

Sri Lanka

Stable / Unchanged ▾



Religion

Population

Area

- Buddhists : **68.4%**
- Hindus : **13.2%**
- Christians : **9.1%**
- Muslims : **8.6%**
- Others : **0.7%**

20,811,000

65,610 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Although peace has returned to Sri Lanka after decades of a civil war which ended in the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, religious harmony and unity remain fragile in the country. As part of the current process of constitutional reform, politicians are examining whether the country's institutions should keep their current centralised form of government or move towards some kind of federalism. At the same time, as part of this process, a decision must be taken regarding the place in the new basic law of Buddhism, the religion of the majority of the population.

For President Maithripala Sirisena, the goal is to move away from the presidential system of government set up under the 1978 constitution. This has been blamed for the authoritarian regime the country experienced under the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015). The new basic law should increase the powers of Parliament and define the level of devolution of power to the regions in order to meet the political aspirations of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. However, in doing so, the president has touched a particularly sensitive nerve, namely the place of Buddhism in the institutions of the nation.^[1] While the 1948 constitution, granted by the British at the time of independence, established the principle that no one should receive preferential treatment under the law on the basis of religion, the 1972 constitution and then the 1978 constitution made Buddhism the state religion by granting it "foremost" status. As article nine of the 1978 constitution says: "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."^[2] It is still unclear whether the new constitutional text will maintain Buddhism's current status. For now, the incumbent administration appears to be playing for time.

After the 2015 elections, the next legislative and presidential elections are scheduled for 2020. The local elections on 10th February 2018 essentially pitted the Sri Lanka Freedom Party of President Maithripala Sirisena and its ally, the United National Party of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, against the Sri Lanka People's Front of former President

Mahinda Rajapaksa.^[3] The poll resulted in an outright victory for the opposition party of the former president, which won the majority of local councils.^[4] Tensions have led the incumbent government to take a wait-and-see attitude to avoid antagonising the most nationalist elements of the Sinhalese majority and the most extremist agitators among the country's Buddhist monks.

The setbacks regarding the institutional reforms deemed necessary for peace have prompted some religious leaders to take matters into their own hands. On 10th March 2017, in Colombo, the Maha Bodhi Society brought together several senior Buddhist and Christian religious leaders. Dedicated to the spread of Buddhism in South Asia, the society provides a forum of dialogue between the major world religions. Venerable Bellanwila Wimalarathana Nayaka Thero, a monk who for many years has engaged in the inter-faith harmony initiatives, made a proposal widely considered to be unique. He said: "It is not the politicians but us who are close to the people so religious leaders should be given a more prominent place in the [national] reconciliation process. I propose a mechanism of religious councils to be set up at the divisional, district and national levels to promote national unity and reconciliation." He noted that while it is the constitution's role to establish the necessary conditions for the nation's political unity, religious harmony is an area in which religious leaders must take the initiative.^[5]

These expressions of goodwill are unlikely to be robust enough to maintain religious harmony in a nation still deeply divided between its Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. This divide has a religious dimension since the Sinhalese tend to be Buddhist and the Tamils are mainly Hindu. The Christian minority, mostly Catholic, is unique in being found in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities, while Muslims are considered a group apart.

Incidents

In recent years, incidents seem to occur on a regular basis. Hindu Tamils have complained about Buddhist groups building temples and putting up statues of the Buddha in areas controlled by the military in the Northern and Eastern provinces, which are predominantly Tamil. Hindu Tamils see this as evidence that the Sinhalese majority want to expand its cultural and religious influence.

The most notorious incident of aggression was recorded and posted on social media in November 2016; in Batticaloa, a former Tamil stronghold, a monk close to the extremists of the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade (BBS)) threatened a local government official. After the official launched legal proceedings against some Sinhalese women, he said: "You, Tamil dog, I'm going to kill you."^[6]

According to a report by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka^[7], although violence against religious minorities has slightly fallen in recent years, extremists are still carrying out activities aimed at "intimidating" them. In addition to the BBS, other groups such as the Sinha Le (Lion's Blood)^[8] have been promoting their vision of a "Sinhalese nation". In all, the Evangelical Alliance has reported 89 incidents against Christians in 2016 and 36 in 2017 (as of May 2017). They include denying Christians the right to bury their dead in public cemeteries, the demolition and closure of churches, physical violence and death threats against individuals. The same report stated that 44 incidents against Muslims had occurred between early 2015 and May 2017, including attacks on mosques or madrassas, hate speech, as well as threats and physical attacks. It should be noted that Buddhist extremists have engaged in hate speech on social media and their words and videos have a large audience.

In June 2017 a human rights lawyer, Mr Lakshan Dias, had to flee the country after participating in a televised debate in which he denounced the rising religious intolerance in Sri Lanka, citing in particular the aforementioned report of the Evangelical Alliance.^[9] The Justice Minister took him to task calling him a "traitor" and an "animal". After seeking refuge abroad for a while, the lawyer returned home where he was interrogated for seven hours by the police. Three officials of the Evangelical Alliance were also questioned by the authorities.

At least two Muslims were killed and mosques, houses, shops and vehicles were destroyed during three days of rioting in

Kandy, central Sri Lanka in early March 2018. According to reports Buddhist monks connected to BBS and Maha Sohon Balakaya travelled to the city to incite attacks. It was claimed that local politicians and police officers took part. More than 300 people were arrested in connection with the riots. The violence was triggered by the death of Buddhist man H. G. Kumarasinghe who was attacked by four Muslim men following a traffic incident.^[10]

Prospects for freedom of religion

In the period under review, there have been some attempts to foster reconciliation between faith communities. For, example, the Arjuna Ranatunga Social Services in Colombo erected the world's largest artificial Christmas tree on Christmas Eve 2016.^[11] However, in light of government actions and statements, there are grounds to fear that the much-needed national reconciliation will progress very slowly in Sri Lanka, allowing extremist Buddhist groups to inflict violence on society, especially religious minorities.

Endnotes / Sources

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[5] Kingsley Karunaratne, 'Sri Lankan monks, bishops propose religious councils', Ucanews, 14th March 2017, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lankan-monks-bishops-propose-religious-councils/78652>, (accessed 24 February 2018).

[6] 'La recrudescence des tensions ethniques et religieuses ternit la politique gouvernementale de réconciliation nationale', Églises d'Asie, 13th December 2016, <http://eglasiemepasie.org/asia-du-sud/sri-lanka/2016-12-13-la-recrudescence-des-tensions-ethniques-et-religieuses-ternit-la-politique-du-gouvernement-en-matiere-de-reconciliation-nationale>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

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[9] 'Well-known Lawyer Lakshan Dias Flees Sri Lanka After Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe Threatens to Take Action in Two Days', Dbsjeyaraj.com, 29th June 2017, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/53873>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[10] APPG Statement on violence in Sri Lanka, All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 8th March 2018, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/appg-statement-on-violence-in-sri-lanka/> (accessed 9th

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[11] Surinder Kaur, 'The World's Biggest Christmas Tree Hasn't Helped Sri Lankan Christians', Christianity Today, 22nd December 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/december/sri-lanka-guinness-worlds-biggest-christmas-tree-christians.html> , (accessed 21 February 2018); Lahiru Pothmulla, 'SL's Christmas tree enters Guinness world records', Daily Mirror, 13 December 2017, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/SL-s-Christmas-tree-enters-Guinness-world-records-142128.html> , (accessed 21 February 2018).