

World
Watch
Research

Sri Lanka: Full Country Dossier

February 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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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 2022 reporting period was 1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Sri Lanka

Brief country details

Sri Lanka: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
21,146,000	1,932,000	9.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30
WWL 2019	58	46
WWL 2018	57	44

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Sri Lanka: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Religious nationalism	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Violent religious groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders

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 partly tolerated, especially from historical Christian communities, but converts to Christianity are not. Additionally, non-traditional churches are frequently targeted by the surrounding local community, joined and more 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. 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. With the return of the Rajapaksa family to power and a dire economic situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, *Dictatorial paranoia* and Buddhist supremacy are likely to get stronger again. The slow and politically fraught investigation process into the responsibilities for the Easter 2019 attacks is hurting the Christian minority anew, especially relatives of the victims.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

11/18 February 2021: Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith called upon the government to regulate "[extremist groups](#)" after a series of high-profile conversions to Protestant Christianity became known (UCA News, 15 February 2021). One week later, Prof. Kapila Gunawardana (Secretary of the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious, and Cultural Affairs) stated in an interview that the Ministry is in the process of [drafting](#) a legal framework to address the issue of "unethical conversions" (NCEASL, 2021 Incident Report January-February).

21 October 2020: Unknown perpetrators hurled stones at a church building in Divulapitiya (Gampaha District), breaking some of its [windows](#). A police complaint has been filed (NCEASL, 2020 Incident Report September-October).

Specific examples of positive developments

President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said in his Christmas message that the doctrine of Jesus Christ encompasses a body of teachings that [contribute](#) to the strengthening of society and can be utilized to revive the economically, socially and culturally disrupted world in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic (Daily Mirror LK, 25 December 2020). This is one of the very few examples where Christianity is mentioned by officials at all, let alone positively.

In October 2020, a Sri Lankan woman was [arrested](#) for slandering Cardinal Ranjith on Facebook. Her comments were seen as hate speech which could increase distrust between Catholics and Buddhists (UCA News, 19 October 2020).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: extremist groups - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/spread-of-evangelical-groups-causes-alarm-in-sri-lanka/91411>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: drafting - <https://mailchi.mp/59f89b813959/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-9671549>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: windows - <https://mailchi.mp/59854aab9141/nceasl-incident-report-may-june-7240461?e=009ac074ae>
- Specific examples of positive developments: contribute - http://www.dailymirror.lk/top_story/Doctrine-of-Jesus-Christ-can-be-utilized-to-revive-world-disrupted-due-to-COVID-19-pandemic:-Prez/155-202483
- Specific examples of positive developments: arrested - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-woman-arrested-for-insulting-cardinal-ranjith/89935>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Sri Lanka

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/sri-lanka/	3 September 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611	3 September 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-LKA.html	3 September 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/	3 September 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	3 September 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	3 September 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-world/2021	3 September 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/freedom-net/2020	3 September 2021
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports	3 September 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/sri-lanka	3 September 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#lk	3 September 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka	3 September 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/lka	3 September 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI 2020	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LKA	3 September 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/	3 September 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports (Not included)	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka	3 September 2021

Recent history

The country has a long and violent history caused by religious and ethnic conflict. The 26 year long civil war only ended in 2009.

With a different government elected in 2015, long-term ruler (who successfully brought the civil war to an end) Mahinda Rajapaksa lost power. As a consequence, some of the radical Buddhist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena lost open support, but were still publicly active and have given support to attacks on minorities. Most attacks target the country's Muslim minority, as happened in March 2018. The level of violence against Christians remained at a lower level than under the previous government, which had been more permissive.

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 on ethnic affiliation, the challenge is immense, since ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust. However, it is far from certain who can lead this process. With the new government starting in November 2019, strong nationalistic undertones and a focus on security issues became the norm. The fact that the Rajapaksa family won the 2019 elections with a landslide victory effectively silenced all efforts of reconciliation and showed that the quest for security trumped all other needs voters may have had.

Christians are still affected by the Easter 2019 attacks and although investigation commissions 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 there is no progress at the domestic level (Daily Mirror LK, 11 February 2021).

Finally, Sri Lanka struggles with bringing the COVID-19 pandemic under control and managing and mitigating its economic and social fallout.

Political and legal landscape

Politics and society in Sri Lanka have been through a time of turmoil. At the end of October 2018, political unrest erupted when President Sirisena suddenly decided to [dismiss](#) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe (Reuters, 27 October 2018). The president suspended parliament and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new prime minister. Despite two no-confidence votes against him, President Sirisena pressed on with this plan and the country was in a political stalemate for several weeks. Only in December 2018 did the Constitutional Court finally rule that the president's action to dissolve parliament and install a replacement prime minister was [unconstitutional](#) (UCA News, 14 December 2018). However, it was impossible for the president and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe to build up a working relationship again and the government could no longer function properly.

This was soon to have devastating consequences when Indian intelligence sources warned the Sri Lankan authorities of an imminent Islamist attack at the beginning of April 2019. However, the information was not properly communicated to the relevant offices and the authorities took no action. As a result, the attacks went ahead unhindered on Easter Sunday, despite the [concrete warning](#) (AP, 12 June 2019). Some officials stepped down from their positions or were arrested, but no one took political responsibility. After almost two years, a presidential commission of inquiry [presented](#) its findings on the investigations into the Easter Sunday attacks in a six volume report (Jamestown Foundation, 9 April 2021). So far, consequences still have to be drawn and the attacks (and the report) have been used for political vendettas as in calls to hold responsible former government politicians now in or connected to the opposition.

The former Minister of Defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was [elected president](#) in the November 2019 elections (ICG, 18 November 2019), who went on to appoint his other brother (also former President) Mahinda Rajapaksa as [prime minister](#) on 21 November 2019 (Reuters, 20 November 2019). Although national security was the main issue in the election campaign which included

promises to oppose [religious extremism](#) (AP, 31 October 2019), the track record of the Rajapaksa brothers and their connections to radical Buddhist groups is not promising, especially from the viewpoint of [ethnic and religious minorities](#) (ICG, 18 November 2019). It has therefore been more than just symbolic that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was sworn in at an ancient temple with the blessings of Buddhist monks (Reuters, 18 November 2019).

The new president decided to dissolve parliament and originally called for elections in April 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the election commission postponed the vote until August 2020. In the meantime, the government ruled practically without legislative oversight, which could have caused a serious [constitutional crisis](#) (ICG, 29 May 2020). However, the Supreme Court [dismissed](#) all legal challenges to this in June 2020 and elections took place on 5 August 2020 as expected (The Sunday Morning, 7 June 2020). 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). By this victory, the Rajapaksas [directly control](#) 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 finance ministry from his brother Mahinda in July 2021, the family has [five ministers and several junior ministers](#) in the cabinet (of now 28 ministers) (Channel News Asia, 8 July 2021).

While the debate and pushing through of the 20th constitutional amendment points to an ever stronger emphasis on *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia* (see below: *Trends analysis*), the government was obliged to focus on its COVID-19 response, which had been strongly supported by military staff. However, with the numbers of COVID-related deaths rising, the political response quickly became [religiously tinged](#) by a mandatory policy of cremating the deceased. Cremation, however, goes against the Muslim minority's faith and had to be [changed](#) to mandatory burial on a distant island after an international outcry and a visit by Pakistani PM Imran Khan (East Asia Forum, 14 January 2021; BBC News, 26 February 2021). The financial, economic and social fallout, described below, adds to the challenges the government faces.

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 (OECD, 2019). 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 2021). 12% of girls are currently married before the age of 18, according to [Girls Not Brides](#). 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, 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	1,932,000	9.1
Muslim	1,961,000	9.3
Hindu	2,761,000	13.1
Buddhist	14,337,000	67.8
Ethno-religionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	80	0.0
Bahai	18,500	0.1
Atheist	18,000	0.1
Agnostic	109,000	0.5
Other	7,840	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Due to the history of civil war in Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has thrived. Radical Buddhist groups have sprouted up across the country and were used by previous governments as a means of keeping religious minorities in check. With the new Rajapaksa government, they may see a revival. The main victim was (and still is) the Muslim minority which is regarded as a particular threat if Islamic radicalization should occur. Increasing violence led to the killing of Muslims in 2014 and flared up again in March 2018 in Kandy when several businesses owned by Muslims were destroyed by Buddhist radicals.

Christians have also been facing attacks by local groups, frequently led by saffron-robed Buddhist monks. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, which saw far-reaching COVID-19 restrictions, more than 80 attacks and incidents of harassment at different levels were recorded. 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 is leaning towards *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 12.707
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people living in multidimensional poverty is 2.9%, 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 has the status of an lower-middle income country.
- **GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2017 international USD):** 3.682
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** This is estimated to have been 2.3% in 2019, an 18-year low, partly explained by the impact of the April 2019 terrorist attacks and -4.1% in 2020 due to COVID-19.
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** is 12.3% (2016). 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.

One of Sri Lanka's most important industries - tourism - took a battering in the WWL 2022 reporting period. 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 has been 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%. 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. Tourist travel almost completely stopped for the better part of 2020 when the COVID-19 crisis brought tourism and many other industries to a grinding halt. The government's hopes of international guests returning swiftly were dashed. In the first four months of 2021, tourist arrivals were [a mere 2%](#) of what they had been in 2020 (TTG Asia, 27 May 2021). The marked contraction of GDP in 2020 was no surprise as a result.

The army continues to be an important economic and political factor and also runs businesses one would not usually connect with military operations: For example, the Navy runs some of the most exclusive holiday resorts. It does not want to let go of such business and 'land-grabbing' for tourist projects is becoming a problem. Whereas the government stopped several projects put forward by Chinese investors, the dependence on Chinese money has nevertheless become clear. The sharp economic downturn and political decisions led to a debt crisis, in which the government calculated with an 8.9% GDP budget deficit and assumed a GDP growth of 5.5% in

2021, leading observers to warn that with a background of debts reaching 102.5% of the national GDP in August 2020 (109.7% as per World Bank in April 2021), "[denial is not a strategy](#)" (Financial Times LK, 11 December 2020). However, China gave a helping hand with a 500 million USD [emergency loan](#) in April 2021 (Channel News Asia, 12 April 2021) and agreed to a [currency swap](#) of 1.5 billion USD in March 2021 (Bloomberg, 22 March 2021). This boosted China's position in its geopolitical competition with rival India. Thus, it is not surprising that Sri Lanka is now firmly in China's camp and not only backed a resolution praising China's policy against the Uighur at the UN in 2019, but also backed the introduction of the National Security Law in July 2020 (Axios, 3 July 2020). Still, Sri Lanka is in dire economic straits, cash-strapped and having to restrict [imports of various goods](#) (AP News, 14 July 2021). The outlook for 2022 is [not brighter](#) (Daily Mirror LK, 22 October 2021).

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 at least just as important.

Despite improvements over the last decades in relation to girls' access to education ([Borgen Project, 2018](#)), 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](#); HDI 2020 - Work Employment and Vulnerability). Denial of inheritance has been 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 the [UNDP's full 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards) and the CIA Factbook:

- **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:** 18.7%
- **Literacy rate:** 91.7% (population of 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 10.6 years
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, Sri Lanka has 10 physicians and 42 hospital beds; the pupil-teacher ratio in primary school is 22:1

According to World Bank:

- **Population/Age distribution:** 23.7% of the population are below the age of 14, 11.2% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 102.4% (2017), the primary school enrollment rate is 100.2%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.8%, the rate of vulnerable employment stands at 39% (modeled ILO estimate)

According to the [International Organization for Migration](#) (accessed 3 September 2021):

- **IDPs/Refugees:** Migration from Sri Lanka has always been stronger than migration to Sri Lanka, hence the negative net migration rate of -3.6. There is a group of Pakistani refugees in Sri Lanka, among them many Christians.

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI 2020):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Sri Lanka scores 0.782 points and ranks 72nd among 189 countries.
- **Life expectancy:** 77 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 4.2%, a further 39% are in vulnerable employment, youth (between 15 and 24) not in school or employment is 30.3%.

Despite its promotion to being categorized as an 'upper-middle income' country, social challenges continue to persist, especially in the rural and war-torn northern and north-eastern Tamil areas. The poverty gap figures (less than 5.50 USD PPP per day) seem manageable at 12.3% but these figures stem from 2016. The reported 30.3% of youth unemployment and 39% of vulnerable employment seem to come closer to reality and show the social challenges the government needs to deal with. These challenges were exacerbated by the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020 and the harsh economic consequences it caused. While migration has always been strong, COVID-19 led to a temporary reversed trend, as many migrant workers returned to Sri Lanka. This increased the economic and social pressure in the country.

Whilst Sri Lanka has deeply entrenched patriarchal 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 ([OECD, 2019](#)). The Muslim population is estimated to be 9.3%: Under Sharia law, it is considered that a wife belongs to her husband's patriarchal 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 ([Colombo Telegraph, 12 March 2021](#)).

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](#) has been put under the Ministry of Defense by the Rajapaksa government, so human rights and minority concerns clearly take a backseat (RSIS, 11 August 2020).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 37.1% penetration - survey date: June 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 37.1% penetration – survey date: June 2021

According to World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 144.3 per 100 people

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020:

- "Internet freedom remained constrained in Sri Lanka. Although the government refrained from blocking social media or communications platforms in 2020 as it had done in 2019 and 2018, the online space for free expression continued to shrink. Following November 2019 presidential elections, journalists and activists reported increased intimidation and harassment, contributing to self-censorship and a more fearful climate. New evidence suggests that government actors manipulate information across major platforms. Separately, COVID-19 brought more arrests for online activity as well as enhanced data sharing between service providers and military intelligence."
- The country is seen as "Partly Free". Next to the capital, Colombo, the Western Province has the strongest Internet traffic. However, the war-affected Northern and Eastern Provinces are lagging behind, which is true for all infrastructure, not just the Internet.

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

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 has become more complicated due to the suicide attacks in April 2019 and all that followed. Also, the army still has

almost 347,000 active members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009.

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, especially as the newly elected president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has a track record of not hindering Buddhist radical activity and is even said to be actively supporting it.

There is general suspicion that small radical Islamic groups such as the ones based in Sri Lanka could never have made such a coordinated suicide attack in April 2019 without support from international jihadist groups such as the Islamic State group (IS). The authorities have arrested a main suspect for the [bombing of Zion church](#) (Daily Mirror, 30 March 2020). However, in October 2020, five of the seven church bombing suspects were [released](#) (Catholic News Agency, 6 October 2020). As of the time of writing, the report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry, despite its massive size of six volumes, has not been published and did not shed additional light into the attack's background. Some victims even say that the [real culprits](#) have not been identified (UCA News, 25 February 2021).

The question is worth considering why the attackers 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 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 (despicable) “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. Meanwhile, three Sri Lankan citizens are facing [terrorism charges](#) in a US court in Los Angeles for the Easter attacks (South Asia Monitor, 10 January 2021).

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. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, however, there has been a hiatus in large-scale attacks in Asia and other parts of the world in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Trends analysis

1) Dictatorial paranoia revisited

One visible trend is that legal and government restrictions are being used against Christians and other religious minorities. The return of the Rajapaksas has brought back bad memories, especially for minorities. It did not increase trust in the new government when, as one of its first acts, it amended the Constitution on 22 October 2020. The government continued to add members of the Rajapaksa family to its fold, increasing the probability of continued *Dictatorial paranoia*, blended with and motivated by *Religious nationalism*. The new government called upon army officers to occupy various government positions and, at local government level, officials who caused much trouble for churches in the past have all remained in their positions. The number of incidents of persecution has only dropped because of the COVID-19 crisis and the general ban on meetings. It is possible that local government officials will increasingly use more strategic methods than just legal restrictions in curtailing the freedom of religious minorities. As one country observer summed it up aptly: "Rajapaksa's biggest challenge is to fix the economic woes COVID-19 has exacerbated. One might argue that the coronavirus has slowed the government's consolidation of Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarianism, and may push it in a more pluralist direction. Conversely, as economic conditions worsen and the regime's popularity tanks, the President and his hyper-nationalist entourage may be tempted to whip up ethnoreligious mayhem to mask the political blowback from COVID-19" (East Asia Forum, 14 January 2021). And apart from the 'economic woes' facing the country, the Rajapaksa dynasty is leading Sri Lanka's democracy into decline, as another observer stated (The Diplomat, 1 August 2021). This, in turn, leads to an increase of Dictatorial paranoia.

2) Ethnic and religious groups still lack trust

The stronger reliance on China does not bode well for the country and its citizens and minorities. National reconciliation remains one of the country's biggest challenges and is more urgent, but also more remote than ever. Given that most social networks are based on religious as well as ethnic affiliation, the challenge is considerable since ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust and find a way ahead. It is clear that the government will not be of any help in this respect due to its policy of supporting Buddhist supremacy. On the contrary, the fact that both the new president and prime minister publicly promised to defend the "Buddhist order", claiming this would mean defending religious freedom, does not bode well for the plight of any minority in the country, including the Christian (FoRBinFull, 10 February 2020). The politicization of the investigation into the Easter 2019 attacks are not helping in winning over religious and ethnic minorities who - for historical reasons - have little reason to trust the authorities. The setting up of a "Presidential Task Force for One Country, One Law" as an advisory group for strengthening Sri Lanka's [cultural heritage](#) and for helping develop a sense of unity between all

the different ethnic and religious groups in the country, has done nothing to instill such trust either (Daily Mirror LK, 1 November 2021). While the formation of this task force was one of President Rajapaksa's election campaign promises, its chairman is the high profile Buddhist monk, Gnanasera Thera, who is known for his hate-speech against religious minorities, especially Muslims. Minority groups are thus wary of hoping too much from such a venture and view it rather as just another method for strengthening Buddhist Sinhala dominance. This plays into the third trend (see below).

3) Muslims and Christians suffer most from the political in-fighting

While all citizens pay the price for political in-fighting, smear campaigns and how political enemies are got rid of, the country's religious minorities pay a higher price, as they are often seen as outsiders and can easily become scapegoats - with Muslims and Christians suffering more than Hindus in this respect. Already in his first speech after winning the November 2019 election, President-elect Rajapaksa announced that he would "protect Sinhala culture and heritage and provide state sponsorship to safeguard the morals, and traditional ways" (Reuters, 18 November 2019). Such words can easily be used as justification for radical monks and village mobs not just to act against Muslims, but also Christians, in order to protect the traditional Buddhist triangle. In the WWL 2022 reporting period, however, it has been mainly the Muslim minority which has been targeted (see below: *Persecution of other religious minorities*). This should not be taken to mean that Christians did not face any problems; the content of this Full Country Dossier clearly shows they did.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: call for an international inquiry - http://www.dailymirror.lk/top_story/Compelled-to-call-for-intl-tribunal-to-probe-Easter-Sunday-Mayhem---Cardinal/155-205586
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- Political and legal landscape: elected president - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lankas-presidential-election-brings-back-polarising-wartime-figure>
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WWL 2022: Church information / Sri Lanka

Christian origins

According to Church tradition, Christianity made inroads when the Apostle Thomas came to India 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	0.1
Catholic	1,581,000	81.8
Protestant	298,000	15.4
Independent	174,000	9.0
Unaffiliated	9,800	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-131,000	-6.8
Total	1,932,800	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	216,000	11.2
Renewalist movement	391,000	20.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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. However, 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.

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

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Sri Lanka

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Sri Lanka: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	63	52
WWL 2021	62	52
WWL 2020	65	30
WWL 2019	58	46
WWL 2018	57	44

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

The WWL 2022 saw an increase in score of 0.7 points compared to WWL 2021. This is due to an increase of violence scores by 0.8 points, meaning in turn that across all *spheres of life* the pressure basically stayed the same. The strongest increase showed in the *Private and Family*

spheres, reflecting the increased pressure on converts due to the COVID-19 restrictions and the spread of pressure to more Christian communities in certain questions.

Persecution engines

Sri Lanka: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
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 (Very 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 the *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 at 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.

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. With their return and their renewed political strength, they are likely once again to do everything necessary to stay in power or to pave the way for the next family generation. As this engine goes hand in hand with invoking Buddhist supremacy, the engine is blended with *Religious nationalism*. The swiftness by which the 20th constitutional amendment passed the political institutions - described above - shows how strong the new government is. As it looks now, religious majoritarianism (the policy of one religion dominating all others) and [militant nationalism](#) are the calls of the day, as one country observer stated (The Diplomat, 19 November 2020).

Christian denominational protectionism (Medium)

In February 2021, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith called the government to curb the influence and ministry of "extremist groups", meaning missionary evangelical groups, after a series of high-profile conversions to Protestant denominations. This brings Christian denominational protectionism back in to view; it had previously been present to a weaker degree.

Islamic oppression (Weak)

The persecution pattern in previous reporting periods used to show that *Islamic oppression* was weak and most strongly felt by the rather small number of Christian converts coming from a Muslim background. However, when radical Islamic fringe groups carried out suicide attacks against three churches in April 2019, this persecution engine spiked in influence. The main persecution engine in Sri Lanka is still *Religious nationalism* and the Muslim community is now under strong pressure due to the numerous crackdowns on radical Muslims and anyone affiliated with militant Islamic groups. Although categorized as 'weak, it is still mentioned here to indicate the complexity of the country's religious situation.

Drivers of persecution

Sri Lanka: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY WEAK	VERY STRONG			MEDIUM			MEDIUM	
Government officials	-	Very strong			-			Strong	
Ethnic group leaders	-	Very strong			-			Medium	
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	Very strong			-			Medium	
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-			Weak			-	
Violent religious groups	Weak	Strong			-			Medium	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	Strong			-			Weak	
One's own (extended) family	-	Strong			-			Weak	
Political parties	-	Strong			-			Strong	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Religious nationalism - Buddhist and 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. However, there have been some cases as well where government officials confirmed the constitutional rights of Christians to worship. These have been rare.
- Ethnic group and non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements frequently at the local level. Since the WWL 2021 reporting period, these movements have resurfaced again after being less visible following the election of the previous government in 2015. They claim Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation and focus on acting against the Muslim minority at the moment. 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, often connected with the radical group, have been calling for the protection of the Sinhala majority. Buddhist monks have been active in persecuting as well. Young Buddhist religious leaders have been using social media platforms to promote hatred towards religious minorities in the country. Radical Buddhist groups such as the Mahason Balakaya (comprised of monks) have also gained more prominence. Another recent 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.

- **Extended family and normal citizens (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.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Political parties tend to join in calls for the protection of the country's Buddhist heritage, since this gains votes. *Religious nationalism* increased in the WWL 2021 reporting period; the campaigning and election period saw political parties embracing nationalistic and exclusivist positions. This continued in the parliamentary elections (held on 5 August 2020) in the WWL 2022 reporting period.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** In their efforts to keep a pure form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and especially in its villages, groups like BBS are calling for violence as well. This call is sometimes direct and sometimes veiled, as can be seen in Gnanasera's speech from July 2019 (see above: *Security situation*). RSS and Shiva Senai groups are violent religious groups among the Hindu majority provinces.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism (Medium):

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Weak):** By calling publicly on the government for certain Protestant denominations to be curbed, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith positioned himself as a driver of this engine. He also encouraged other public figures to join the call.

Drivers of Islamic oppression (Very weak)

- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** An Islamic fringe group committed the Easter Sunday suicide attacks in April 2019 against three churches and three hotels. The authorities cracked down on the group immediately afterwards, but there have been further threats made against churches. It is not totally clear if there are other Islamic radical groups in Sri Lanka or only 'lone wolves'.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The provinces of Sri Lanka are Northern, Central, Eastern, Western, North Central, North Western, Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Southern. There are no recognizable geographical hotspots, but 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 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.

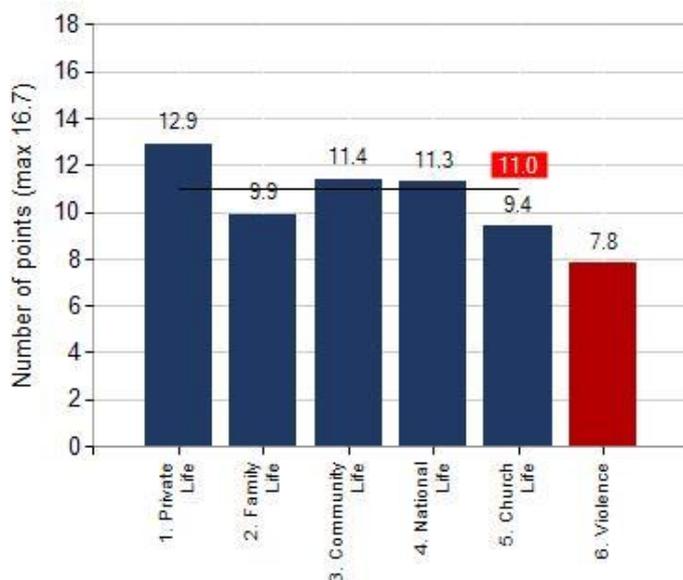
Historical Christian communities: These are groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and some of the eight denominations belonging to the [National Christian Council](#). They face less persecution or violence, but are affected by the overall atmosphere of Buddhist supremacy and are hindered from constructing 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.

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 "unethical conversion" and being connected with Western influence.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Sri Lanka remained at the same very high level as in WWL 2021 (11.0 points).
- Pressure is strongest and very high in the *Private, Community and National 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* 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 to 7.8 points in WWL 2022, having returned to 7.0 points in WWL 2021, after a spike of 13.1 points in WWL 2020 reflecting the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019.

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 2022 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. According to a country expert, "the Minister of Religious Affairs announced this year [2021] that a [Bill](#) to propose conversions be made a criminal offence will be introduced in Sri Lanka" (Barnabas Fund, 17 March 2021). Christians from a Muslim or Hindu background also experience this sort of 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. As an illustration of how high the pressure in rural parts can be, a village government official and some residents of a village put up a sign

on the water tank, saying 'DON'T CHANGE YOUR PATH'. If converts reveal their Christian faith to relatives and friends, this would result in them receiving insults and being rejected. Christians report that people make rude comments when they walk down the street. 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.

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.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.00 points)

Due to the possibility of being accused of 'unethical conversions', Christians are cautious of being too open about their faith - especially in rural areas - and avoid wearing a cross on a necklace, for instance. While converts have to self-censor even more in this respect, Christians from historical churches are generally less restricted.

Block 1 - further 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 and in rural areas, it can be dangerous for Hindu converts as well. Meetings of converts (and of other Christians too) face the risk of disruptions. 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. There have been reports that due to the COVID-19 crisis, curfew laws have been used against the Christian community in a discriminatory and biased manner.

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. (4.00 points)

Christian children enrolled into 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 kids to dhamma school."

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 attend 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)." In the WWL 2022 reporting period, Christian burial

rites were denied by families, villagers and even by a government official. Especially in places where conversions recently took place, this sometimes resulted in Christians being forced to bury their loved ones in distant locations. 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."

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 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. Occasionally, this went so far that some pupils refused to continue attending school.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.00 points)

Converts have difficulties in raising their children according to Christian values in their homes as relatives (especially grandparents and in-laws) are influential members in the family/clan. Schools also play a part in influencing the children. School children are exposed to Buddhist/Hindu traditions, and in many instances, Christian children are forced to participate in these rites. It is a challenge for parents to explain to their children why they have to participate in rites they do not believe or trust in. Occasionally, children themselves will be pressured by relatives and teachers who say: "Don't follow what your parents are doing. At least you must do

the right thing." The notion: "Since you are attending a Buddhist school, you must also attend the Buddhist teachings on Sunday mornings", is also frequently heard.

Block 2 - further information

Evangelical and Independent churches are denied the possibility of registering weddings within their church buildings - which is a facility traditionally allowed in churches in Sri Lanka. Converts face discrimination and harassment, but are usually not put under pressure to divorce. However, they can be kicked out of their house. A parents' comment to their daughter's conversion in the WWL 2022 reporting period was: "You will always be welcome back at this house whenever you decide to renounce your 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 and in some cases all ties to the family are cut. Adult baptisms face opposition, especially if they are held publicly and most churches decide to baptize low-key.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

It is usually local Buddhist monks who stir up community sentiments about Christians 'not belonging'. These monks are often themselves influenced by the ideology of the radical groups and want to protect the purity of their local Buddhist triangle (explained above under the Persecution engine *Religious nationalism*). In areas where Hindus and Buddhists are the majority, Christians are closely watched and often become targets for intimidation and social exclusion. Most villages all over the country have assigned people to monitor anyone coming to the village and any other suspicious activity. It has been reported in some regions that whenever there is a prayer meeting or Bible study in a Christian's home, local villagers would 'spy' on them. The level of monitoring for converts is so high that one pastor in the WWL 2022 reporting period stated: ""People in the village constantly keep an eye on the Christians to see where they are going. Some converts do not dress well when they come to church because of it. They dress simply as if they were running an errand. If they are seen going out well-dressed, people will know they have converted and are going to church."

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 called to follow Buddhism. In one incident, the pressure on a family having recently 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".

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)

Christian students in some areas have been threatened with being denied enrollment because they are not part of the majority religion. (There are cases of denied enrollment pending in the courts.) For getting admission to state schools and colleges, they need to do better than children from the majority religion. Christianity classes are often not offered by schools despite being mandated by law or, if they have these classes, do not provide decent facilities for holding them. One pastor in the WWL 2022 reporting period shared: "When trying to put kids into schools, they sometimes face disadvantages when they do not belong to the majority religious group. This affects about 10% of Christian students. Even in Roman Catholic schools, they accept Buddhist or Hindu students more readily than they accept pastors' kids."

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)

The community expects Christians to participate in all local and national religious ceremonies, either Buddhist or Hindu. When Christians refuse, they are isolated in the community and face discrimination. In one case, this has even been reported from the capital, Colombo. 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 activities. Pressure can also be applied in the workplace and is not limited to converts, but affects historical and non-traditional Christian churches as well.

Block 3 - further information

In rural areas, converts can be denied access (or are given delayed access) to community resources such as wells and electricity. As in many previous reporting periods, the WWL 2022 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. One in-country source shared: "If the government gives a construction company any construction work, they first look into the religion." 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.

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.

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. 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. To put it bluntly: Whenever a Buddhist monk is involved in leading or backing an attack, the victims cannot expect justice.

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.

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.50 points)

Villagers make up stories about new converts and the church to stir up people against them. The most frequent rumors are that Christians are funded from abroad, that Christians are traitors of their country, and also that they desecrate Buddhist and Hindu deities. Related with COVID-19, there have also been rumors that Christians spread the pandemic. At the same time, in February 2021, a national discourse about a number of celebrities and high-profile individuals converting to Christianity started and spurned several inflammatory claims on mainstream and social media concerning the Evangelical church in Sri Lanka. This led to statements by religious leaders including the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, calling on the government to investigate and regulate the activities of Evangelical leaders, and introduce anti-conversion laws. The Archbishop in his statement distanced the Catholic Church from the Evangelical community, referring to them as "fundamentalists". As a result, in an interview with The Morning news-

paper, the Secretary of the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious and Cultural Affairs stated that the Ministry is in the process of drafting a legal format to address the issue of so-called "unethical conversions". This rhetoric was spurred on by a number of smear campaigns on social media spearheaded by Buddhist monks. In one such video in particular, a Buddhist monk called for open violence against Christian "invaders" who enter villages to conduct Christian worship activities.

Block 4 - further 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 in the way

how they support minorities, they are immediately threatened with not being re-elected. In many cases, Christians and Christian human rights organizations are accused of creating "social disharmony" (which can best be understood when 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 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 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, although most gatherings were stopped due to the pandemic. However, as one pastor during the WWL 2022 reporting period said: "When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, churches were the first ones to be asked to stop gatherings. Other religious gatherings and political gatherings could continue. There seems to be more obstructions to church activities. In many parts of the country, there have been restrictions to church activities from the community and officials."

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 stated (IRFR 2020, p.4): "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."

During the WWL 2022 reporting period, pastors reported that they had started the registration process seven years ago, without receiving any result.

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. Sometimes, this is even not necessary; a pastor stated: "In the local Provincial Councils, often there are monks in important positions. So, there will be problems when we try to get permission to build churches. They especially will not grant permission to extend church buildings." As a result, the majority of the newer, mostly non-traditional Protestant churches function as house-churches.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)

Speaking out usually simply leads to more discrimination and/or subsequent attacks. There have even been instances where Christians who have been seen as too outspoken had to leave the country for a while. Representatives of Christian NGOs have been summoned for questioning by security and intelligence officers as well. 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."

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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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 WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Sri Lanka: Violence Block question		WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10	20
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	3	0
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?	2	4
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)?	40	40
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?	2	5
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?	0	1
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	2	0

In the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Churches attacked:** At least 10 churches were targets for 'normal', everyday attacks. Most of these were carried out by Buddhist villagers, less so by Hindu violent groups and villagers. There were reports of such attacks occurring in Gampaha, Kalutara, Mannar and Batticaloa district.
- **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.
- **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:** In one instance from the Polonnaruwa district, a pastor was [detained](#) and his church had to close in October 2020 (Christian Post, 28 October 2020).

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

The table below shows that the average pressure was at a high level (in the first three reporting periods), increasing each reporting period. Pressure has now levelled off at the very high score of 11.0 points since the WWL 2021 reporting period.

Sri Lanka: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	11.0
2021	11.0
2020	10.4
2019	10.3
2018	10.1

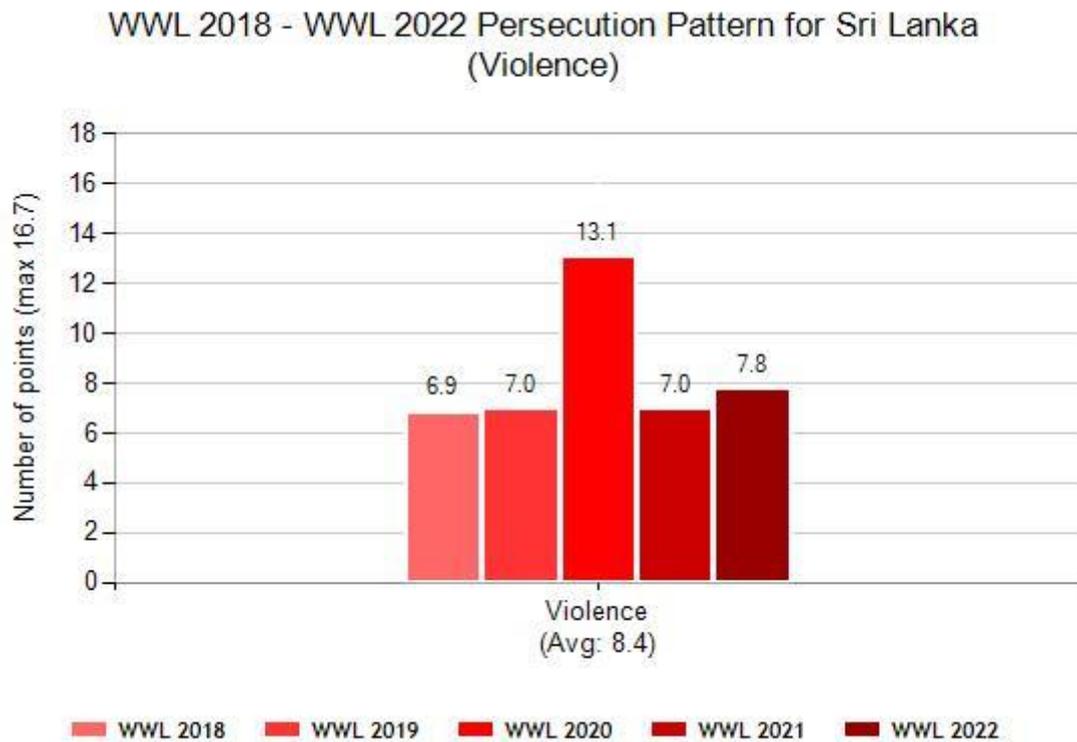
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows the development of pressure in the individual *spheres of life* over the last five reporting periods. The scores for pressure in all spheres have increased since WWL 2018, with the notable exception of *Church life*, although churches have been regularly attacked, often due to allegedly lacking permits. (The more or less stable score shows that pastors continue to courageously claim their constitutional rights).

The general rise shows that the pressure on converts exerted by local authorities increased; during COVID-19 restrictions pressure was exerted particularly by families and neighbors. The rise was also influenced by the availability of more information from the Tamil regions.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the violence score in the earlier reporting periods (WWL 2018 - 2019) 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 is continued in WWL 2022.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
Security	Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

While Sri Lanka has made recent positive steps to address the protection of women (such as establishing an Office on missing persons and an 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). 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.” This means that although sexual assault continues to be an issue, such cases are rarely reported.

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, as well as Christian teaching. One of the most common forms of persecution that affects female converts to Christianity is isolation and/or house arrest. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in light of Sri Lanka’s patriarchal society. As a result, many female converts find it more difficult to follow their faith than new male converts and overcome the verbal harassment they receive from their families and communities. A Sri Lankan Christian comments: “Even her own children will oppose her. Women who convert are under great distress because their whole family will be scolding 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	Denied access to social community/networks; Denied communal resources; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian leaders often bear the brunt of attacks against a church. As men are often at the forefront, they are most often the victims of physical attack and threats (although Sri Lanka does have 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 male gets 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 2020):

- "In his February 24 report to the UN Human Rights Council on his visit to the country in 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, said that he observed “significant gaps” in “upholding accountability and access to justice as well as ensuring non-recurrence of human rights violations.” He also said that religious minorities faced restrictions in the manifestation of their religion or belief, such as proselytization, conversion, and building of places of worship, in addition to numerous incidents of violent attacks." (Page 1)
- "Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report incidences of discrimination and abuse and lengthy delays in court action on cases involving them. In September, a magistrate issued arrest warrants for two men accused of assaulting four members of Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2019. In October, police reported that the attorney general would be filing a complaint against Buddhist monks accused of leading a mob that assaulted three female Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2013. According to civil society groups and NGOs, highly visible social media campaigns targeting religious minorities continued to fuel hatred and incite violence. According to Human Rights Watch, in April and May, there were calls on social media to boycott Muslim businesses and false allegations of Muslims spreading COVID-19 deliberately, which the authorities did not contest." (Page 2)

Buddhist nationalist monks campaign strongly not just against Christians but also against the country’s Muslim minority. While physical violence decreased in the WWL 2022 reporting period (also due to the lockdown restrictions imposed to battle COVID-19), other restrictions especially aimed at the Muslim minority were implemented. The already mentioned implementation of mandatory cremation was short-lived, but affected mainly the Muslim and Christian minorities. Additionally, 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). A detailed overview of recent developments is provided in USCIRF’s [country update](#) from October 2021.

The Hindu minority continues to be watched with suspicion which is partly due to religious bias, and partly due to the country’s bitter war history, 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

These persecution engines will continue to play an important role not just in Sri Lanka's politics, but also in society and families as well. With the Rajapaksa family back in power and its next generation already in place, the country is not likely to walk a path of reconciliation and inclusion of religious or ethnic minorities. On the contrary, as the government faces an uphill battle to bring the economy back to life, especially with the tourist industry being so badly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, it will be much easier to use minorities as scapegoats and claim that Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhism are inseparable. Since the Rajapaksas have a record of reportedly backing radical Buddhist groups like BBS and helping them flourish, it seems that reconciliation and a peaceful co-existence of all citizens (inclusive of minorities such as Christians), will remain a far-off dream. The pushing through of the 20th amendment of the Constitution, even strengthening an already strong presidential position, will only add to this. And increasingly relying on China will mean that the government is less willing to listen to any criticism of the human rights situation, especially when made by Western countries.

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. However, if 2019 taught observers anything, it was to be very cautious about making any predictions.

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>
- Persecution engines description: militant nationalism - <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/sinhalese-leviathan-how-gotabaya-rajapaksa-is-remaking-sri-lanka/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: National Christian Council - <http://nccsl.org/web/member-churches/>
- Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.75 points): Bill - <https://barnabasfund.org/news/sri-lankan-government-drafting-new-law-against-unethical-conversions-ami/>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: detained - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/sri-lankan-pastor-forced-close-church-threats-buddhists-police.html>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: announced - <https://apnews.com/article/cabinets-national-security-islamic-state-group-sri-lanka-eb23fb57fd43ba306c4716b87de026fe>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: country update - https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update_0.pdf

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

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