, civil society organizations, and government officials to express concern about harassment of, attacks on, and government and societal discrimination against members of religious minority groups.

Three participants representing National Peace Council, NCEASL, and the District Interreligious Committee-Kandy took part in a two-week religious freedom and interfaith dialogue exchange program in the United States July 17-28.

The embassy supported multiple reconciliation projects that identified and resolved local grievances, built empathy and understanding among religious groups, and supported government reconciliation efforts. The embassy led ongoing tolerance and unity programs in cultural centers. In November it held a national Youth Forum workshop where youth from across the country representing different religions and ethnicities gathered for interreligious dialogue. A senior embassy official encouraged the youth “to nurture inclusive, thoughtful, and courageous leadership” and to “understand the experiences and perspectives of Sri Lanka’s diverse communities.” Embassy representatives supported the work of civil society organizations to strengthen the capacity of religious and community leaders to foster peacebuilding activities through district-level interreligious reconciliation committees. The U.S. government funded multiple foreign assistance programs designed to build on global best practices in interfaith cooperation, dialogue, and confidence building through the National Peace Council.