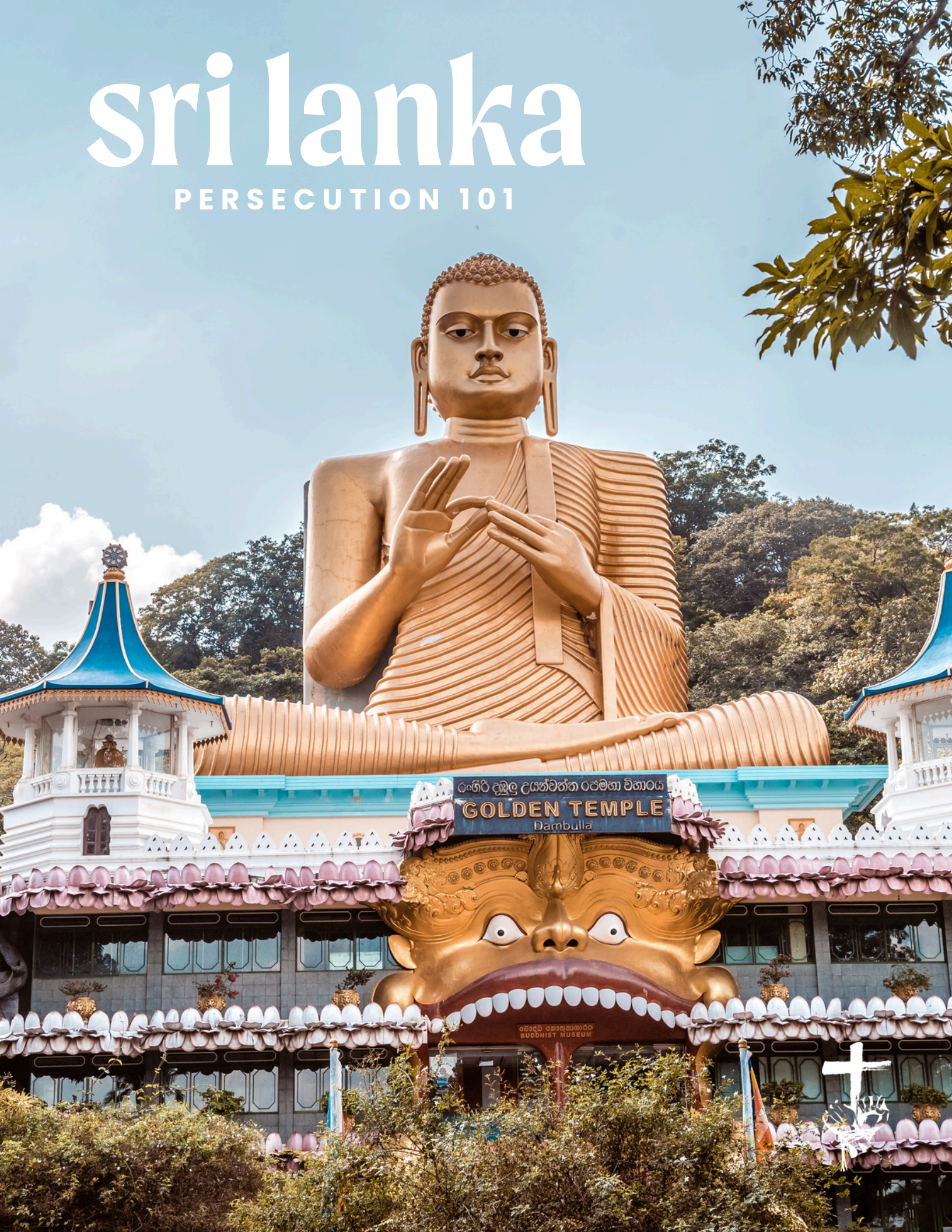
# sri lanka

## PERSECUTION 101



# sri lanka

PERSECUTION 101



**Sri Lanka's Buddhist-led government is increasingly restricting its small Christian and Muslim population, seizing their land and micromanaging their internal affairs**

Still dealing with the fallout from a 2019 series of bombings that killed 268 and injured over 500 more, Sri Lanka is not creating space for its small religious minority communities, particularly in the north where religious tensions have been heightened by a civil war. Government officials routinely harass Christians and members of other religious minorities, forcing them to follow cumbersome registration processes, seizing places of worship for conversion to Buddhist religious sites, and keeping careful oversight on the finances and internal workings of religious groups.

# QUICK FACTS



**Type of Government**
Presidential
Republic

**Head of Government**
Ranil
Wickremesinghe
*Since 2022*

**Total Population**
Approx. 23.32 mil

**Religious Demography**
70.2% Buddhist - 16.37 mil
12.6% Hindu - 2.93 mil
9.7% Muslim - 2.26 mil
6.1% Roman Catholic - 1.4 mil
1.3% Other Christian - 303,000

**Ethnic Demography**
74.9% Sinhalese
11.2% Sri Lankan Tamil
9.2% Moors
4.2% Indian Tamil
0.5% Other

## TYPES OF PERSECUTION

### Government Restrictions

Though no national-level law exists requiring churches to register, government officials—especially in the north—create onerous registration that limit the ability to set up places of worship and proper burial grounds.

### Land Siezures

The Department of Archeology seizes land from Christian and Muslim groups with little reason.



# ICC IN SRI LANKA

Government crackdowns on Christians in Vietnam often create economic suffering for people of faith. Whether because the family's breadwinner is in prison or through social economic pressure, those targeted for their faith often face secondary pressures on top of the direct action taken against them. In one case ICC worked on, the family of a Christian believer came and seized his possessions in anger at his religious beliefs.

In this case and others like it, local authorities proved unhelpful in restoring the Christian's property to him and he was left with almost nothing on which to support himself and his family. ICC provided him with a small lot of land on which to grow rice. In other cases, ICC might provide livestock to the persecuted, giving them access to a sustainable and long-term source of income in the wake of a persecution incident.



**Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka**

Article 9 of Sri Lanka's Constitution, ratified in 1978, declares that the government "shall give to Buddhism the foremost place." Though the Constitution affords rights to followers of other religions as well, Article 9 goes on to say that "it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana," or Buddhist practice.

From this starting point the Sri Lankan government has evolved a web of laws and regulations that, over the years, has increasingly promoted Buddhism over the rights of Christians and Muslims—literally in some cases, including where it seizes Christian and Muslim religious sites and converts them to Buddhist sites.

These land seizures happen at the direction of the Department of Archeology, which in a repeated pattern names Christan and Muslim religious sites as originally of Buddhist origin and converts the site into a Buddhist shrine. Curiously, the Department of Archeology sits under the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs in an organizational arrangement that casts doubt on its ability to objectively judge in these cases.

According to civil society sources, one of these cases made its way to the courts, where a judge ruled against the Department of Archeology. He later faced threats to his person and was forced to flee for safety in a sign of the high-level backing enjoyed by the Department in its campaign against Christians and Muslims.

In northern Sri Lanka, Christians regularly face issues with registration despite there being no national requirement to register as a religious organization. Officials in the north are known to engage local religious groups in long, drawn-out registration processes that create a substantial barrier to free religious practice. In many cases, places of worship and even burial grounds are threatened by this arbitrary practice.



A series of bombings in 2019, largely of Catholic churches, led to a general rising in religious tensions across Sri Lanka and the unfortunate vilification of the country's Muslim population. The government crackdown on the Muslim community drew widespread condemnation, including by the Archbishop of Colombo who has been an outspoken critic of the government on this matter.

According to a 2023 report by the U.S. Department of State, a 2003 ruling by Sri Lanka's Supreme Court decided that the government is "required to protect only Buddhism; other religions do not have the same right to state protection." In the same decision the Supreme Court held that "no fundamental right to proselytize exists or is protected under the constitution," and in 2017 it "determined the right to propagate one's religion is not protected by the constitution," according to the 2023 report.

International human rights law holds strong protections for the right of each person to proselytize. While Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides that no one "shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice," a 2023 report by the U.S. Commision on International Religious Freedom notes that, along with other international human rights bodies, "Article 18 protects 'noncoercive attempts to persuade others' to convert."

## Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Sri Lanka Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Sri Lanka Chapter



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