

World
Watch
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Sri Lanka: Country Dossier

December 2019



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

December 2019

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Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54

60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). 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”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Sri Lanka

Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Sri Lanka		
21,019,000	1,994,000	9.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Sri Lanka	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	65	30
WWL 2019	58	46
WWL 2018	57	44
WWL 2017	55	45
WWL 2016	53	-

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of persecution situation

Converts from a Buddhist or Hindu background suffer the strongest forms of persecution. They are subject to harassment, discrimination and marginalization by family and community. They are put under pressure to recant Christianity as conversion is regarded as betrayal: All ethnic Sinhalese (the majority in Sri Lanka) are expected to be Buddhist. Similarly, within the minority Tamil population in the northeast, all are expected to be Hindu, except for those belonging to Historical Christian communities. The Christian minority is partly tolerated, but converts to Christianity are not. Additionally, non-traditional churches are frequently targeted by the surrounding local community, 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. This longstanding persecution pattern was shattered when on Easter Sunday 2019 there were major attacks carried out by a little-known radical Islamic group. The suicide attacks targeted three Christian churches and three international hotels, claiming 259 lives, most of them Christians.

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- On 21 April 2019, Islamic suicide bombers from a little known radical group [attacked](#) three churches (two Catholic and one Protestant) and three luxury hotels in Colombo, Negombo and the Eastern city of Batticaloa. As they managed to time their attacks to coincide with the Easter church services, 259 people died, most of them Christians, making it one of the largest coordinated terrorist attacks since 9/11. Such suicide attacks were unprecedented in Sri Lanka.
- On 24 March 2019, a mass protest was held outside the church premises of Christ Gospel Church, Ja-ela, Gampaha District, Western Province, during Sunday afternoon worship. The 2000 townspeople, led by a traders' association, distributed leaflets and set up a petition, calling for the removal of the church ([NCEASL](#)). This is a more normal example of persecution in Sri Lanka, which often involves small mobs.
- 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 2020: Persecution summary / Sri Lanka

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: attacked - https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts-mastermind-insight/black-sheep-the-mastermind-of-sri-lankas-easter-sunday-bombs-idUSKCN1S21S8?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: NCEASL - <https://slchurchattacks.crowdmap.com/reports/view/961>

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Sri Lanka

Introduction

Link for general background information

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

Recent history

The country has a long and violent history for religious and ethnic reasons. The 26 year long civil war only ended in 2009.

With a new government elected in 2015, the long-term ruler (who successfully brought the 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 by Buddhists and Hindus 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 adequate protection against interference and attacks from radical Buddhist groups - although it avoids emphasizing Buddhist supremacy, unlike the previous government. After the political crisis in the country and the Islamic suicide attacks targeting the Christian minority in April 2019, the elections in November 2019 saw very strong nationalistic undertones and campaigning was focused on security issues, benefitting former Minister of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa (see Political landscape below).

Political and legal landscape

Politics and society in Sri Lanka is in turmoil. At the end of October 2018, in a shock development causing much political unrest, President Sirisena claimed he was [dismissing](#) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. The president suspended parliament and installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as new prime minister. Despite two no-confidence votes against him, President Sirisena pressed on with this plan and the country was in a political stalemate for several weeks. Only in December 2018 did the Constitutional Court finally rule that the president's action to dissolve parliament and install a replacement prime minister was [unconstitutional](#). However, the president's relationship with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was now broken and the government could no longer function properly.

This was soon to have devastating consequences when Indian intelligence sources warned the Sri Lankan authorities of an imminent Islamist attack at the beginning of April 2019. However, the information was not properly shared, relevant offices were not informed and the authorities took no action. As a result, the attacks went ahead unhindered on Easter Sunday, despite the [concrete warning](#). Some officials stepped down from their positions or were arrested, but no one took political responsibility. Instead, all nine Muslim ministers and two provincial governors [stepped down](#), after radical Buddhist monks accused them of having links to the suicide bombers, deepening the ethno-religious rift in the country. However, four of them [returned to the cabinet](#) later after being cleared of such allegations. Still, this incident illustrates aptly the increasing tension as regards ethnic and religious minorities and the well-founded [fears of possible future violence](#).

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. It has even done the opposite: It has driven out Muslim politicians from the government and presidentially pardoned a radical Buddhist monk (the leader of Bodu Bala Sena), just a few months after a court had the courage to sentence him to six years' imprisonment. Therefore, Buddhist organizations will continue to focus their energies on protecting a country perceived as being threatened by the Muslim and Christian minorities. In what human rights organizations called an [“unprecedented move”](#) in February 2019, President Sirisena spoke out against the national human rights commission for doing its work. While the United Nations requires the commission to vet the human rights record of persons proposed for participation in peacekeeping missions, the president and army officers oppose this. The fact that President Sirisena [appointed a general](#) accused of war crimes as the new Army Commander in August 2019 does not leave much room for hopes of reconciliation. The appointment was purely an effort to beef up his battered security credentials.

Additionally, former President Rajapaksa and his family are 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, himself, is very experienced in executing power politics and served his country as (an ambitious) member of parliament. His brother, the former Minister of Defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was elected president in the November 2019 elections, who went on to appoint his other brother (also former President) Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister on 21 November 2019. Although security was been the main issue in the election campaign, the track record of the Rajapaksa brothers having connections to radical Buddhist groups is not promising, especially from the viewpoint of ethnic and religious minorities.

Religious landscape

Due to the history of civil war in Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has thrived. Radical Buddhist groups have sprouted up across the country and were used by 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 2020 reporting period, 98 attacks and incidents of harassment at different levels have been recorded. Radical Buddhists used the Easter Sunday attack against Christians by Islamic militants in April 2019 as a pretext for [attacking the Muslim minority](#). 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. The monk, in turn, [called upon](#) the authorities to arrest those spreading Wahhabist views among the Muslim population. 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. If he continues unchecked, there is the danger that those involved in Christian outreach could also find themselves categorized as 'extremists' before long.

Religious Context: Sri Lanka	Numbers	%
Christians	1,994,000	9.5
Muslim	1,882,000	9.0
Hindu	2,741,000	13.0
Buddhist	14,251,000	67.8
Ethnoreligionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	81	0.0
Bahai	17,500	0.1
Atheist	17,400	0.1
Agnostic	107,000	0.5
Other	7,810	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

The international hotels were not a random target in April 2019. The suicide bombers did not just want to kill Christians and others who were eating before heading off to the Easter celebrations. They also wanted to target Sri Lanka's most important business, tourism. The country's tourist industry not only generates significant levels of revenue (in 2018 according to one local source [4.4 billion USD](#)), but also creates many jobs, even for less qualified citizens. 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. The political crisis in October 2018 was already bad business for the Christmas season, but the April 2019 terror attacks may have a longer lasting impact, although tourists do tend to have short memories and the government will do what it can to guarantee safety, despite the security blunder made by the authorities in April 2019. It was probably just coincidence that "Lonely Planet" had [named](#) Sri Lanka "the best country in the world to visit in 2019".

The army continues to be an important economic and political factor and also runs businesses one would not usually connect with military operations: For example, the Navy runs some of the most exclusive holiday resorts. 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. It will be interesting to see what stance the next president will take towards China.

Social and cultural 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 insurgency (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 Tamil Tigers group (LTTE), 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, 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 the levels of dissatisfaction and impatience will get. Reconciliation is a term frequently heard, but seldomly 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. This task has become more complicated with the suicide attacks in April 2019 and all that followed .

While the working poor rate (less than 3.10 USD PPP per day) seems to be manageable with 10.7% according to UNDP figures, the reported 20.7% of youth unemployment and 40.1% of vulnerable employment show the social challenges the government needs to deal with.

Technological landscape

According to the UNDP, the Internet penetration rate of Sri Lanka stands at 32.1%, the mobile subscriptions number at 124 per 100 people. There is a wide urban-rural gap, partly still stemming from the civil war. Next to the capital, Colombo, the Western Province has the strongest Internet traffic. However, the war-affected Northern and Eastern Provinces are lagging behind, which is true for all infrastructure, not just the Internet. The country is seen as ["Partly Free"](#) by Freedom House's "Freedom on the Net" report 2019, not least because of an internet blackout and slowdown after the attacks against the Muslim community in Ampara in March 2018.

Security situation

The army still has almost 260,000 serving members, despite several years having passed since the civil war came to an end in 2009. 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.

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. They made a comeback in the WWL 2020 reporting period, maybe best reflected in a speech Ganagoda 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 targeted Christians almost exclusively 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 destroying the nation. This is a very worrying sign that more storms could be brewing, especially as the newly elected president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has a track record of not hindering Buddhist radical activity and is even said to be actively supporting it.

There is general suspicion that small radical Islamic groups such as the ones based in Sri Lanka could never have made such a coordinated suicide attack in April 2019 without support from international jihadist groups. So far, the police claim there are no [traceable links](#). However, three lessons from the surprise attacks can have become evident:

1. Why Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka was no “natural target” and the attack did not fit into the persecution pattern World Watch Research has been observing for many years now. But it had been noted that there was a Muslim minority under strong pressure from the Buddhist majority and that some splinter groups were radicalizing and willing to use violence as well. An estimated 50-100 citizens from Sri Lanka followed the rallying call of the Islamic State group (IS) to fight in Syria and those returning may have been the nucleus of the Easter attacks, be it in the execution or in background support. They are battle-hardened, connected to other jihadis from all over the world (with whom they fought side by side in Syria) and also trained in clandestine communication techniques.

2. Origins of suicide bombers

It is striking that the suicide bombers did not come from the poor and marginalized fringes of society, but according to Sri Lankan authorities from (upper) middle class families and were relatively highly educated, some even studying abroad. There is a somber resemblance here to what emerged after the hostage-taking at the “Holey Artisan Bakery” in Dhaka/Bangladesh in 2016. This fact needs to be kept in mind: Islamic terrorism of the IS-variety seems to be first and foremost a middle class ‘phenomenon’, which points to ideological and not economic motivation.

3. Why Christians?

Given the history of Sri Lanka, the drivers of persecution against Christians were and are radical Buddhist monks, local mobs and neighbors and sometimes a complicit state. But attacks never reached the level of killings, let alone mass killings. Muslims have been persecuted more than Christians and there have been incidents where some were killed, as in [March 2018](#) (The Diplomat, 13 March 2018). The Easter 2019 attacks by Islamic militants simply do not fit into this pattern. The answer is that IS ideology does not require a pattern to be in place. IS leaders simply [call](#) for Christians to be attacked wherever they are (The Times, 15 April 2019) for being (despicable) “polytheists”, referring to the Christian foundational doctrine of the Trinity. In this way, the attacks in Sri Lanka show, like so many other attacks in recent years, that ideology is the key for understanding the motivation behind the violence. Looking at the religious, ethnic and socio-economic situations of minorities in Sri Lanka means looking in the wrong direction and asking the wrong questions.

The Easter attacks in Sri Lanka show that IS can be geographically defeated (for instance in Iraq and Syria), but not their ideology. It also means that we are likely to witness more such attacks, disrupting the persecution patterns observers have seen emerging in many countries over the years.

Trends analysis

One visible trend is that legal and government restrictions are being used against Christians and other religious minorities. The Muslim minority has also suffered from violent Buddhist attacks, especially in March 2018. Even though (from the perspective of the international community) Sri Lanka presently has a more democratic government, it is 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 in the past 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.

The increasing international isolation does not bode well for the country and its citizens and minorities. National reconciliation remains one of the country's biggest challenges and is more urgent than ever. Given that most social networks are based on religious as well as 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. However, it is well likely that this policy will be revived with a nationalistic government being elected under the leadership of the Rajapaksa family. At the time of writing (November 2019), Sri Lankan politicians are busy forging alliances and combatting political enemies, after presidential elections in November 2019. All citizens pay the price for this political in-fighting, but even more so the country's religious minorities - with Muslims and Christians suffering more than Hindus. It is particularly worrying that President-elect Rajapaksa in his first speech after election announced that he would "[protect Sinhala culture](#) and heritage and provide state sponsorship to safeguard the morals, and traditional ways". This can be easily used as justification for radical monks and village mobs not just to act against Muslims, but also Christians, protecting the traditional Buddhist triangle.

External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Sri Lanka

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11999611>
- Political and legal landscape: dismissing - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/sri-lankan-president-suspends-parliament-after-firing-prime-minister-idUSKCN1N107E?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Political and legal landscape: unconstitutional - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/democracy-activists-take-to-streets-in-chaotic-sri-lanka/84111>
- Political and legal landscape: concrete warning - https://apnews.com/e78584294999420fb98cd0c803323fc8?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=09e95bfa7f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_06_13_01_04&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-09e95bfa7f-399904105
- Political and legal landscape: stepped down - <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-17-No-50#assessment2>
- Political and legal landscape: returned to the cabinet - https://apnews.com/341320029b58472583ce601baf165302?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=92d3a0e63d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_07_30_02_05&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-92d3a0e63d-399904105
- Political and legal landscape: fears of possible future violence - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/302-after-sri-lankas-easter-bombings-reducing-risks-future-violence>
- Political and legal landscape: “unprecedented move” - <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-005-2019/>
- Political and legal landscape: appointed a general - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sirisena-appoints-General-Silva,-accused-of-war-crimes-47781.html>

- Religious landscape: attacking the Muslim minority - https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/05/16/after-sri-lanka-attacks-anti-muslim-backlash-points-new-divisions?utm_source=The+New+Humanitarian&utm_campaign=59d27dece2-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_21_12_49_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d842d98289-59d27dece2-15684673
- Religious landscape: pardoned hardline Buddhist monk - [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/asia/sri-lanka-president-pardons-hardline-buddhist-monk.html?utm_source=The+Irrawaddy&utm_campaign=1c9b32379d-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1465753ec6-1c9b32379d-26435333&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1465753ec6-1c9b32379d-26435333&ct=t\(RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN\)](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/asia/sri-lanka-president-pardons-hardline-buddhist-monk.html?utm_source=The+Irrawaddy&utm_campaign=1c9b32379d-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1465753ec6-1c9b32379d-26435333&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1465753ec6-1c9b32379d-26435333&ct=t(RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN))
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- Economic landscape: 4.4 billion USD - <http://www.ft.lk/columns/Sri-Lanka-tourism-a-success-story--No-tourism--no-economy-/4-677890>
- Economic landscape: named - <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/oct/23/sri-lanka-ranked-top-country-for-travel-in-2019-by-lonely-planet>
- 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>
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- Security situation: accused the Christian minority - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/buddhist-monks-urge-formation-of-sinhalese-govt-in-sri-lanka/85582>
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- Trends analysis: protect Sinhala culture - https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics/blessed-by-buddhist-monks-sri-lankas-new-president-prioritises-security-idUSKBN1XS15E?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=360541b274-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_11_18_02_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-360541b274-399904105

WWL 2020: Church information / Sri Lanka

Christian origins

According to Church tradition, Christianity made inroads when the Apostle Thomas came to India and preached in Sri Lanka as well. Nestorian Christians lived in the country for a long time before Roman Catholicism was introduced to the island by Portuguese traders at the beginning of the 16th 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

Church networks: Sri Lanka	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	1,585,000	79.5
Protestant	297,000	14.9
Independent	174,000	8.7
Unaffiliated	9,600	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-70,700	-3.5
Total	1,994,900	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	206,000	10.3
Renewalist movement	370,000	18.6

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

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.

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 65 points, Sri Lanka ranked 30 in WWL 2020.

This is an increase of seven points, compared to the score of 58 points in WWL 2019. Almost six points of this increase are accounted for by the score for violence, where the country scored the maximum for Christians killed for their faith due to the Easter Sunday attacks. The pressure on Christians increased in the Private sphere and Family spheres (especially for converts from Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds).

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Sri Lanka	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Very strong
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Religious nationalism (Very strong):

The Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka is a secular state. However, its Constitution puts Buddhism first and evidently regards Buddhism as the state religion. Chapter 2 of the Constitution states that the "Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana (Buddhist teachings), while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)." This provision in Article 9 is left [unchanged](#) in the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 2015, as well as in the proposed 20th amendment from 2017. These rights concerning freedom of religion and belief granted in Articles 10 and 14 can be limited, however, and this is done in subtle ways as will be shown below in the section describing the *Spheres of life*.

Buddhist supremacy is still a concept widely shared in the country. Every Sinhalese is considered to be a Buddhist, so not only Tamil Christians are treated as second-class citizens, but also Sinhalese Christians are looked at with suspicion, frequently insulted and attacked. Perpetrators are not only the state authorities, as the telling name "Ministry for Religious Affairs and Buddhist Sasana" indicates, but also Buddhist monks and local authorities.

To understand Sri Lankan Buddhism it is helpful to understand the traditional Sri Lankan triangle: Sinhalese life has three points of reference, namely the temple, the village and the lake (meaning irrigation and farming). Nothing else should enter this triangle; therefore anything from the outside is viewed with suspicion. Sri Lankan Buddhist groups are therefore not so much concerned with the philosophical themes of Buddhism so popular in the West, but rather with the battle to preserve this traditional triangle. All the actions involving radical groups and local monks can be seen as attempts at fending off anything that threatens this view of society. All violent clashes and riots [targeting](#) the Muslim minority (as occurred in 2014 and to a lesser extent in March 2018) and all attacks against Christians are grounded in this insistence on preserving the traditional triangle.

Islamic oppression (Medium):

The persecution pattern in previous reporting periods showed that Islamic oppression was weak and most strongly felt by the rather small number of Christian converts coming from a Muslim background. However, since radical Islamic fringe groups carried out suicide attacks against three churches in April 2019, this persecution engine has increased in influence. The main persecution engine in Sri Lanka is still Religious nationalism and the Muslim community is now under strong pressure due to the numerous crackdowns on radical Muslims and anyone affiliated with militant Islamic groups. It remains to be seen if the persecution pattern returns "back to normal" in the WWL 2021 reporting period or if it is indeed changing (see "Security situation").

Drivers of persecution

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

Drivers of Religious nationalism:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Government officials (mostly local government officials, police officers and provincial council officers), especially in predominantly Buddhist communities, have continued to be highly involved in action or inaction against Christians. Often, government officials have instigated persecution against Christians by simply heeding to the demands of local Buddhist monks and mobs. However, there have been some cases as well where government officials confirmed the constitutional rights of Christians to worship. These have been rare.
- **Ethnic group and non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** The main drivers of persecution are radical Buddhist movements frequently at the local level. In the WWL 2020 reporting period, these movements resurfaced after being less visible since the election of the new government in 2015. They claim Sri Lanka as a Buddhist Sinhala nation and focus on acting against the Muslim minority at the moment. The Bodu Bala Sena movement (BBS) transformed itself into a political party, but has not been particularly influential in the political arena. Ethnic Sinhala leaders, frequently connected with the radical group, have been calling for the protection of the Sinhala majority. Buddhist monks have been active in persecuting as well. Young Buddhist religious leaders have been using social media platforms to promote hatred towards religious minorities in the country. Radical Buddhist groups such as the Mahason Balakaya (comprised of monks) have also gained more prominence. Another recent development is that in the Hindu-majority 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.
- **Extended family and normal citizens (Strong):** Family members together with village officials and society in rural areas have often abused Christian converts verbally and asked them to leave their villages. Converts are put under strong pressure to return to their faith, while non-convert Christians are pressured to leave villages or at least to cease meeting as a Christian group. Such incidents have been reported from the Hindu (Tamil) minority region in the northeast of Sri Lanka as well.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Political parties tend to join in calls for the protection of the country's Buddhist heritage, since this gains votes. As Religious nationalism gained strength in the WWL 2020 reporting period and the campaigning and election period saw political parties embracing nationalistic and exclusivist positions. This will most likely continue to be the case in the upcoming parliamentary elections as well.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** In their efforts to keep a pure form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and especially in its villages, groups like BBS are calling for violence as well. This call is sometimes direct and sometimes veiled, as can be seen in Gnanasera's speech from July 2019, discussed in the section "Security situation" above.

Drivers of Islamic oppression (Strong):

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

Geographical hotspots of persecution

There are no recognizable geographical hotspots, as attacks and harassment against Christians is spread over the whole country, as can be seen in the ["heatmap"](#) produced by NCEASL. However, problems for Christians coming from the Hindu minority, especially for converts from their group, are centered in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, where they are living.

Christian communities and how they are affected

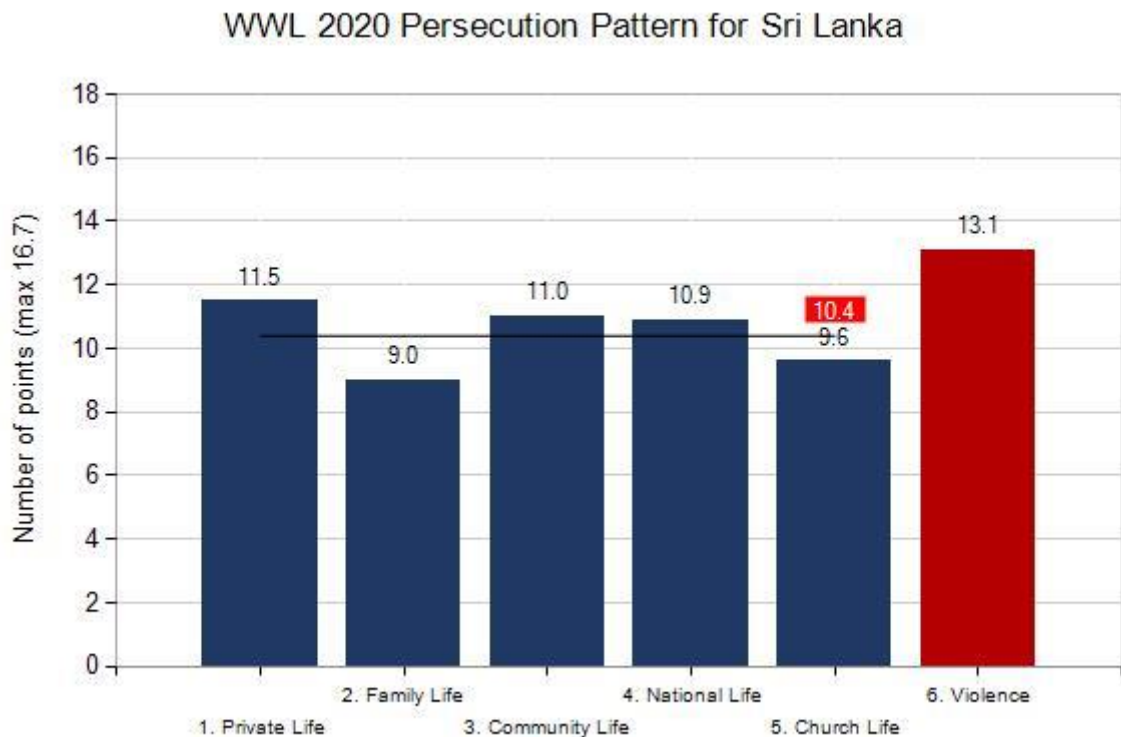
Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation. This category is therefore not scored in the WWL analysis.

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 hindered from constructing church buildings at times.

Converts to Christianity: These are Christians coming from Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. They face frequent hostility and violent attacks. New converts are most often seen as traitors by family and community and are consequently harassed, subjected to physical and verbal assaults and to isolation. This occurs mainly in rural villages and had in the past only been significantly visible in the southern and north central provinces 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.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Sri Lanka shows:

- Overall, the pressure on Christians in Sri Lanka remained at a high level, rising from a score of 10.3 in WWL 2019 to 10.4 in WWL 2020.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private, Community and National 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, disrupting services and demanding that churches be closed down.
- Violence against Christians spiked from 7.0 in WWL 2019 to 13.1 in WWL 2020 reflecting the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Private sphere:

- **Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.5 points):** 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.
- **It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (Block 1.8 / Score: 3.25 points):** It is risky for converts to talk to others about their new faith, especially for converts from Islam. But even other Christians and converts from other backgrounds living in predominantly Buddhist and Hindu villages find it very hard to share their faith within their communities. This is also due to the fear of being accused of "unethical conversions", a term which is not clearly defined and is therefore prone to abuse. Radical Buddhist and Hindu elements are quick to accuse converts and non-traditional Protestant Christians of unethical conversions and file petitions against them. They also mobilize other villagers against them. Reflecting this attitude is the already mentioned accusation by BBS that Christians are "converting people and destroying the nation".
- **It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 3 points):** Due to the just mentioned accusations, especially in rural areas Christians are cautious of being too open about their faith and avoid wearing a cross necklace, for instance. Converts have to self-censor even more in this respect.
- **It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (Block 1.4 / Score: 3 points):** Revealing one's Christian faith is risky as it can be perceived as an attempt at unethical conversion. Therefore, Christians will be careful in choosing the means and channels they are sharing those expressions on. Converts have more limited options and they prefer not to share their faith visibly at all.

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. 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:

- **Christian children have been pressed into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 4 points):** Christian children enrolled into state schools have been routinely forced to observe Buddhist or Hindu rituals. In some instances, Christian students have even been fined, when majority religion rituals were not observed.

At school, religion is a compulsory subject. It is a legal requirement according to the Education Ordinance that if a school has more than 15 pupils belonging to a particular faith, the state must appoint a teacher to instruct those schoolchildren in that particular faith. However, this is not implemented by state schools. Partly owing to the lack of Christian teachers and funds for employing them, Christian children are usually forced to study Buddhism or Hinduism instead, resulting in harassment, bullying and bad marks.

- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Christian children have also been punished by teachers. 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. Christian students are also often bullied by their school peers.
- ***Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites (Block 2.5 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Christians are not allowed to be buried in a public cemetery. Christian burial rites were denied by Buddhist monks, Hindu villagers and even by government officials in the WWL 2020 reporting period and relatives of deceased Christians continued to be forced to bury their loved ones in far away places. In one incident, reported in July 2019, a pastor was hindered from carrying out burials at a cemetery where he had done this since 2004 without anyone taking offence. In another incident, the promise by local authorities to grant Christians a piece of land for burials was not followed up.
- ***Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2.7 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Converts have difficulties in raising their children according to Christian values in their homes as relatives (especially grandparents and in-laws) are influential members in the family/clan. Schools also play a part in influencing the children. School children are exposed to Buddhist/Hindu traditions, and in many instances, Christian children are forced to participate in these rites. It is a challenge for parents to explain to their children why they have to participate in rites they do not believe or trust in.

Evangelical and Independent churches are denied the possibility of registering weddings within their church buildings - which is a facility traditionally allowed in churches in Sri Lanka. Converts face discrimination and harassment, but are usually not put under pressure to divorce. However, the denial or loss of inheritance rights is one of the most common threats in trying to bring a new convert back to his or her old faith. If this threat does not succeed, the converts lose their inheritance and in some cases all ties to the family are cut. Despite these challenges, the change of religion in an ID card or passport is usually unproblematic. This is why the score for this Sphere of life is low compared to other countries. Adult baptisms face opposition, especially if they are held publicly.

Community sphere:

- **Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score: 4 points):** It is usually local Buddhist monks who stir up community sentiments about Christians "not belonging". These monks are often themselves influenced by the ideology of the radical groups and want to protect the purity of their local Buddhist triangle, explained above under the Persecution engine *Religious nationalism*. In areas where Hindus and Buddhists are the majority, Christians are closely watched and often become targets for intimidation and social exclusion.
- **Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events (Block 3.5 / Score: 3.5 points):** The community expects Christians to participate in all local and non-Christian religious ceremonies. When Christians refuse, they are isolated in the community and face discrimination. This is an even bigger point of pressure for converts, who are in danger of being discovered. During Hindu festivals, Hindus ostracize Christians for not participating in the activities.
- **Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith (Block 3.7 / Score: 3.5 points):** This is particularly the case for converts in previously homogeneously non-Christian areas. But even non-convert Christians, especially Protestants, are called to convert and follow Buddhism.
- **Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (Block 3.9 / Score: 3.5 points):** Christian students in some areas have been threatened with being denied enrollment because they are not part of the majority religion. There are cases of enrollment having been denied pending in the courts. For getting admission to state schools and colleges, they need to do better than children from the majority religion. Christianity classes are often not offered by schools despite being mandated by law or, if they have these classes, do not provide decent facilities for holding them.

Converts are frequently denied access (or are given delayed access) to community resources such as wells and electricity. As in many previous reporting periods, the WWL 2020 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, there was a poster campaign against a Christian worker in one city, in which she (and other Christians) were threatened with death if she did not cease her ministry.) 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 membership in funeral endowment societies. These societies are formed at village levels and are important for conducting burials. After the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019, several pastors were visited by police and intelligence officers and were requested to come for meetings at the police station. Further details about church members were then requested under the guise of offering protection for the gatherings. However, in most cases the promised police protection never materialized.

National sphere:

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 points):*** Whilst the Constitution provides for the freedom of thought, conscience or religion in Article 10 and the freedom to practice one's faith in Article 14 (1) (e), in Article 15 (7) it states the freedom to practice ones religion can be restricted based on national security, public morality and health. Furthermore, Article 9 of the Constitution states that the foremost place should be given to Buddhism. Article 9 and 15 (7) have been widely used against Christians in an arbitrary and biased manner. Moreover, the Sri Lankan judiciary has continued to deliver biased judgements on religious freedom issues - using both these articles as their basis for argument. In July 2018, the Supreme Court held in Case No 241/14: "In any event, the duty of this Court is to uphold and give effect to the Constitution and as our Constitution now stands, the citizens of this country do not possess a constitutionally protected freedom to 'propagate' their religion or beliefs". This seems to back a long-held practice with legal reasoning which ignores international standards of law.
- ***Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished (Block 4.14 / Score: 3.75 points):*** There has been no proper conviction of any perpetrator, who has led incidents of persecution against Christians. The Judiciary is very biased and there has been no precedence of religious freedom cases. In most instances the judiciary forces the Christian victim to settle the case. The quick release of the Secretary-General of Bodu Bala Sena after only a few months in prison - not because of an attack against religious minorities, but for contempt of court - sets a precedent and shows the prevailing mindset.
- ***Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment (Block 4.15 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Normally, such cases are closed with a forced settlement, fine or bail. In the WWL 2020 reporting period, there were reports of this in the Puttalam district .
- ***Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons (Block 4.5 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Christians are routinely discriminated against by government officials. When Christians are victims of a Buddhist attack, they experience discrimination at the police station. In most cases, the police officers blame the Christians for the attack and file a 'breach of peace' report which records both Buddhists and Christians as equal parties in causing the incident. Many local officials are biased as well, for example when Christians attempt to construct homes, many find they are continually denied approval - even when all legal requirements are met. There have been incidents reported where local government officials have been part of mobs who led protests and attacks against Christian places of worship.

The level of pressure on Christians in this sphere of life remains substantial, especially as the government is leaning towards supporting Buddhism and Buddhist nationalism. The very few Christians who are in government positions (or work with the government) experience discrimination from nationalists.

Christians are portrayed negatively in the media. 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. 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:

- **Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 3.75 points):** Mobs, monks, villagers, police and local authorities continue to interrupt the gatherings of Christians, question the legality of their activities, and take these cases to the higher authorities. Christian residents are frequently asked to stop all their activities and/or leave the village.
- **It has been difficult to get registration or legal status (Block 5.2 / Score: 3.75 points):** Registration is often used as leverage against Christian churches. A 2008 circular issued by the "Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs" is still being implemented. It requires religious communities to register houses of worship and demands registration for advance approval of any new construction. Even though this circular has no legal force and would apply only to churches opened after 2008 anyway, local authorities, Buddhist monks and mobs use it to justify their at times very violent actions against Christians. In the current situation, even if pastors complain against the use of this circular, local authorities and courts do not listen to them. The Supreme Court curbed freedom of religion, when concerning the circular it held in Case No. SCFR 92/2016, decided in June 2017: "It can be considered as law and therefore is applicable to all communities". As the US State Department in its IRF Report 2018 on page 7 says: "The Department of Christian Religious Affairs launched a public awareness campaign to encourage local congregations of nondenominational groups to register as religious organizations in 2016, but at year's end the government had not registered any new groups because a political decision on whether or not the ministry would register these groups was still pending, according to officials. Instead, unregistered free Christian groups continued to incorporate as commercial trusts, legal societies, or NGOs to engage in financial transactions, open bank accounts, and hold property. Without formal government recognition via the registration process, however, nondenominational churches said they could not sponsor religious worker visas for visiting clergy and faced restrictions on holding meetings or constructing new places of worship." In 2015, when the new government had been elected, it set up a Christian Affairs Ministry (or department) in the Religious Affairs Ministry, for the first time recognizing Christians as falling under a separate portfolio. However, the evangelical Christian community is not recognized by this government entity and systematically discriminated against.

- Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier (Block 5.3 / Score: 3.75 points):** It remains very difficult to construct or renovate a church building in rural areas as it disturbs the Sri Lankan triangle described under "Religious nationalism" above. Even though the pastors and the church follow all legal requirements and procedures, a building plan is often not approved. Most often, the government official alerts the local Buddhist temple or villages elders regarding the submitted building plan. Subsequently, the villages will submit petitions to the government office demanding that the building plan should not be approved. In turn, the government officials will use these petitions as an excuse and deny approval, stating that by approving, they would be creating disharmony within the community. Government officials will be acting *ultra vires*, when acting in such a way, but the fact remains that the approval is denied. As a result, the majority of the newer, mostly non-traditional Protestant churches function as house-churches. As the US State Department noted in its IRF 2018 report, the number of these groups is growing.
- It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution (Block 5.20 / Score: 3.75 points):** Speaking out usually simply leads to more discrimination and/or subsequent attacks. There have even been instances where Christians who have been seen as too outspoken had to leave the country for a while.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.

Sri Lanka	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	200	201	1	16	14
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.

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** The triple suicide attack against three churches and three hotels on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019, claimed 259 lives, making it to one of the largest Islamist attacks on civilians since 9/11. The targets were the Catholic St. Sebastian Church in Negombo, the Catholic Shrine of St. Anthony Church in Colombo and the Protestant Zion Church in the Eastern city of Batticaloa. (The hotels, which were attacked while offering 'Easter Brunch', were the Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand and The Kingsbury). All attacks were coordinated and carried out at around 8.45 in the morning. Two little-known [radical Islamic groups](#) claimed responsibility. The level of devastation and chaos may be illustrated by the fact that the authorities revised their initial claim on casualty numbers down by more than [one hundred](#).
- **Churches attacked:** The three churches mentioned above were bombed by Islamic militants. But in terms of "normal, everyday" attacks, other churches were targeted by Buddhist monks and mobs as well.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Reports of pastors' and other Christians' houses being targeted were received from Hambantota and Gampaha district. In most cases, the attacks were carried out by mobs and in one case, Christians had to flee the village and did not dare to return for several months.

5 Year trends

The following three charts below show the situation for Christians in Sri Lanka over the last five reporting periods.

Chart 1:

The chart below shows that the average pressure has been consistently at a high level and has increased each reporting period since WWL 2016.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Sri Lanka	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	10.4
2019	10.3
2018	10.1
2017	9.6
2016	9.0

Chart 2:

The chart below 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.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka (Spheres of life)

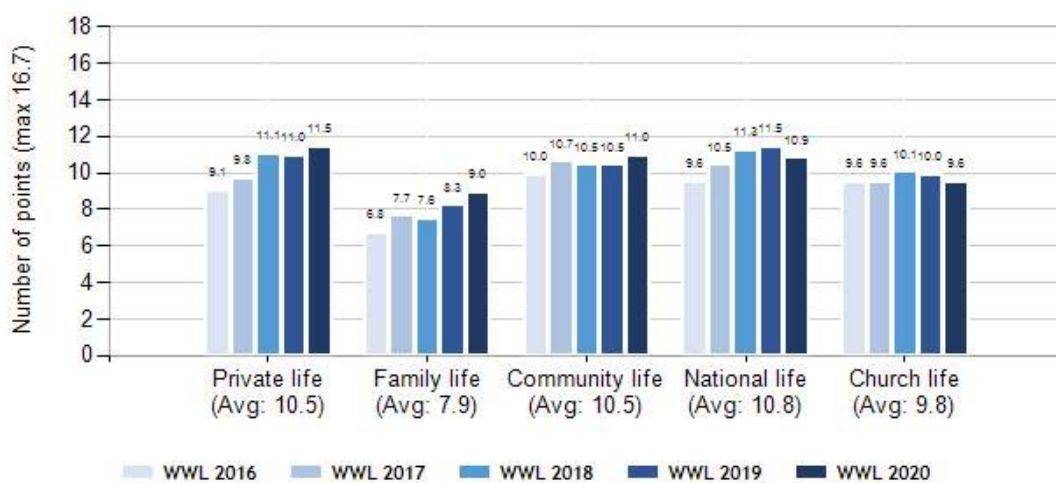
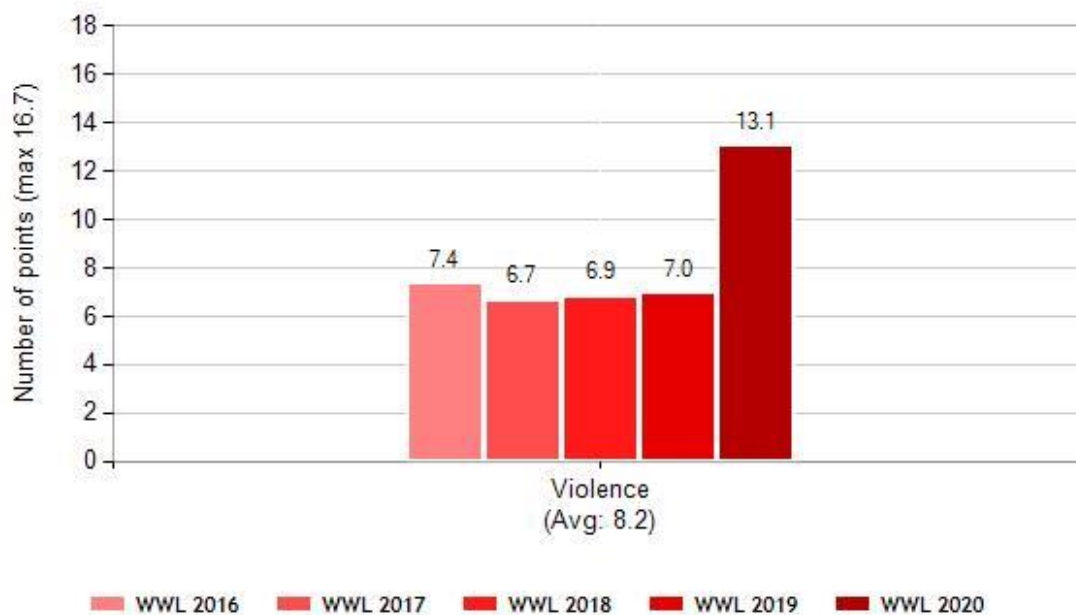


Chart 3:

The chart below shows that the violence score remained stable at a very high level (at around 7 points) in the earlier reporting periods up to WWL 2019. That meant that in each reporting period more than 10 churches were attacked or closed and more than 10 Christians were assaulted. In the WWL 2020 reporting period, this pattern was broken; with the suicide attacks against three churches on Easter Sunday 2019, the violence score almost doubled, rising to an extreme level.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Sri Lanka (Violence)



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to Christian religious materials***
- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Discrimination/Harassment via education***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – sexual***
- ***Violence – verbal***

In the context where the [UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#) is calling on the nation to adequately address the impunity and prevalence of sexual violence (29 May 2019), sexual assault is often a weapon used against women, regardless of religion. For a Christian woman, she has double vulnerability because of her faith. Persecution involving any kind of sexual assault most often would be considered bringing shame upon the whole family and would impact her prospects for marriage in the village.

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.

Due to cultural reasons, new female converts find it more difficult to follow their faith than new male converts. The consequences facing a convert are felt in ways both large and small, such as the freedom to openly read the Bible in their homes. Laws concerning the Muslim community, such as the Muslim Marriages Act, makes converts to Christianity more vulnerable to persecution because this law is more male dominant. 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, especially in Malay communities where arranged marriage is a common practice. Early marriage practice plays a role in facilitating this means of consequence for her religious choice.

Furthermore, women and girls are often subject to dress codes and traditions (e.g. in Hindu communities, to continue wearing certain religious symbols etc.). They also face verbal abuse, reportedly by Buddhist monks and villagers.

Male Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***False charges***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – psychological***
- ***Violence – verbal***

Christian leaders often bear the brunt of attacks against a church. As men are often at the forefront, they are the victims of physical attack most often. 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 and move to other areas. Some go into hiding, resulting, at times, in long periods of separation from their families. Christian men and boys also live with the pressure from threat of abduction and torture for their faith. Sri Lanka is also a male dominated, patriarchal society, therefore, when a male gets physically assaulted, it would also create a sense of shame within rural close-knit communities.

The persecution of men and boys particularly affects the livelihood of Christian families. Especially in rural communities, males are the breadwinners of the family, so losing a job or livelihood financially affects the whole Christian family. This can even be true many years after the actual incident of persecution happened.

Persecution of other religious minorities

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 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 resulting in the damage or destruction of 49 Muslim-owned shops, 132 houses and 4 mosques. 51 individuals were injured and 2 deaths were reported.

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 for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed 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 just elected the Rajapaksa family back into power in November 2019. 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 government's policies. Also, President Sirisena is increasingly courting the Buddhist nationalists (again) and the political infighting may handicap the country. The April 2019 suicide attacks helped the Rajapaksa family make a comeback to power; people are craving for security and many recalled that their heavy-handed action ended the civil war in 2009 and feel that this is what the country needs now. According to experts on religious freedom, attacks against religious minorities almost doubled during his ten years term as president. Since the latter 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 most likely that *Religious nationalism* will increase and *Dictatorial paranoia* may also enter the scene again. An early sign of an already changing climate in society is that the [chief criminal investigator for organized crime](#), Nishantha Silva, who has also been tasked with investigating the murder of a Christian journalist in 2009, fled the country and sought asylum in Switzerland in November 2019 due to death threats.

- **Islamic oppression:** The bomb attacks at Easter 2019 were a reminder that not everything is about the persecution engine *Religious nationalism* in Sri Lanka. The authorities reacted fast by cracking down on suspected networks of radical Islamic groups and those responsible for assisting the attackers. It remains to be seen if there will be more attacks by Islamist groups or 'lone wolves' and if they will target the Christian minority. It is possible that young Muslims will radicalize if attacks against Muslims continue and society offers them no real future perspectives. However, if 2019 taught observers anything, it was to be very cautious about making any predictions.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: unchanged - <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/new-constitution-state-religion-buddhism/>

- Persecution engines: targeting - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/sri-lanka-president-pledges-inquiry-into-religious-riots/81760>
- Geographical hotspots of persecution: "heatmap" - <https://slchurchattacks.crowdmap.com/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: National Christian Council - <http://nccsl.org/web/member-churches/>
- Violence: radical Islamic groups - <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/easter-attacks-in-sri-lanka/#.XMD-GUI7meE>
- Violence: one hundred - https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts/sri-lanka-on-edge-with-scares-lock-downs-and-sweeps-for-bomb-suspects-idUSKCN1S10CN?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=72cef7def6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_04_25_01_47&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-72cef7def6-399904105
- Gender profile of persecution: UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence - <http://https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/sri-lanka/>
- 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 for the church: landslide victory - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/former-president-rattles-sri-lankas-political-status-quo/81504>
- Future outlook for the church: chief criminal investigator for organized crime - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Rajapaksa-crimes-investigator-flees-from-death-threats-48645.html>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

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

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Sri Lanka.

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/sri-lanka>

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Sri+Lanka> (password: freedom).