

World Watch Research

# Sri Lanka: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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## Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Sri Lanka: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
21,949,000	2,027,000	9.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

## Recent history

The country has a long and violent history of religious and ethnic conflict. The 26 year long civil war only ended in 2009. Although Sri Lanka is not alien to political turmoil, the 2022 protest movement was exceptional in several aspects. In May 2022, peaceful protestors were [violently attacked](#) at Galle Face Green by armed pro-Rajapaksa supporters (and police), injuring dozens and killing five (Daily Mirror LK, 10 May 2022). This shows the potential for civil unrest in the country. (See below for further details: *Political and legal landscape*).

Sri Lanka has not made any tangible progress in terms of national reconciliation, which is so much needed after a generation-long civil war. Given that most networks in society are based on religious as well as ethnic affiliation, the challenge is immense, since ethnic and religious groups need to overcome their mistrust of each other. However, it is far from certain who can lead this process. In 2022 and the first months of 2023, all efforts focused on solving the economic and social crisis facing Sri Lanka and the country saw some success in those efforts. With the political turmoil, which brought people from all ethnic and religious groups of Sri Lanka together, a somewhat open situation developed and there were high hopes for a more inclusive form of government. However, subsequent political developments have dampened these hopes, as the present government is dominated by establishment forces. Fresh elections are scheduled to take place on 21 September 2024.

Christians are still affected by the Easter 2019 attacks and although official investigations uncovered some shortcomings and intelligence failures, there is a feeling that the attacks have been used to serve political ends rather than improve the situation for Christian minorities. More than five years after the attacks, there are still more questions than answers, leading Cardinal Ranjith to threaten to [call for an international inquiry](#) if progress at the domestic level was delayed any longer (Daily Mirror LK, 11 February 2021). These demands were echoed by the UN OHCHR which called for an [independent inquiry](#) after the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka had issued its compensation verdict (Newsfirst LK, 19 January 2023).

## Political and legal landscape

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

The year 2022 saw unprecedented changes and challenges. Sri Lanka faced its most dire economic situation since gaining independence in 1948. This initially led to large-scale, antigovernment demonstrations (known as "Aragalaya protests") and an unprecedented [ministerial reshuffle](#) involving members of the Rajapaksa family (Reuters, 4 April 2022). While the crisis was exacerbated by the pandemic, its roots predate the emergence of COVID-19. The average Sri Lankan was facing shortages of literally everything and had to queue for long hours in the hope of getting even the most basic of supplies. In response to the protests, which included demonstrations in front of the private home of the president (and of Rajapaksa children living abroad), the government imposed an island-wide curfew in May 2022.

The new Finance Minister, Ali Sabry, [resigned](#) less than 24 hours after being appointed in the government reshuffle mentioned above (although he later revoked his resignation) and 41 lawmakers abandoned the governing coalition. This left the government without a majority. The news that the government had also closed a number of the country's embassies abroad was yet another illustration of just how dire the economic situation was becoming (Reuters, 5 April 2022). The protests “morphed into a nationwide uprising” bridging existing gaps between different ethnic and religious groups in the face of the political turmoil ([International Crisis Group, 18 April 2022](#)).

Finally, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa heeded week-long demands by protesters and tendered his resignation on 9 May 2022, stating that he was “quitting to help form an interim, unity government” ([Reuters, 10 May 2022](#)). Ranil Wickremesinghe was re-appointed as prime minister just three days later in an effort to bring stability. He has already served five times in this top position. However, the protesters were not satisfied with this replacement and continued to protest and demand that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resign as well. Months of protests with cries of "GotaGoGama" protests ensued. Finally, on 12 July 2022, President Rajapaksa [fled the country](#), first to the Maldives (Reuters, 12 July 2022), then to Singapore, where he resigned from his presidency, and then on to Thailand. He [returned](#) to Sri Lanka on 2 September 2022 (Channel News Asia, 3 September 2022) and was greeted by party members and several ministers of the government.

On 15 July 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as acting president and elected by parliament on 20 July; a few days later, Dinesh Gunewardena was appointed [new prime minister](#) (Reuters, 22 July 2022). In August 2022, the state of emergency was lifted as the political protests tailed off, but the authorities [continued to act firmly against the leaders](#) of the mostly peaceful protests (The Diplomat, 3 November 2022). However, the government's main focus was on the country's dire economic situation.

Viewed against the background of the August 2020 election results, the speed of this political development is quite breathtaking. Back then, the Rajapaksa family won a landslide victory with almost 60% of the votes and subsequently amended the Constitution with the help of some smaller allied parties. [Four members of the Rajapaksa family](#) made it into the cabinet (consisting of 26 members), with Namal Rajapaksa, son of Prime Minister Mahinda, already representing the next generation (Al-Jazeera, 12 August 2020). Through this victory, the Rajapaksas [directly controlled](#) 126 of 434 government departments and entities, which is a stunning 29% (Financial Times LK, 22 August 2020). With Basil Rajapaksa, who took over the Ministry of Finance from his brother Mahinda in July 2021, the family had [five ministers and several junior ministers](#) out of a total of 28 ministers in the cabinet (Channel News Asia, 8 July 2021). Since August 2022, no member of the Rajapaksa family holds executive power in Sri Lanka. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have lost all political power, especially as President Wickremesinghe is regarded as being in close contact with them.

The pushing through of the 20th constitutional amendment had led to a stronger emphasis on *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia*. The [21st Amendment](#), voted into force in June 2022, effectively re-instated parliament's control over a president still holding considerable executive powers (The Quint, 21 June 2022). The 22nd Amendment, approved in October 2022, showed (according to observers) the [weakening grip](#) of the Rajapaksa family on Sri Lankan politics (The Diplomat, 26 October 2022). At the same time, it confirmed the strong presidential position, leading Cardinal Ranjith to warn that it could be used to [punish the government's critics](#) (UCA News, 4 November 2022). No matter

which government and under what changing constitutional powers, the main task for the nation's leaders is to find an effective way of dealing with the financial, economic and social crisis (as described below).

### Gender perspective

Although Sri Lanka has made progress towards achieving gender equality, structural barriers and societal norms continue to discriminate against women and girls, particularly in the context of marriage. In response to the government’s agreement to revise the 1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, activists are calling for – among other things – the minimum age of marriage to be raised to 18 (without exception) and for women to be able to marry without their guardian’s permission ([HRW 2023 Sri Lanka country chapter](#)). 10% of girls are currently married before the age of 18, according to [Girls Not Brides Sri Lanka](#) (accessed 9 September 2024). Whilst Sri Lanka has made positive steps to address the protection of women, sexual violence is prevalent across the country and the justice system is reportedly inadequate (Report of the UN Secretary General, 3 June 2020, “[Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)” p.42). These legal gaps can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution, particularly against minorities like Christian women and girls.

### Religious landscape

Sri Lanka: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,027,000	9.2
Muslim	1,990,488	9.1
Hindu	2,861,390	13.0
Buddhist	14,918,089	68.0
Ethnic religionist	1,208	0.0
Jewish	90	0.0
Bahai	18,727	0.1
Atheist	16,915	0.1
Agnostic	106,723	0.5
Other	8,739	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Due to the history of civil war in Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has thrived. Radical Buddhist groups have sprung up across the country and were used by previous governments as a means of keeping religious minorities in check. Under the Rajapaksa government, it was feared they may see a revival.

The main target for radical Buddhists has always been the Muslim minority which is regarded as a particular threat if Islamic radicalization should occur. A rise in violence in 2014 led to the killing of many Muslims, and violence flared up again in March 2018 in Kandy when several businesses owned by Muslims were destroyed by Buddhist radicals.

Christians have continued to face attacks by local groups, frequently led by saffron-robed Buddhist monks. It is still too early to judge just how much influence was lost by radical monks through the political upheavals of 2022:

- On the one hand, the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka caused many people to speak out against the Rajapaksas and those associated with them. Because of this, the influence of Buddhist monks was affected and even online posts from monks were quickly dismissed by many people. At the same time, many Buddhist clerics spoke out against the dismal conduct of the government and criticized the levels of state violence against mostly peaceful protestors.
- On the other hand, there were continued reports in 2022 and 2023 that monks led mobs of villagers to demand the closing of churches and at times led attacks on them, even though these reports were less frequent than in previous years.

It is also worth remembering that radical Buddhists used the Easter Sunday attack against Christians by Islamic militants in April 2019 as a pretext for attacking the Muslim minority ([The New Humanitarian, 15 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 shows how heavily this government was leaning towards *Religious nationalism* and *Dictatorial paranoia*. Buddhist monks also played a significant role in helping the Rajapaksas come back into power at the 2020 elections.

In 2021 a bill was announced to propose that conversions be made a criminal offence. The law is still under debate, and would appear to have support in society: A study in 2022 found that more than 40% of Buddhists, Hindus and Catholics believe that there is a prevalence of unethical conversions ([Minor Matters, 21 September 2022](#), p.46).

## Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Sri Lanka data](#) (accessed 9 September 2024):

- Sri Lanka has the status of an lower-middle income country.
- **GDP (current US\$):** 84.36 (2023 billion)
- **GDP per capita (current US\$):** 3,828.0 (2023)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** -2.3 (2023) / -7.8 in 2022
- **Inflation (consumer prices (annual %):** 16.5 (2023) / Throughout 2022, the rate was 49.7%.
- **Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP) (% of the population):** 1.0 (2019). Economic growth has translated into shared prosperity with the national poverty headcount ratio declining from 15.3% in 2006/07 to 4.1% in 2016. Extreme poverty is rare and concentrated in some geographical pockets; however, a relatively large share of the population subsists on a level only

just over the poverty line.

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

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

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

One of Sri Lanka's most important industries - tourism - took a further battering in 2022, although it slowly started to bounce back as the COVID-measures were lifted. Tourist resorts employ thousands of people and because of the pristine beaches and the natural beauty of Sri Lanka, the country gets a good share of the growing worldwide tourist industry. However, the April 2019 attacks had already caused a devastating economic impact; it was no coincidence that international hotels were targeted. The Islamic suicide bombers did not just want to kill Christians and others who were eating before heading off to Easter celebrations, they also wanted to damage the whole tourist industry. Tourism generates significant levels of revenue and creates many jobs, also for less qualified citizens. After four years of crisis (i.e., the 2019 bombings followed by the COVID-19 crisis and political and economic instability in 2022), tourism would at last appear to be recovering.

As reported by [Al-Jazeera on 19 December 2023](#):

- "In 2023, Sri Lanka recorded more than 1.3 million tourist arrivals by the second week of December, official data show. It is the first time arrivals have crossed the 1 million mark in four years. More than 150,000 tourists visited in November, the highest monthly tally since March 2020."
- In 2023: "From January to November, tourism contributed \$1.8bn in revenue – an increase of 78 percent compared with the same period last year. Tourism is Sri Lanka's third-largest source of foreign exchange. On average, a tourist spends \$181 daily, according to government data."

### Effect on Christians

During the waves of demonstrations in 2022, Christian leaders, especially the country's Catholic bishops, but also priests and nuns, did not mince words when it came to criticizing the government and siding with the protesting people ([UCA News, 1 April 2022](#)).

A country expert noted that if the cost of living and taxes remain high, with many people struggling to make ends meet, this has a knock-on effect on "the self-sustainability of churches". Since many Christians are working in the hospitality sector and - especially in rural areas - in the agricultural sector, they have been struggling with the economic decline as well, but for them, a proper investigation of the April 2019 attacks and a discussion about their rightful place in society is still very important and would be a positive signal for all minorities ([UCA News, 22 April 2024](#)).

### Gender perspective

Despite improvements over the last decades in relation to girls' access to education ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal / Sri Lanka](#), accessed 9 September 2024), 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, 9 March 2021](#)). The female labor force participation rate was 32.1% in 2023, compared to 71.9% for men ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal / Sri Lanka](#), accessed 9 September 2024). Besides societal attitudes toward female employment and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the service sector, where women constitute about 49% of the workforce, a UN study on Gender Disparities concluded that the low demand for female workers is driven, at least in part, by the challenges associated with financing maternity benefits ([UN Women Press Release](#), 28 March 2022). Denial of inheritance has been reportedly used to punish female converts to Christianity, throwing them into economic uncertainty. Male converts on the other hand are more likely to experience persecution in the workplace or lose their job.

### Social and cultural landscape

[World Factbook Sri Lanka](#) (accessed 9 September 2024):

- **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.)
- **Urban population:** 19.2% of total population (2023)

- **Literacy rate:** 92.3% (population of 15 years and older) - male 93% / female 91.6% (2019)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 10.6 years

According to [World Bank Sri Lanka data](#) (accessed 9 September 2024):

- **Population/Age distribution:** 23% of the population are below the age of 14, 11.6% are above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 98% (2020), the primary school enrollment rate is 100.2%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 6.7%, the rate of vulnerable employment stands at 37.8% (modeled ILO estimate)

According to a statement by the [Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka](#) (20 June 2024):

- **Refugees:** "In Sri Lanka, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 31 January 2024, there are 311 registered refugees and 180 registered asylum-seekers. Among these persons are 105 Rohingya refugees, and many asylum-seekers from the Ahmadiyya community. It is estimated that a majority of the registered refugees in Sri Lanka would eventually be resettled in third countries this year."

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Sri Lanka](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Sri Lanka scores 0.780 points and ranks #78 among 193 countries (2022).
- **Life expectancy:** 76.6 years
- **Median age:** 34 years
- **Gini coefficient:** 39.8
- **Gender inequality:** On the Gender Inequality Index, Sri Lanka scores 0.376 points and ranks #90 of 166 countries (2022)
- Labor force participation rate (age 15 and over): Female: 29.7% / male: 70.7% (2022)
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 5.4%, a further 39% are in vulnerable employment, youth (between 15 and 24) not in school or employment is 30.3%.

In the dire economic situation, social challenges abound, especially in the rural and war-torn northern and north-eastern Tamil areas and for the most vulnerable strata of society. The World Bank figures quoted above (see: *Economic landscape*) make it very clear that the ordinary citizen suffers most, within a framework of high inflation, a strong rupee depreciation and growing unemployment, leading to a doubling (in rural areas) and tripling (in urban areas) of poverty rates. And even the IMF loan does not bring any immediate relief. While the queueing for daily necessities may have become less or even stopped, the increase in VAT from 8% to 15% (as one of the measures agreed upon with the IMF) shows how hard it will remain for the average person to make a living. The reported 30.3% of youth unemployment and 39% of vulnerable employment seem to come closer to reality and those percentages will have since risen due to the deepening crisis in the country.

While migration has always been at a high level, the dire economic situation led to even more leaving Sri Lanka. Especially highly skilled professionals are leaving: One result is that Sri Lanka is now facing a significant [shortage of doctors](#). According to the Government Medical Officers Association of Sri Lanka, in the period between May 2022 to May 2023, "a total of 842 graded medical personnel have left the

country, and 274 specialist doctors have left the country. There were 30 doctors categorized as emergency services, and 23 of them have left the country, leaving only 7 in Sri Lanka" (NewsFirst LK, 14 August 2023).

Christians, especially in the rural areas, struggle with vulnerable or no employment, but another issue for them (as for other ethnic and religious minorities) is to have [their voice heard](#) in a very dominant Sinhala and Buddhist society (International-LaCroix, 2 July 2020). Another sign for more restrictions in society is that the government's [NGO office](#) was put under the Ministry of Defense by the Rajapaksa government in 2020, so human rights and minority concerns are likely to continue taking a backseat for some time in the future (RSIS, 11 August 2020).

### Gender perspective

Whilst Sri Lanka has deeply entrenched patrilineal norms, the civil war left many women as widows and heads of households. As of 2017, one in four households was female-headed, although these women reportedly face societal pressures and ongoing challenges in accessing government programs and in owning property. The Muslim population is estimated to be 9.1%. Under Sharia law, it is considered that a wife belongs to her husband's family. Within this male-dominated, Islamic context, women continue to assume subservient positions to men. Domestic violence is reportedly widespread, having [increased](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is a known means of punishing female converts (UNFPA, 2023).

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Sri Lanka](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 56.3% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 34.2% of the total population (38.5% female users / 61.5% male)
- **Active cellular mobile phone connections:** 148.2% of the total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023](#):

- "Internet freedom in Sri Lanka improved slightly during the coverage period. The government no longer blocked social media and other communications to repress protests, and the historic *Aragalaya* (Struggle), a countrywide peaceful mobilization calling for reforms to the country's political culture and economic policies, continued during the coverage period. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in response to the protesters demands, former opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was sworn in as acting president following Gotabaya fleeing the country, was appointed president through an election by Parliament. Wickremesinghe's government implemented emergency regulations to bar purportedly false information, continued the brutal crackdown on online activists and journalists reporting on the *Aragalaya* movement, and introduced draft laws that could encroach on online expression and user privacy. Despite these continued restrictions, Sri Lankans continued to engage in digital activism around a range of issues."

- "Sri Lanka experienced improvements in political rights and civil liberties after the 2015 election of President Maithripala Sirisena, which ended the more repressive rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, the Sirisena administration was slow to implement transitional justice mechanisms needed to address the aftermath of a 26-year civil war between government forces and ethnic Tamil rebels, who were defeated in 2009. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election as president in November 2019 and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's (SLPP) victory in the August 2020 parliamentary polls emboldened the Rajapaksa family, which worked to further empower the executive, specifically the powers of the president, roll back accountability mechanisms for civil war-era rights violations, and further militarize the island, while also entrenching themselves in key positions, including the premiership and finance ministry. During his presidency, Wickremesinghe has continued to crack down on protesters and has sought to maintain an image of stability following the height of the unprecedented economic crisis in the country."
- The country is rated as "Partly Free", but increased by four points in score. Next to the capital, Colombo, the Western Province has the most Internet traffic. However, the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces are lagging behind, which is true for all infrastructure, not just the Internet, and also in terms of "digital literacy". As Freedom House says: "Post-civil war infrastructure development in the Northern and Eastern provinces was delayed. However, the development of telecommunications infrastructure in these provinces has improved and led to increased internet usage. Nonetheless, compared to urban areas, rural and up-country Tamil communities have significantly lower computer and digital literacy rates. Some 34.2 percent of the population in rural areas and 11.5 percent in estate areas were categorized as computer literate, compared to 49.1 percent in urban areas, while 58 percent in rural areas and 43 percent in estate areas were categorized as digitally literate compared to 72.4 percent in urban areas."

### Gender perspective

According to a [2018 report](#) by the GSMA, Sri Lankan women have attained relatively high levels of gender equality compared to most surrounding countries. Efforts continue to close the gender gap, particularly in relation to women's access to mobile Internet and mobile financial services ([GSMA, Mobitel Sri Lanka](#)). A 2017 GSMA report found that unlike other countries where male gatekeepers were the primary barrier to mobile Internet use, in Sri Lanka the main barrier was affordability and perceived lack of relevance/need.

### Security situation

In May 2022, peaceful protestors were [violently attacked](#) at Galle Face Green by armed pro-Rajapaksa supporters (and police), injuring dozens and killing five (Daily Mirror LK, 10 May 2022). This shows the potential for civil unrest and an increasingly unstable security situation. At the same time, radical Buddhist groups, which have a history of influencing politics, largely remained silent in the political unrest and more moderate Buddhist monks publicly sided with the protestors, condemning the violence. Thousands of protestors [demonstrated](#) against the government's crackdown on opposition protests and its leaders (ABC News, 27 October 2022). While protests have not completely ceased in 2023, they have tended to be smaller in size and more focused on specific areas of discontent (e.g. student protests and protests against the unfair distribution of financial burdens with the lower and middle classes taking the brunt of rising prices and increased taxes). This may also be a reaction to the

constant government warnings against unrest and the authorities' heavy-handedness against opposition demonstrators.

Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist and ethnic Sinhala (around 75% of the population). After decades of ethnic tension, a full-fledged civil war broke out in 1983. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority fought against the Tamil insurgency, represented by the Tamil Tigers group (LTTE) (Tamils are predominantly Hindu, but include a considerable number of Christians). There was a high death toll on both sides. The war ended finally in 2009 with the defeat of the insurgency, but true peace and reconciliation is still far off. In the long-term, it will be important to establish how the country should deal with its war legacy and whether reconciliation will also be conducted by legal means, however, with the Rajapaksa government in power, led by two war-time heroes, all discussions and efforts stopped or were at least postponed. Reconciliation is a term heard less and less and is very rarely followed up by any concrete action. Churches would be in a unique position to help bridge this gap and address these painful issues as they have members from both sides. But all too often, they find themselves suffering from those self-same divisions, mainly in the Eastern, Southern and Northern provinces. This task became more complicated following the suicide attacks in April 2019. In addition, the army still has a vast number of active members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009. According to a Financial Times report on 13 January 2023:

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

Radical Buddhist groups, namely the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, translated as Buddhist Power Force) and the Sinhala Ravaya (SR), are led by Buddhist monks and these are known to stir up mobs for attacking the Muslim minority and, to a lesser extent, Christians as well. They made a comeback in the WWL 2020 reporting period, maybe best reflected in a speech Galagoda Aththe Gnanasera, Secretary-General of the BBS gave at a rally in Kandy in July 2019. In it, he offered his own particular view of the April 2019 attacks on churches and hotels and the later attacks against Sri Lanka's Muslim minority. He said that Buddhism is under threat on the island and the Sinhala people – the majority ethnicity – should rule the country with the help of nationalist monks. He proposed that the government should withdraw from the rule of law and allow Buddhist monks to deal with the Muslim minority. He did not make the slightest mention of the fact that the Easter attacks almost exclusively targeted Christians or that Sri Lanka's Muslim minority faced riots, looting and physical assaults at the hands of Buddhist nationalists. On the contrary, according to a media report, he [accused the Christian minority](#) of converting people and thus of damaging the nation (UCA News, 8 July 2019). This is a very worrying indication that more storms could be brewing in the future. Ex-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who resigned in July 2022, had a track record of not hindering Buddhist radical activity and was even said to be actively supporting it.

The question is worth considering why the Islamist bombers chose to target Christians and not Buddhists in April 2019, especially since the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka has a long history of facing attacks from Buddhist mobs and has even been targeted more during the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. with the policy of forced cremation. Muslims have been persecuted more than Christians and there have been incidents where some were killed. The Easter 2019 attacks by Islamic militants simply do

not fit into this pattern. The answer is that Islamic State (IS) ideology does not require a pattern to be in place. IS leaders simply [call](#) for Christians to be attacked wherever they are (The Times, 15 April 2019) for being “polytheists”, referring to the Christian foundational doctrine of the Trinity. In this way, the attacks in Sri Lanka show, like so many other attacks in recent years, that ideology is the key for understanding the motivation behind the violence. To search for reasons in the religious, ethnic and socio-economic situations of minorities in Sri Lanka means looking in the wrong direction and asking the wrong questions.

In January 2021, three Sri Lankan citizens faced [terrorism charges](#) in a US court in Los Angeles for the Easter attacks (South Asia Monitor, 10 January 2021). In November 2021, the trial of [25 men](#) accused of masterminding the 2019 Easter bombings began in Sri Lanka: More than 23,000 charges were filed against the suspects, and 1,215 witnesses were called to testify (BBC News, 24 November 2021). However, the trial was [adjourned until March 2022](#) to allow time for the indictments to be translated (Al-Jazeera, 12 January 2022). The Catholic Church has long been challenging the government's investigations, claiming that the truth of who was really behind the attacks is [deliberately being hidden](#) (Al-Jazeera, 21 April 2021). Despite Cardinal Ranjith's frequent calls for justice and repeated calls from civil society as well, so far [no progress](#) has been made in the trials and much about the motives, perpetrators and political implications remains obscure (Island LK, 29 October 2023).

The Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka show that although IS can be geographically defeated (for instance in Iraq and Syria), the influence of its ideology remains strong. It also means that more such attacks are likely in the future, disrupting the persecution patterns observers have seen emerging in many countries over the years.

## Christian origins

According to Church tradition, Christianity made inroads when the Apostle Thomas came to India in the 1st century AD and preached in Sri Lanka as well. Nestorian Christians lived in the country for a long time before Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island by Portuguese traders at the beginning of the 6th century. In the 17th century, Dutch traders brought Protestantism; Methodist missionaries were particularly active later on in the 19th century, especially in the founding of schools. Christians are one of the few groups in society which include a mix of both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups, although ethnicity can be problematic among them as well.

## Church spectrum today

Sri Lanka: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		0.0
Catholic		75.0
Protestant		16.1
Independent		10.2
Unaffiliated		0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians		-2.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		10.5
Pentecostal-Charismatic		19.0

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Christians can be found throughout the country, but are more concentrated in the eastern, western and northern parts of the country, and are least represented in the south. When the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka, they built Roman Catholic churches along the eastern and western coast and in some towns. There are fewer Roman Catholic churches in rural areas. Assemblies of God (AoG) churches can be found in many parts of the country now, especially in rural areas. There are also Anglican mission and Methodist churches in some rural areas. The Catholic Church of Sri Lanka is spread over 12 dioceses and generally follows the geographic distribution described above. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka comprises the Anglican, (Protestant) Church of South India, Methodist, Baptist, Reformed, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Church of Ceylon, AoG and Foursquare Gospel churches. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka mainly represents evangelical groups and has a membership of more than 200 churches, representing more than 200,000 Christians. The Statistics Office of Sri Lanka published an [overview](#) about the religious affiliation per district in 2012.

## Further useful reports

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

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

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- Recent history: violently attacked - <https://www.dailymirror.lk/plus/Pro-Rajapaksa-supporters-attack-peaceful-Galle-Face-Green-Sponsored-violence-ensures-black-day-for-protesters/352-236651>
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