

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

SRI LANKA

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Copyright Notice	3
Introduction.....	3
WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Sri Lanka	4
Link for general background information	4
Recent country history	4
The religious landscape	4
The political landscape	5
The socio-economic landscape	5
Concluding remarks.....	5
External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Sri Lanka	6
WWL 2019: Church History and Facts.....	7
How many Christians?	7
How did Christians get there?.....	7
What church networks exist today?	7
Religious context	8
Notes on the current situation.....	8
WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	9
Introduction.....	9
What type of persecution dominates?	9
Who is driving persecution?.....	9
What it results in	9
Violence	10
Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period	10
External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile	10
WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics	11
Introduction.....	11

Position on World Watch List (WWL)..... 11

Persecution engines 11

Drivers of persecution 12

Context 13

Christian communities and how they are affected..... 13

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence 14

5 Year trends 17

Gender specific persecution..... 18

Persecution of other religious minorities 18

Future outlook..... 19

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics 20

Additional Reports and Articles 21

 WWR in-depth reports 21

 Open Doors article(s) from the region 21

 World Watch Monitor news articles 21

 Recent country developments 21

Introduction

Copyright Notice

Introduction

World Watch List Sri Lanka	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	58	46
WWL 2018	57	44
WWL 2017	55	45
WWL 2016	-	-
WWL 2015	51	44

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Sri Lanka

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611>

Recent country history

With a new government elected in 2015, the long-term ruler (who had brought the 26 year long civil war to an end) Mahinda Rajapaksa lost power. As a consequence, some radical Buddhist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena lost open support, but are still publicly active and have given support to attacks on minorities. Most attacks target the country's Muslim minority, as happened in March 2018. This shows that radical groups and a strong nationalism (in the sense of having to protect Sri Lanka's Buddhism from being threatened) continue to be influential. The level of violence against Christians has remained at a lower level than under the previous government, which had been more permissive. However, incidents against Christians continue to be reported, mainly involving local government officials, legal restrictions and threats.

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 a big and maybe insurmountable one since ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust. However, it is far from certain who can lead this process. The government is still not giving ethnic and religious minorities enough protection (although it avoids emphasizing Buddhist supremacy as much as the ousted government did) and has already crossed its mid-term point and faces new presidential elections in 2020. Because the local elections of February 2018 saw former President Rajapaksa's new party making landslide gains, the government may decide to turn to other important topics like the economy, but it is possible that, as a matter of last resort, they will revert to religious nationalism. This possibility gained traction with the political crisis beginning at the end of October 2018. In a shock development causing much political unrest, President Sirisena claimed he was being targeted for assassination and [dismissed](#) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. The president suspended parliament and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new prime minister. Despite two non-confidence votes against him, at the time of writing (end of November 2018) there was still no solution on the horizon for this political stalemate.

The religious landscape

Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist and ethnic Sinhala (80% of the population). The country has a long and violent history for religious and ethnic reasons. After decades of ethnic tension, a full-fledged civil war broke out in 1983. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority fought against the Tamil minority (predominantly Hindu, but including 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 Tamils, especially the Tamil Tigers group (LTTE), but true peace and reconciliation is still far off.

Due to this history, religious nationalism has thrived in Sri Lanka. Radical Buddhist groups have sprouted up across the country and were used by the previous government as a means of keeping religious minorities in check. The main victim was and still is the Muslim minority as this was particularly felt to be a 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. But Christians have also been facing attacks by local

groups, frequently led by saffron-robed monks. In the WWL 2019 reporting period, more than 60 attacks and incidents of harassment at different levels have been recorded.

The political landscape

Hopes were high in 2015 that the new government would start tackling the legacy of the civil war, start a full reconciliation process and start protecting ethnic and religious minorities in a more comprehensive way. As the former president had relied heavily on Buddhist nationalist groups (and on violence instigated by them), there was hope that the elections would overcome the decades-long ethnic and religious rift which was paralyzing the country.

Such hopes turned out to be premature. Both sides in the civil war committed war crimes and this has not been addressed sufficiently. There are still many wounds on both sides, and the Tamil part of the country in the northeast still tends to be neglected. Reconciliation is a term frequently heard, but seldom followed up with 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.

Finally, ex-President Rajapaksa is still a force to be reckoned with as was shown in local elections in February 2018, in which his party (Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna) made significant gains. He is very experienced in executing power politics and now serves his country as an ambitious member of parliament, although his brother and former Minister of Defence, Gota Rajapaksa, may serve as frontline candidate. In the short-term, i.e. with the next elections looming closer in 2020, the country's struggling economy needs to be dealt with and Sri Lanka's citizens need to be given good perspectives for the future, no matter which religion they belong to. In the long-term, however, it will be more important to establish how the country should deal with its war legacy and whether reconciliation will also be conducted by legal means, and, if so, whether this will be dealt with by domestic courts or by hybrid solutions such as the United Nations have proposed. The longer these issues remain unaddressed, the stronger dissatisfaction and impatience will get. It remains to be seen how new Prime Minister Rajapaksa is going to tackle these challenges and if he continues his first terms' policy of a close connection with China.

The socio-economic landscape

The army continues to be an important economic and political factor and also runs businesses one would not usually connect with military operations: e.g. the Navy runs some of the most exclusive holiday resorts. This is also due to the army's size, as it still has almost 260,000 members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009. Tourism is increasingly important for employment as well. Resorts are employing thousands of people and because of the pristine beaches and the natural beauty of Sri Lanka, the country gets its share of the growing worldwide tourist industry. Therefore, the army does not want to let go of such business and "land-grabbing" for tourism projects is sadly becoming a problem. Whereas the government stopped several projects put forward by Chinese investors, the dependence on Chinese money became clear in June 2018, when a Chinese company [took over](#) the port of Hambantota with a lease for 99 years.

Concluding remarks

One visible trend is that legal and government restrictions are being used against Christians and other religious minorities. The Muslim minority has also suffered another year of violent incidents, especially in March 2018. Even though (from the perspective of the international community) Sri Lanka presently has a more democratic government, it is sadly only the heads of state which have changed, not the

policies. The ministers and local government officials who caused so much trouble for the churches all remain the same. Therefore, the number of incidents of persecution has not dropped drastically. It is possible that local government officials will increasingly use more strategic methods than just legal restrictions in curtailing the freedom of religious minorities.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Sri Lanka

- Recent country history: dismissed
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lankan-president-suspends-parliament-after-firing-prime-minister-idUSKCN1N107E?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- The socio-economic landscape: took over
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-china-ports/chinese-firm-pays-584-million-in-sri-lanka-port-debt-to-equity-deal-idUSKBN1JG2Z6>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
20,950,000	1,962,000	9.4

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

According to ancient traditions, 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. Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island at the beginning of the 16th century by Portuguese traders. 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 become an issue among them as well.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Sri Lanka	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	1,571,000	80.1
Protestant	277,000	14.1
Independent	225,000	11.5
Unaffiliated	9,600	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-121,000	-6.2
Total	1,961,600	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	229,000	11.7
Renewalist movement	406,000	20.7

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: Believers 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.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Besides the Roman Catholic Church, which is the oldest, largest and most wide-spread church in the country (80% of all Christians), Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and the Salvation Army are also well established. More than 40% of Christians are ethnic Tamils and many churches run services in Sinhala and Tamil and - in the larger cities - English as well. Although Christians could be a role model in how to bridge the ethnic rift, which is still shaking the country even after the civil war ended in 2009, it causes friction in the Church as well, with many Christians struggling with ethnic and political issues.

Religious context

Religious Context: Sri Lanka	Numbers	%
Christians	1,962,000	9.4
Muslim	1,854,000	8.8
Hindu	2,832,000	13.5
Buddhist	14,154,000	67.6
Ethnoreligionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	81	0.0
Bahai	17,100	0.1
Atheist	17,000	0.1
Agnostic	105,000	0.5
Other	7,670	0.0

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to WCD statistics, the main religion in Sri Lanka is Buddhism (67.6%), followed by Hinduism (13.5%).

Notes on the current situation

- Pastors and church members alike have had little training for facing the challenges of Christian life - especially in rural areas. Due to rising Buddhist pressure, Christians need to be better prepared for persecution, including gaining a deeper biblical understanding. Many Christians who have experienced church attacks are traumatized and feel insecure. Children are especially vulnerable.
- A government circular from 2008 cites the Christian right to freedom of worship as laid out in the Sri Lankan constitution. An increasing number of pastors use this when neighborhoods threaten churches - or demand their closure. However, the pastors' courage often remains unrewarded as they continue to suffer pressure from local governments, police officers, neighbors and mobs and courts. This is true even when there have been incidents of police officers defending their rights.
- Christians in the Tamil majority in the north are still suffering from the consequences of the civil war (1983 – 2009). Hundreds of families are still displaced and struggling to survive. A hybrid court system was proposed by the United Nations to investigate war crimes committed by all parties of the civil war, but this was never followed through and so injustices and war crimes have never been addressed and continue to be an open wound in society.
- Religious education is a mandatory subject in school. Due to a lack of Christian teachers, Christian pupils often have to attend Buddhist religion classes.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 58 points, Sri Lanka ranked 46th in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

Religious nationalism: Every Sinhalese is considered to be a Buddhist, so not only Tamil Christians are treated as second-class citizens, but also Sinhalese Christians are looked at with suspicion and frequently slandered and attacked. This is even more true for members of non-traditional Protestant churches and especially converts. Members of historical churches such as the Roman Catholic Church are somewhat more accepted, as they tend to stay within the unspoken limits of society. This does not mean that they are not affected by discriminatory practices or - occasionally - attacks as well.

Denominational protectionism: The incident from 2017, when a Roman Catholic bishop said there had been no attacks on churches in the country, neglecting dozens of Protestant churches attacked, has not been repeated in the WWL 2019 reporting period. However, it certainly still reflects the sentiments held by many in government circles.

Who is driving persecution?

The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements, at times supported by (local) officials. Although the election of a new government in 2015 led to a slight reduction in the activities of the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) group, other movements such as *Sinha Le* became active and gained strength. They claim Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Sinhala nation and are active in promoting this ideology through sticker campaigns etc.. BBS transformed into a political party, but has not been particularly successful so far. Although BBS focuses more on attacking the Muslim minority, Christians and churches are attacked frequently as well. A strong signal was given by the state against such violence, when a leading BBS monk was sentenced [to six years](#) imprisonment in August 2018 (see "Context" for details). Some Buddhist religious leaders have been actively engaging social media platforms to promote hate against religious minorities in the country. Various radical Buddhist groups have gained more prominence within the WWL 2019 reporting period, such as the Mahason Balakaya, which is comprised of Buddhist monks.

Apart from such radical movements, family members together with village officials in the rural areas have verbally abused and asked Christian converts to leave their villages.

What it results in

Converts from a Buddhist or Hindu background suffer the strongest forms of persecution. They are subject to harassments, 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, but converts to Christianity are not. Additionally, non-traditional churches are frequently targeted by neighbors, often joined 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.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Sri Lanka	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	21	0	10	3
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	17	0	10	5

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- On 9 September 2018, a group of about 100 people stopped the worship service of an Assemblies of God church at Beliatta, Hambantota District. They damaged a window, two motorcycles parked outside, and removed religious symbols hanging on the front door. Some of them forcibly entered the premises and threatened to kill the pastor and his family and demanded they stop gathering people for worship activities and leave the village. They spoke to the women in the congregation in obscene language and demanded that the pastor send the congregants away. A Buddhist monk then arrived and reiterated the mob's demands and further escalated the tension by claiming to have previously warned the pastor. Police found it very difficult to calm the situation and provide security for the pastor and his family.
- The majority of state schools do not teach Christianity as a subject, and so Christian schoolchildren are forced to study Buddhism or Hinduism. There have also been reports that children were forced to participate in Buddhist rituals.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Who is driving persecution?: to six years
https://apnews.com/cc8d1655439941a08855fba8b41c40dd?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=3485c2d6f8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_08_08_01_38&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-3485c2d6f8-399904105

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 58 points, Sri Lanka ranked 46th in WWL 2019, a rise of 1 point compared to WWL 2018. Neither the score for violence nor the levels of pressure increased substantially. Most pressure was experienced in the *Private sphere* (for converts from Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds) and *National sphere* (especially for Christians not belonging to Historical Christian communities).

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Sri Lanka	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Weak
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 (long version).

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

The Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka is a secular state. However, its Constitution puts Buddhism first and evidently regards Buddhism as 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. 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 *Spheres of life and violence*.

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 also Sinhalese Christians are looked at with suspicion and frequently slandered and attacked. Perpetrators are not only state authorities, as the telling name "Ministry for Religious Affairs and Buddhist Sasana" indicates, but also Buddhist monks and local authorities. Radical Buddhist groups, namely the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS, translated as Buddhist Force Army) 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. Although they are not as present as they used to be before the government changed in January 2015, their radical influence is still felt and attacks on Christian churches continue at the same level. Buddhist supremacy is still very much felt in the daily lives of religious minorities like Muslims and Christians, but it is no longer the BBS or SR in the driving seat.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Sri Lanka	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	WEAK	VERY STRONG	-	WEAK	-	-	WEAK	-
Government officials	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak	Strong	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	Strong	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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 (long version).

Drivers of Religious nationalism:

The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements and government officials, frequently at the local level. Although the election of a new government in 2015 led to a reduction in the activities of the BBS, other movements such as SR gained strength. They claim Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation and focus on acting against the Muslim minority at the moment. BBS transformed itself into a political party, but has not been particularly influential in the political arena. Ethnic Sinhala leaders, frequently connected with the radical group, call for protection of the Sinhala majority as well, often religious leaders like monks have been active in persecution as well. Family members together with village officials in rural areas have often abused Christian converts verbally and asked them to leave their villages. Political parties tend to join in calls for the protection of the country's Buddhist heritage since this gains votes. 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 areas of the northeast, groups of radical Hindus belonging to the RSS movement (well-known in India as a strong driver of persecution) are gaining in influence.

Context

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; therefore anything from the outside is viewed with suspicion. Sri Lankan Buddhist groups are therefore not so concerned with the philosophical themes of Buddhism so popular in the West, but rather with the fight they perceive as very real to preserve this traditional triangle. All the actions of BBS and SR can in fact be seen as attempts at fending off attacks against this view of society. Even violent clashes and riots [targeting](#) the Muslim minority (as occurred in 2014 and to a lesser extent in March 2018) and attacks against Christians can be explained by this wish to preserve the triangle. Muslim and Christian minorities are perceived as a threat. This was shown by another incident in May 2017 as well: In a speech aimed at the Minister for National Co-existence, leading BBS monk, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasera Thero, criticized the presence of "[Christian missionaries](#)", effectively declaring them to be legitimate targets. This very same monk has been [sentenced](#) to two terms of six months in jail after intimidating the wife of an abducted journalist in June 2018 and in July 2018 to a surprisingly strong [six years in prison](#) for contempt of court. Although the verdict will be appealed, it is sending a strong signal to radical Buddhist groups that they need to watch their step.

Sri Lanka has a 26 year civil war history which came to a bloody conclusion only in 2009. In Sri Lanka's civil war the predominantly Hindu minority of Tamils, mainly based in the northern and eastern provinces of the country, fought for independence. The "Tamil Tigers" (or LTTE) gained prominence around the world. Both government forces and LTTE committed war crimes and one of the main challenges now is how best to deal with this fact. Reconciliation, either through purely domestic means or with international help, is still far off and no progress has been made over several years. Another major question connected to this issue is the de-militarization of the country. Due to the long civil war and the ever-increasing business activities of the army, the armed forces currently consist of around 260,000 soldiers. The process continues slowly and it will be difficult to re-integrate these soldiers into civilian life - and the army does not want to lose lucrative opportunities in enjoying benefits from business.

Finally, there is the question of how radical Buddhist groups like BBS and SR will act in the future. They seemed to emerge from nowhere and grew in a very short time (BBS held its first national convention in July 2012). And while most of their leaders had been politically active earlier, the groups' influence and radicalism targeting religious minorities has been unprecedented. Their actions until recently went unchecked, so that the claim that those groups were at least tacitly supported by the former government, especially by the minister of defence, has gained credibility. The sentencing of a leading monk of BBS [to six years](#) because of contempt of court could be a game changer, but it remains to be seen how the court of appeal reacts - and how far protests and potential retaliation will fuel violence. In a shock development causing much political unrest, President Sirisena [dismissed](#) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe at the end of October 2018, suspended parliament and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new prime minister. After two non-confidence votes by parliament, at the beginning of December 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that President Sirisena had acted against the Constitution. Since several members of parliament belonging to Rajapaksa's party had meanwhile defected towards the ousted prime minister's party, the ruling was surprisingly accepted.

Christian communities and how they are affected

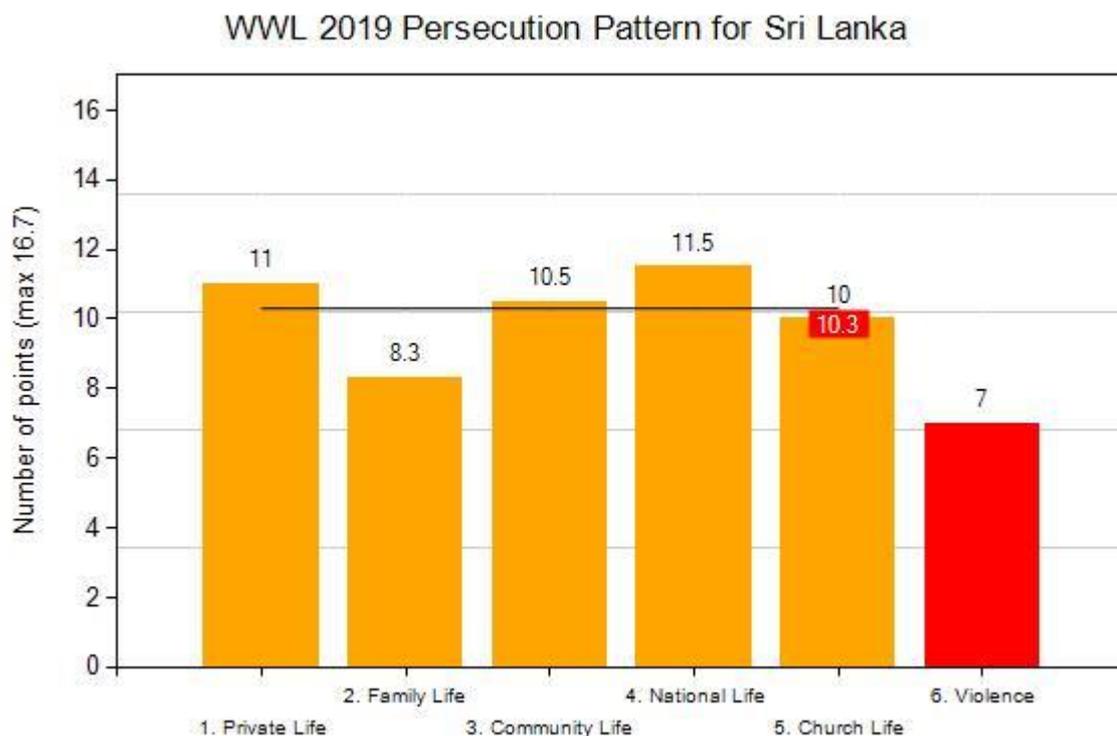
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: These are groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and 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 being hindered in 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 and are consequently harassed, subjected to physical and verbal assaults and to isolation by their local communities. This occurs mainly in rural villages and had in the past only been significantly visible in the southern and north central provinces of the country. However, with the end of the civil war, this trend has spread to the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka 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.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Sri Lanka remained at a high level, rising from a score of 10.1 in WWL 2018 to 10.3 in WWL 2019.
- Pressure is strongest in the *National, Private and Community spheres of life*. While pressure in the *National sphere* is typical for countries affected by the Persecution engine *Religious nationalism*, 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 as

well, reflecting numerous incidents where mobs (frequently led by Buddhist monks) turned up in front of churches, often supported by local officials, disturbing services and demanding that churches be closed down.

- Violence against Christians increased from 6.9 in WWL 2018 to 7.0 in WWL 2019.

Private sphere:

Converts from a Buddhist background experience opposition from their family and relatives. Even other people from the community oppose them when someone converts to Christianity in their area. Christians from a Muslim or Hindu background also experience this sort of opposition. Therefore, 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 towards spreading their religion. It is risky for converts to talk to others about their new faith, especially for converts from Islam, and 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.

Family sphere:

Evangelical and Independent churches are being denied the possibility of registering weddings within their church buildings - which is a facility traditionally allowed in churches in Sri Lanka. Converts are facing discrimination and harassment, but are usually not put under pressure to divorce. Also, registration questions or the change of religion in an ID card or passport are usually unproblematic. This is why the score for this *Sphere of life* is comparably low. Adult baptisms face opposition, especially if they are held publicly. In rural areas, Christians are not allowed to be buried in the public cemetery. Christian burial rites have been denied by Buddhist monks, Hindu villagers and even by government officials in the WWL 2019 reporting period. In one incident, the mob prevented the burial of a Christian in the village and forced the mourning family to find a bury place 15 kilometers away. In another incident, reported in January 2018, a man with a mob caused a disturbance at his own father's burial in a public cemetery. He demanded that his mother reconvert to Hinduism so that his father could have a decent burial. This illustrates the intensity of pressure on converts in family and society.

Christian children enrolled into state schools have been routinely forced to observe Buddhist or Hindu rituals. Christian children have also been punished by teachers and principals, and in some instances even fined, when majority religion rituals were not observed. At school, religion is a compulsory subject. Although it is even a legal requirement according to the Education Ordinance that if a school has more than 15 students belonging to a particular faith, the state must appoint a teacher to instruct students in that particular faith, it 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 one case, a head-teacher not only denied a Protestant pupil admission to his school, but also advised the parents to keep the child at home, even though the parents said there was no other state school near their village. There were several more cases where Protestant children were denied admission to schools.

Community sphere:

It is usually local Buddhist monks who stir up community sentiments about Christians "not belonging here". (These monks are themselves influenced by the ideology of the radical groups and want to protect the purity of their local Buddhist triangle - see "Context" above.) In areas where Hindus and

Buddhists are the majority, Christians often become targets for intimidation and forms of social exclusion, frequently being denied access (or only being given delayed access) to community resources such as wells and electricity. During Hindu festivals, Hindus ostracize Christians for not participating in the activities. Christians are frequently monitored and obstructed by villagers and at times even violently attacked. As in many previous reporting periods, the WWL 2019 reporting period also contains 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. In December 2017, a poster campaign against a Christian worker took place in one city, threatening her by name to kill her and anyone conducting Christian worship if she does not cease her ministry. Pressure to renounce the Christian faith is frequent and at times businesses run by Christians become targeted for customer boycotts. There have been several incidents reported, where Christians in rural areas have been stripped of the membership in funeral endowment societies. These societies are formed at village levels and are important for conducting burials.

National sphere:

Even though the government, which was elected in January 2015, does not support the radical Buddhist groups openly any more, the level of pressure on Christians in this *sphere of life* remains substantial, especially as the government is leaning towards supporting Buddhism. Buddhism retains religious supremacy in the Constitution, and the very few Christians who are in government positions (or work with the government) experience discrimination from nationalists. Christians are portrayed negatively in the media. Perpetrators against Christians are left unpunished.

There is a common pattern prior to violent attacks: The attacker releases false accusations to the media (e.g. claiming that a pastor is making forced conversions) which in turn justifies the attack. Perpetrators are left unpunished and, in most cases, Christians are pressed to solve court cases amicably. 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.

Church sphere:

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. Christian residents are frequently asked to stop all their activities and/or leave the village. Registration is often used as leverage against Christian churches.

It remains very difficult to construct or renovate a church building in rural areas as it disturbs the Sri Lankan triangle described under the section "Context" above. 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, 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. In two very worrying developments, the Supreme Court curbed freedom of religion even further. In Case No.SCFR 92/2016, decided in June 2017, it held "It can be considered as law and therefore is applicable to all communities". In July 2018, the court in Case No 241/14 held: "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 (if international law standards are left aside).

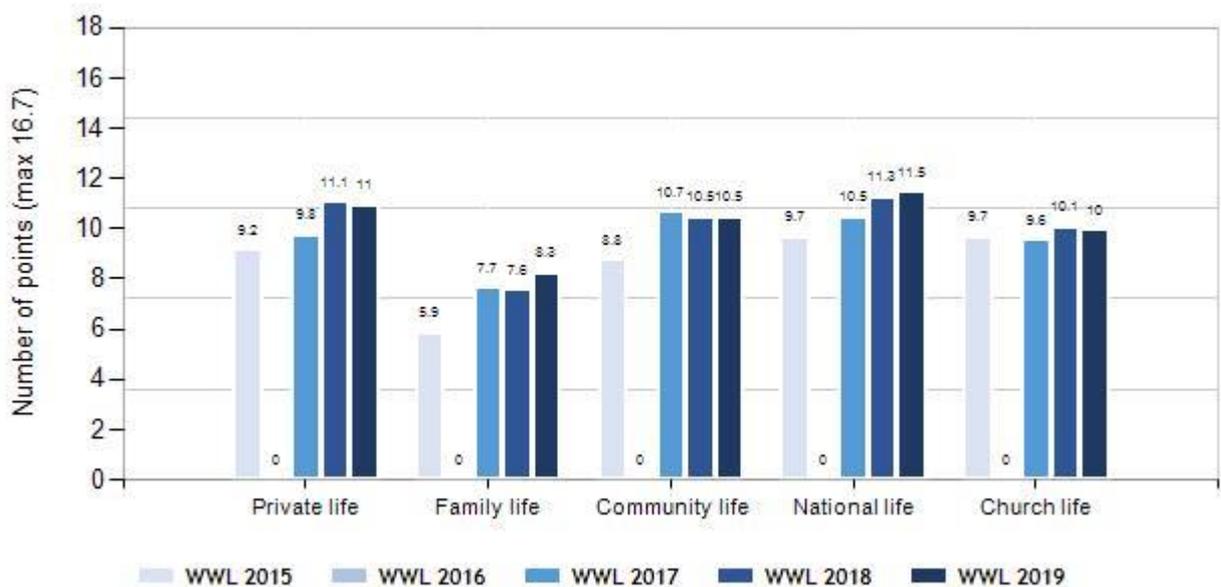
Violence:

Churches and premises of pastors have been attacked. There were also reports of Christians being physically assaulted and at least one church worker faced a smear campaign. For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

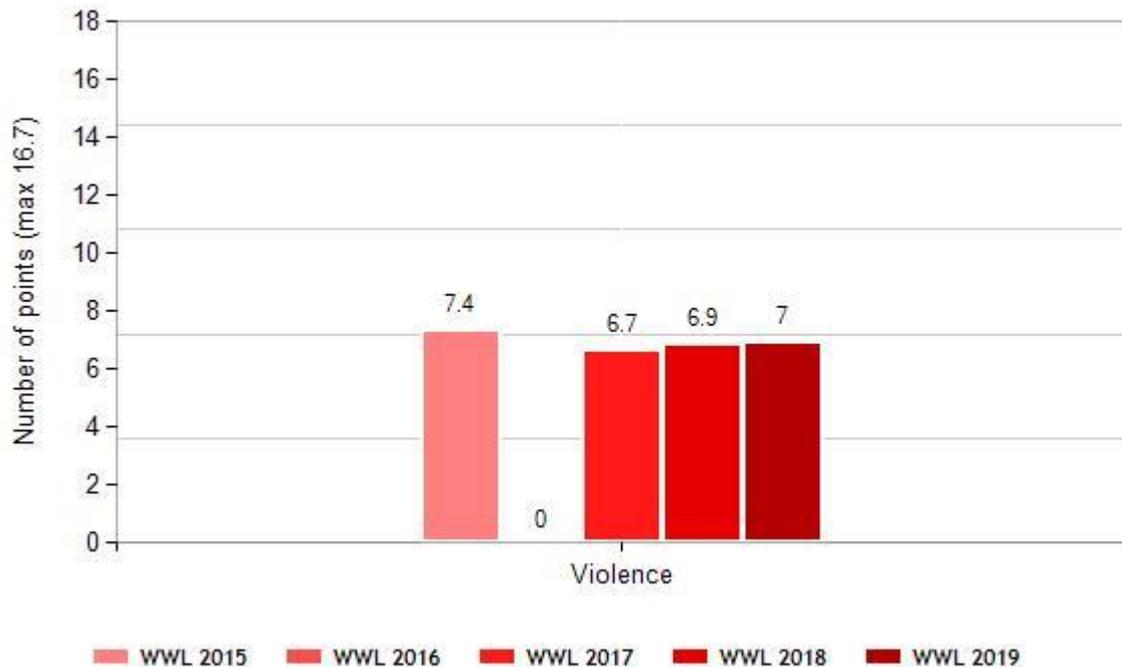
Chart 1 shows the development of pressure in the individual *spheres of life* over the last five reporting periods. (In WWL 2016, there were first signs of relaxation for Christians after the election of a new president and a new government which led to a slight drop in scores causing the country not to make it into the Top 50.) The scoring for *Private life*, *Community life* and *Church life* have been hovering around 10 to 11 Points, showing that converts are facing many problems and churches consistently get attacked due to allegedly lacking permits. In contrast, *Family Life* and *National Life* received higher scores over the years, showing that pressure on converts by local authorities in particular increased. Chart 2 shows that the average pressure has been consistently at a high level and has increased each reporting period (except in WWL 2016). Chart 3 shows that the violence score has remained stable at a very high level (at around 7 points), reflecting the fact that each reporting period more than 10 churches have been attacked or closed and more than 10 Christians have been assaulted.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Sri Lanka (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Sri Lanka	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	10.3
2018	10.1
2017	9.6
2016	0.0
2015	8.7

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Sri Lanka (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Due to cultural reasons, new female converts find it more difficult to follow their faith than new male converts. Furthermore, women and girls are often subject to dress codes and traditions (e.g. in Hindu communities, to continue wearing certain religious symbols etc.). If the female convert comes from a Muslim background and clings to her new-found faith, she is more at risk of being forced into marriage with a Muslim, than a male convert. When Christian women and girls - not just converts - have already been subjected to persecution, their families are more reluctant to allow them out for any church-related work again. Also, if the persecution involved any kind of sexual assault, most often it would be considered as bringing shame upon the whole family. This also then impacts those girls' prospects for marriage in the village. The persecution of men and boys particularly affects the livelihood of Christian families. Especially in rural communities, it will be the males who are the breadwinners of the family, so losing a job or livelihood affects the whole Christian family financially. This can even be true many years after the actual incident of persecution happened. Since, predominantly male members of families, especially pastors and church leaders are targeted in incidents of intimidation and violence, they are often forced to flee or go into hiding, resulting, at times, in long periods of separation from their families.

Persecution of other religious minorities

As already stated, Buddhist nationalist monks campaign strongly not just against Christians but also against the country's Muslim minority. Violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims occurred in the Central town of Kandy in March 2018 and the [religious narrative behind the violence](#) is worrying. Hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist mobs carried out a wave of violent attacks against Muslim-owned businesses, homes, and mosques in the District of Kandy. The attacks resulted in the damage/destruction of 49 shops, 132 houses, and 4 mosques. 51 individuals were injured and 2 deaths

were reported. Reportedly, Muslim communities in the country are looking increasingly for protection in the Arab world.

The Hindu minority continues to be watched with suspicion which is partly due to religious bias, partly due to the country's bitter war history, when the predominantly Hindu minority of Tamils in the northern and eastern provinces of the country, fought for independence. (These Hindu communities are increasingly becoming drivers of persecution against Christian converts and churches in their midst.)

Future outlook

The political outlook: Once again, Sri Lanka has missed out on becoming one of the positive stories in the World Watch List. The government has failed to take steps to include religious minorities (Muslims and Christians) in its policies and to act decisively against anyone inciting religious hatred. The sentencing of a leading radical Buddhist to six years imprisonment in July 2018 is unlikely to change attitudes in society, especially with the political turmoil unfolding at the end of the WWL 2019 reporting period. Buddhist organizations will continue to be set on protecting a country perceived as being threatened by the Muslim and Christian minorities.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- *Religious nationalism:* This persecution engine will continue to play an important role not just in Sri Lanka's politics, but also in society and families as well. The government faces an uphill battle to keep the economy afloat and the country is already preparing for the presidential elections scheduled for 2020. A warning sign could already be seen in the way the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), former President Rajapaksa's newly formed party, enjoyed a [landslide victory](#) in Sri Lanka's recent local elections in March 2018. This shows how frustrated voters are with the current government's policies. Also, the way President Sirisena claimed he was being targeted for assassination and [dismissed](#) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe in October 2018, does not bode well for the country's development and the situation of its Christian minority. The president suspended parliament and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new prime minister. Even though this plan was stopped by the Constitutional Court (after the WWL 2019 reporting period in December 2018), it shows that Rajapaksa is still present and influential. According to experts on religious freedom, attacks against religious minorities almost doubled during his ten years term as president. Since Rajapaksa has 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. It seems more likely that *Religious nationalism* will increase again and *Dictatorial paranoia* may enter the scene again.

Conclusion: National reconciliation remains one of the country's biggest challenges. Given that most social networks are based on religious as well as on ethnic affiliation, the challenge is a big one as ethnic and religious groups need to overcome mistrust and find a way ahead. And it is not clear who can lead this process. The policy of Buddhist supremacy has not been particularly helpful in this respect. Christians are one of the very few social groups which can bridge the nation's huge ethnic divide, since many Protestant churches have both Sinhalese and Tamil members. This is a unique opportunity for building bridges and serving as a role model. But ethnic tensions sometimes hamper churches as well.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: unchanged
<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/new-constitution-state-religion-buddhism/>
- Context: targeting
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lanka-president-pledges-inquiry-into-religious-riots/81760>
- Context: Christian missionaries
<http://srilankabrief.org/2017/05/govt-silent-as-bbs-continues-its-holy-war/>
- Context: sentenced
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/sri-lanka-jails-extremist-buddhist-monk-six-months-threats-woman.html>
- Context: six years in prison
https://apnews.com/cc8d1655439941a08855fba8b41c40dd?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=3485c2d6f8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_08_08_01_38&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-3485c2d6f8-399904105
- Context: to six years
https://apnews.com/cc8d1655439941a08855fba8b41c40dd?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=3485c2d6f8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_08_08_01_38&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-3485c2d6f8-399904105
- Context: dismissed
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lankan-president-suspends-parliament-after-firing-prime-minister-idUSKCN1N107E?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: National Christian Council
<http://nccsl.org/web/member-churches/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: religious narrative behind the violence
<http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co18048-ultranationalist-buddhist-rhetoric-in-sri-lanka/#.WrThr3-G9PY>
- Future outlook: landslide victory
<https://www.ucanews.com/news/former-president-rattles-sri-lankas-political-status-quo/81504>
- Future outlook: dismissed
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lankan-president-suspends-parliament-after-firing-prime-minister-idUSKCN1N107E?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).