

Asia REF

Religious & Ethnic Freedom



SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

ASIA REF, 2022



Prepared by: **Indira Aslanova**, Learning specialist, Asia REF

Aizhan Baidavletova (Malaysia chapter), Project Officer, Asia REF

Research intern: **Aidin Turganbekov**

Quality control:

Deanna Kolberg-Shah, Senior Program Officer, Evidence & Learning and Human Rights Support Mechanism, Freedom House.

Shiva K Dhungana, Senior Manager, Geography Support - Asia and MENA, Search for Common Ground.

Editor: **Marco Mulcahy**, Independent consultant.

“This report is made possible by the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the sole responsibility of the Asia REF Learning specialist and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.”

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

INTRODUCTION

Asia is the largest and most diverse continent in the world in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The regions of South, Southeast, and Central Asia alone comprise 24 countries and account for about 35 percent of the world's population. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), these regions also have some of the highest levels of government restrictions on religion and have the most hostile incidents involving religion compared with other countries around the world. The Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (Asia REF) program, funded by USAID, was designed to support targeted in-country and cross-border efforts by local partners to expand the freedom of religion and conscience in Asia. It also aimed at improving the ability of local community partners to advance the freedom of religion and conscience within their countries, address their immediate needs, and develop and access resources to address deficits in self-reliance. To achieve these objectives, the program supports iterative projects and a learning agenda to respond to existing and emerging threats to the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

When the project was started, the Asia REF team identified seven key religious freedom issues, after consulting with international experts and advisory group members. These include: the rise of religious nationalism; anti-conversion, blasphemy and apostasy laws; a reform of educational curricula to support religious and ethnic freedom (REF); gender-based REF violations; hate speech and misinformation; legal, policy and governance reform to support REF; and capacity building for civil society organizations (CSOs) working on religious and ethnic freedom. The advisory group members recommended that these issues take top priority. They added that there is also a need to consider other laws used to target minorities, the narrowing of civic space, the responsibility of social media companies, the position of children and youth, and the role that local context plays in providing greater depth and nuances to the issues identified.

A situational analysis is one of the steps in identifying the needs and opportunities in the expansion of religious and ethnic freedom in the region. It involves the collection and study of REF violations in secondary data, country contextual information, and regional trends to identify and understand the specific issues to be addressed. It examines the status of REF issues, establishing a basis of shared understanding for Asia REF partners and USAID. It also assists Asia REF in identifying actionable intervention areas for projects and identifies the key priorities for the Asia REF learning agenda. The approach of Asia REF incorporates adaptive management and flexible programming of award funding to support local organizations that promote the recognition of religious freedoms across Asia. The research includes projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and the Philippines, based on project development needs. It also ensures diverse representation of countries in the region for comparative analysis.

To understand the REF context in the selected countries, Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle was used. The triangle helps to identify how physical violence, discriminatory structures in society and ideas about "the other" are interlinked. **Direct violence** is direct physical or psychological violence with clear specific victims and perpetrators. It can be carried out by states, groups in the society, or family. (Examples include security force attacks, torture, mob violence, sexual violence, and hate crimes.) **Structural violence** is harm done to people by injustice and discrimination in society leading to the denial of their basic rights. This injustice and discrimination can be found in the structures of society. It can be found in laws, policies, written and unwritten rules; the institutions and praxis of government authorities and civil society, and in the behavior of individuals. **Cultural violence** refers to the prevailing attitudes or beliefs used to legitimize violence – whether of a direct or structural nature. These include the prejudices or stereotypes existing in society that have been internalized by individuals. The stereotypes find expression in the interactions people have with each other.

Therefore, each country profile consists of a short background; an overview of its legal framework, describing constitutional norms and relevant legal religious freedom acts; an analysis through the

triangle of violence lens; and an analysis of the actors involved. The study was conducted between May and September 2022.

Key Questions of the Study:

- What are the most pressing concerns for different groups in the target area, including women, girls, men, boys, and minorities.? How are they linked to REF rights?
- Are there examples of direct violence related to REF in the country's context?
- What are examples of structural violence connected to REF in a country's context? How are men and women, boys and girls affected by these?
- Which attitudes make direct and structural violence seem acceptable to people? How are these attitudes and values being transmitted through a cultural context?
- Which actors/stakeholders are working on REF in the targeted countries and what types of programming are they doing now?
- What are the thematic priority/development challenges that Asia REF needs to address in each target area?

Limitations:

- *Secondary data and reliability:* The situational analysis is entirely desk research, with no expected key informant interviews. The study does not claim to be academically original. It is based on a literature review of sources provided by national and international human rights reports, as well media reports.
- *Language:* Most of the desk research consisted of a study of secondary sources available in English. For Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan resources in Russian language also were used.
- *Difficulty in identifying cultural narratives:* Reports on human rights and religious freedom provide little insight into the cultural narratives that underlie direct and structural violence. A feasible understanding of social perceptions of religious and ethnic diversity has been gathered, not intending to be comprehensive. A more in-depth study of the issue is needed.
- *Limitations of an actor analysis:* The situational analysis also includes a review of organizations working on religious freedom. However, an actor analysis is limited to those organizations mentioned in the resources covered in the literature review. Thus, the list is not exhaustive and does not identify the needs of these organizations. The identified list of organizations will be shared with REF partners, so it can be supplemented and evaluated in consultation with the Advisory Group and consortium partners.
- *Definition:* Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience directs and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is a core human right, international law and treaties recognize it as a vital element of national security that is crucial to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.



Source: Nations Online Project

SRI-LANKA

COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, is an island nation in the Indian Ocean. The capital is Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, a satellite city of Sri Lanka's largest city Colombo. A representative, democratic system of government has existed in Sri Lanka since the termination of British rule in 1948. The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a presidential republic with a unicameral parliament.¹

Among the principal ethnic groups, language and religion determine identity. With a total of 23 million population², Sri Lanka has the largest Sinhala population (74 percent). Tamils (11.2 percent) are the second major ethnic group on the island. Moors comprise just over nine percent. There are also small ethnic groups such as the Burghers (of mixed European descent) and Malays from Southeast Asia. Moreover, there is a small population of Vedda people who are believed to be the original indigenous group to inhabit the island. Spoken languages are Sinhala (the official and national language), Tamil (a national language) and about 10 percent of the population speak English as a second language. More than 90 percent of the Sinhalese are Buddhists (70 percent), and both Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils are overwhelmingly Hindu (12.6 percent)³. Sizable minorities of both Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians (7.4 percent), most of whom are Roman Catholic. The Burghers are mostly Roman Catholic or Presbyterian. Other Christian groups include the Church of Ceylon (Anglican), the Dutch Reformed Church, Methodists, Baptists, Assembly of God, Pentecostals, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The indigenous Veddahs typically follow animist and Buddhist practices. Muslims (9.7 percent) are legally recognized as a separate ethnoreligious group. Within the Muslim community there are several communities, ranging from the majority Tamil-speaking Moors to Malays and to those with Indian roots tracing back to Mumbai and Gujarat, the Memons and Bohras. Most Muslims are Sunni, with small Ahmadi and Shia minorities

As noted by the World Bank in April 2022, the current development has been good, in the rise of financial services, manufacture, transport, and textile.⁶ However, it is unstable due to rising foreign debt and inflation for food prices due to the rise of global commodity prices. There is a deficit, and the import ban does not help. The deficit seems to be widening due to a decline in remittances and tourism. The public debt and fiscal deficit increased, regardless of an expeditious vaccination campaign. A lack of fuel supply for thermal generators resulted in scheduled power cuts. [Aljazeera](#) states that Sri Lanka is facing its worst economic crisis/ This started due to the COVID-19 pandemic and tourism is doomed because of the Russia-Ukraine war.⁷ [BBC also mentions](#) that Sri Lanka's crisis is largely the result of staggering economic mismanagement combined with the fallout from the pandemic. This, along with the 2019 terrorism attacks, devastated its important tourism industry.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Sri Lankans generally enjoy a substantial degree of religious freedom. Article 10 of the [constitution](#) says "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." Article 14(1)(e) says "Every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching." At the same time, Article 9 of the constitution stipulates, "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/community] while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)." Thus, the constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place" among the country's religious faiths and requires the government to protect it, although it does not recognize it as the state religion.

The law recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. There is no registration requirement for central religious bodies of these four groups. New religious groups, including groups affiliated with the four recognized religions, must register with the government to obtain approval to construct new places of worship, sponsor religious worker (missionary) visas/immigration permits,

operate schools, and apply for subsidies for religious education. Religious organizations may also seek incorporation by an act of parliament, which requires a simple majority and affords religious groups state recognition. The law considers any racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence to be a criminal offense, including through spoken word, written word or signs, or other visible representations that cause religious disharmony. The offenses carry a punishment of imprisonment from five to 20 years, depending on which law or laws are applied.⁸

Religious instruction is mandatory in public and private schools in Sri Lanka. Parents may elect to have their children study Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam, if at least 15 students have also enrolled to study that religion in any given location. “All schools teaching the Sri Lankan Ordinary Level syllabus must use the Ministry of Education curriculum on religion, which covers the four main religions and is compulsory for the General Certificate Education Ordinary Level exams” Religious minority students at some schools may be required to study a religion contrary to their parents’ wishes since religious course offerings are dependent upon demand. In certain circumstances, teachers may also be compelled to teach about a religion other than their own. [RFI](#) recommends initiating additional monitoring to understand to what extent these requirements present religious freedom concerns.

[USCIRF’s country update](#) states that several restrictions on expression impact the freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka. Article 291A and 291B of the penal code restrict expressions that deliberately [wound] “the religious feelings of any person” or [outrage] “the religious feelings of any class of persons.” This carries a punishment of one to two years in prison or a fine for any transgressors. Additionally, the country’s Prevention of Terrorism Act and ICCPR Act (designed to incorporate the international treaty into domestic law) restrict freedom of expression for language that can be construed to incite violence, disharmony, discrimination, or hostility among community groups.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The country’s ICCPR Act, which is designed to incorporate the international covenant into domestic law, criminalizes propagating or advocating religious or racial hatred. Punishments range from fines to up to 10 years’ imprisonment.

TRIANGLE OF VIOLENCE

Despite boasting legal protections for religious freedom, Sri Lanka displays significant social intolerance and religiously motivated violence, exemplified by the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. These attacks are an extreme example of a long history of ethnic and religious violence in the country. Recent years have seen riots against Christian and Muslim minorities, targeting individuals, their homes and their businesses. These recent cases of violence are only the latest chapter in a long history of religious conflict, particularly between the Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamil populations.⁹

Direct violence

Sri Lanka is a post-conflict society that has experienced years of brutal civil war. At the most basic level, the conflict arose from the ethnic tension between Sinhalese and Tamil citizens that erupted into war in 1983. The conflict lasted until 2009, when the Tamil Tiger guerrillas had been killed. At least 100,000 people lost their lives, tens of thousands went missing and hundreds of thousands were displaced, with most of the civilian victims being Tamils.¹⁰ A large portion of the Tamil population remains displaced. While there are fewer political and civil rights issues, instances of torture and enforced disappearances persist even in recent years. Moreover, the Sri Lankan government often monitors and tracks people linked (suspected) to LTTE.¹¹

Terrorism and the implications. After the war, grievances of state discrimination and social hostility toward minorities, particularly against Muslims, contributed to the radicalization of Muslims, with some involved in violent extremist groups. Terrorist groups and Buddhist nationals are a major source of sectarian violence, destroying places of worship and killing followers of other religions. The most

prominent example was attacks during Easter Sunday 2019, which claimed the lives of about 300 people.¹² The Islamic State (IS) group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, Sri Lankan authorities have blamed a local extremist group, National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ). All eight of the bombers were Sri Lankan Muslim citizens.¹³ As a part of measures to counter terrorism and ensure national security, the state adopted provisions restricting the rights of Muslims, including freedom of religion. Thus, in 2019, in the days following the Easter Sunday attacks, Sri Lanka took the unusual step of banning face coverings, as part of its emergency legislation. The Islamist attacks also fed into further anti-Muslim animus, prompting a wave of anti-Muslim riots from organized mobs.

Buddhist nationalism. One of the major actors of anti-Muslim and anti-minority mood and actions are Sinhala-Buddhist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS-translated as the Buddhist Power Force). The [BBS](#) was formed in 2012 to exclude the contribution of the non-Buddhists to the country's history and society. Their actions include attacks on minorities' places of worship, businesses, and properties; hate speech; intimidation of and violence against clergy and their congregations; and other discriminatory actions. According to the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCAESL) there were 77 cases of attacks documented. Of these, 40 involved threats, intimidation, or coercion; 40 were discriminatory actions or practices; nine involved property damage or destruction; seven were related to hate campaigns or propaganda; and three involved physical violence. Some were a combination of multiple factors. In 11 instances, the NCAESL said crowds intimidated or attacked pastors, their family members, or congregants. The NCAESL also documented 10 incidents of religious freedom violations against Muslims and three incidents against Hindus.¹⁶ These BBS activities are not only offensive to minorities but also undermine their sense of identity.¹⁴

Hate speech. Hashtag Generation, a local NGO that analyzes trends in online dangerous speech, said the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an intensification of anti-Muslim rhetoric online, including hate speech, disinformation, and harassment. When the government reversed the mandatory cremation policy in February to allow for the burial of COVID-19 victims, the NGO said this led to further anti-Muslim online content, mainly on YouTube, portraying this as a deviation from the government's "One Country, One Law" concept. In October 2021, Hashtag Generation said Muslims were the main ethnoreligious group targeted online, with posts portraying Muslims as terrorists or being responsible for the spread of COVID-19. According to the NCAESL, discrimination against Hindus centered on land issues and cultural heritage, while Christians experienced individualized forms of hate speech.¹⁷

Structural violence

On paper, Sri Lanka has a strong legal protection system for religious freedom. In practice, however, the government does not consistently act to protect these rights and is often accused of various forms of discrimination against religious minorities.

Blasphemy Law and Other Restrictions on Expression. According to a [USCIR report on blasphemy](#), Sri Lanka is one of 80 countries with criminal blasphemy laws, and the government continues to prosecute individuals who allegedly break this law. Observers say blasphemy and antiterrorism laws are used by authorities to unfairly target minorities and critics of the government. The country is mentioned among those countries accusing individuals of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment while in custody, including bribes, threats, and [sexual harassment](#). In addition to state-sponsored violence against alleged blasphemers, Sri Lanka is cited among those countries where researchers found several criminal blasphemy cases with reported state violations of due process, including unfair trials.

In general, blasphemy is viewed as actions directed against the religious majority. Even such actions as "insulting" representations of religion and its symbols, free interpretation of religious norms, and conversion can be considered blasphemy. [In June 2020](#), a Buddhist monk lodged a complaint against nontheist activist Indika Rathnayake, claiming that he propagated fictitious ideas about Buddhism and Buddha, created unrest among Buddhists, and misled the younger generation by writing on Facebook

that Buddhism originated from Jainism. Award-winning writer Shakthika Sathkumara was arrested in April 2019 for a Facebook post that [garnered](#) anger from the Buddhist community and allegations of defamation of Buddhism when he made veiled references to homosexuality within the Buddhist clergy and a retelling of Siddhartha's story. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief notes that the ICCPR Act has been used to protect religions from insult, instead of protecting religious communities from incitement, and "ironically become a repressive tool used for curtailing freedom of thought or opinion, conscience, and religion or belief."¹⁹

Preventing terrorism practice. Observers and human rights activists [point](#) to the disproportionality of measures used to counter terrorism. The Prevention of Terrorism Act has been criticized as being used as a pretext to detain Muslims and hold those individuals indefinitely. According to the [UN Special Rapporteur](#), after the Easter Bombing, mosques and madrasas across the country were raided by security forces and many arrests were made. Mosques have also been searched by security forces with little or no respect paid to religious practices, including by taking sniffer dogs (considered impure by Muslims) into mosques, and confiscating Qur'anic and other Islamic texts that are mainly in Arabic and therefore deemed "radical" material. The army and police also allowed the media to accompany them on the searches. The media reports often were allegedly misreported and sensationalized. Several mosques have also come under scrutiny by local vigilante groups. Sections of the local media — both print and electronic — continued to repeat anti-Muslim narratives, without carrying rebuttals or clarifications from individuals or groups in the targeted community.

Violations of due process are reported, including prolonged arbitrary detention, to extract false confessions through torture, and to target minority communities and civil society groups. Thus, poet [Ahnaf Jazeem](#) was arrested in May 2020 for Tamil-language poetry and for claims of exposing students to "extremist" content. He was detained for more than a year without any charges. [Hejaaz Hizbullah](#) is a Muslim lawyer and minority rights activist who has represented many Muslim victims of human rights violations. During his detention, he was unable to gain access to his legal counsel. Lack of legal representation is a regular obstacle for Muslims arrested under the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA), because of suspects' financial hardships or the reluctance of lawyers fearing reprisals for defending Muslims. The [Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka](#), in its communication to the Bar Association of Sri Lanka, expressed concern over the refusal of lawyers to appear in those cases due to such considerations.

It is also believed that the PTA disproportionately affects the nation's Tamil population. According to Human Rights Watch: "The law allows arrests for unspecified "unlawful activities" without a warrant, and permits detention for up to 18 months without requiring that authorities produce the suspect before a court pre-trial."²¹ On March 28, 2021, the government issued a gazette notification designating seven Tamil diaspora organizations and 388 individuals — all ethnic Tamils and Muslims — as terrorists. The list included the names and home addresses of dozens of detained individuals, which local activists said endangered the families of the designated individuals²². The Sri Lankan military still occupies predominantly Tamil areas designated as "high-security zones," though to a lesser extent than during the war. In a more subtle sense, the Sri Lankan government continues to disenfranchise the Tamil community. Through the process of "Sinhalization," for example, Sinhalese culture has slowly replaced that of the Tamil population. Sinhalese monuments, road signs, street and village names, as well as Buddhist places of worship became more common in predominantly Tamil areas.²³

Rule of law. The [UN Special Rapporteur](#) said the culture of impunity in Sri Lanka has been repeatedly pointed out as one of the principle reasons that religious extremism and hate speech thrive in the country, which undermines the rule of law and human rights. Many interlocutors complained about how acts of violence were "indulged" by the silence and inaction of the authorities, as illustrated by some of the examples discussed above. Some expressed concerns that large mobs could openly rampage through minority community neighborhoods for several hours without hindrance or reaction from law enforcement authorities. They added that the police participated in these violent incidents or that authorities failed to adequately protect victims under attack even when some of the violence

continued for several days. In some cases, the attacks took place during curfew hours, such as with the riots in the Kandy District in 2018 and riots in several parts of the western and northwestern provinces in May 2019. In addition, the RFI points out that the government has supported some of BBS activities. For example, the state approved pro-Buddhist revisions to Sri Lankan history, such as claiming historical Buddhist links to sites traditionally sacred to minority groups. Moreover, government forces have tacitly allowed BBS-organized rallies against minorities, and the violence incited by such rallies has gone unpunished. The government denies any direct links with the organization²⁴.

Freedom of worship and places of worship. Sri Lankan law does not require religious bodies to register places of worship with the state. However, the police occasionally ask for registration, justifying their requests with circulars issued in 2008 and 2011 by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs. In the circular, it says that, regarding the submission of the documentary evidence required by the Ministry to prove credibility, there are exemptions for “traditional religions,” but “traditional religions” is not defined. The authorities have the discretion to grant or deny permission based on their own interpretation or biases. Human rights activists have challenged the legal basis of these circulars, but police have still used them to harass religious minorities.²⁵ The [IRF 2021](#) report refers to some nondenominational Christian groups facing challenges with registration, restrictions on holding meetings, or constructing new places of worship. Instead, unregistered Christian groups said they continued to incorporate commercial trusts, legal societies, or NGOs, but without formal government recognition. In the north, religious minorities pointed to how the state allowed Buddhist monks to erect shrines or Buddhist statues in areas where there was little Buddhist presence or where there was strong objection from local residents. There are also competing claims to historic religious sites, such as in the Kanniya and the Neeraviyadi cases. In the Neeraviyadi case, the Mullaitivu District Court ordered an interim injunction against the construction of a disputed Buddha statue in a Tamil Hindu temple. However, the Buddhist community disregarded the judgment and went ahead with the construction, allegedly with the help of the military and police. During the ongoing dispute, Buddhist monks also disrupted Thai Pongal rituals at the Hindu temple.²⁶

Conversion. The right to proselytize is not fully protected in Sri Lanka. In 2003, the Supreme Court decided that the propagation and spreading of a religion other than Buddhism “would not be permissible because it would impair the very existence of Buddhism or the Buddha Sasana.” In 2018, it held that the right “to propagate” one’s religion was not protected by the constitution. Reported hostilities toward Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelicals, and Muslims appear to be grounded in the perception that religious conversions threaten established hegemonies or “insult” the doctrines and beliefs of the dominant religion in any given area. Often, these religious conversions are claimed to be “unethical” and involve the “exploitation” of vulnerable persons. The common complaint of both the Bodu Bala Sena and Siva Senai is that Buddhists and Hindus are being converted to Christianity through insults to existing religious practices and inducement by Western-funded NGOs in Sri Lanka. They assert that, during the civil war, many such exploitative religious conversions took place in the conflict-affected eastern and northern provinces in particular.²⁷

Gender issues. The UN Special Rapporteur points out that in Sri Lanka, women’s experiences of ethnoreligious hostilities are no less than those experienced by men. Religious minority women risk double victimization at community and personal levels due to the patriarchal structure of the society and policies. The Special Rapporteur mentioned the cases of forced marriage, forced conversion, and harassment. Widows face challenges of getting remarried, especially when community members worry that they may convert, either willingly or not, to another religion. Meanwhile, Muslim women are excluded from the Marriage Registration Ordinance, which means that there is no option for Muslims to opt-in or out of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951. The act allows for polygamy. In regard to claiming maintenance and asking for a divorce, it places the burden of proof upon the wife to provide a “valid and sufficient reason” and “grounds for divorce.” After the post-Easter-bombings’ ban on face coverings in public places, there was a rise in intolerance toward those who

observe religious dress codes, especially Muslim women in public institutions such as hospitals, schools, and public transportation.²⁸

Members of LGBT+ communities also reported that religious teaching was a significant factor in the marginalization of their communities and led to deeply personal struggles for those who attempted to reconcile their religious identity with their sexuality. Often, the perspectives of LGBT+ persons and women are excluded from interreligious dialogues and processes of reconciliation. Efforts toward reconciliation, refracted through ethnic and religious lenses without considering gendered impacts, are not inclusive.

Cultural narratives

[Some sources](#) view the origins of tensions between the Tamils and Sinhalese not only as ethnocultural incompatibilities but also as the result of power struggles and recognition rooted in the British period of rule. The Tamils, who enjoyed favoritism from the British, had greater access to education and socioeconomic benefits than the Sinhalese. An attempt to take revenge after Sri Lanka's independence led to a series of discriminatory regulations, which subsequently provoked the resentment of the Tamil population. At that time, the Tamil minority, made up of Hindus and Christians, were accused of having been close to the colonizers and soon found themselves marginalized.²⁹ The RFI also points out that even now, a decade after the end of the war, feelings of mutual grievance remain, and acts of ethnic and religious discrimination continue. Ethnic tensions are often exacerbated by the lack of interaction among different ethnic and religious communities. This is partially due to the existence of monolingual communities and linguistic segregation in the education system. Ethnic communities outside of ethnically diverse urban areas tend to exist in isolation from each other. They end up receiving information about others only from monolingual media sources, forming relationships only within their own ethnic group, and viewing other communities through the lens of long-established biases and stereotypes. These experiences tend to fuel antipathy and create barriers between communities.³¹

In Sri Lanka, because of the country's ethnic-nationalist identity politics, the Muslim community, led by its political elites, has been forced to define itself as an "other" that is neither Sinhalese nor Tamil but Muslim. This identity has been a reactive force for Muslims because it was developed by Muslim elites "as a response to Sinhala and Tamil ethnic-nationalistic ideologies." These formations, or how Muslims define themselves, are a by-product of social and political mobilization to secure rights and markets. Hence, the situation today in Sri Lanka is that the Muslims are the only Sri Lankan ethnic group bearing a religious rather than a linguistic, ethnic, or racial name. For example, faith is not only a theological marker (a moral motivator) but also an identity marker (a communal galvanizer). This means that tensions and fault lines along racial and religious lines remain.³²

The ethnocentric Buddhist nationalists recently claimed that the Muslim community is a threat to the survival of the Sinhalese and Sinhala nation. Their argument has been summarised in the following by Jones Robin Noel Barone: "Sri Lanka is the only Sinhala country in the world; a two-thousand-year-old Theravada Buddhist civilization that has survived three waves of colonialism. Moreover, the Sinhalese have no other countries in which to seek refuge or live; if they no longer constitute a majority in Sri Lanka, then their only homeland will be lost. Sinhala nationalists deeply fear the possibility of 'switching places' with a minority. Globalization exacerbates this fear by connecting relatively powerless internal minorities to powerful transnational forces – the Tamil diaspora and the Muslim ummah. In contrast, the Sinhala nationalist movement feels that the majority has no such international connections. Thus, Sinhala Buddhist nationalists understand themselves as a majority under siege from outside, threatened by collusion between weak local enemies and strong foreign agents. BBS paranoia about foreign (i.e. non-Sinhala) others must be understood in the context of globalization"³³

Rhetoric is widely used regarding Muslim business prowess as challenging the ascendance of Sinhala entrepreneurs, Muslims conspiring to upend the majority status of Sinhalese, or constituting a terrorist threat.

Rifai³⁴ has also outlined four factors that facilitate the rapid growth of anti-Muslim waves in Sri Lanka:

1) *International Islamophobia*: Some opportunist Sinhalese politicians and ultra-nationalist Buddhists have exploited anti-Muslim waves in the name of a war on terror against radical Muslim groups;

2) *Anti-Muslim sentiments in Asian regions*: These sentiments have been increasing between the followers of Hinduism and Buddhism in recent times. Often Islam and Christianity are seen as rivalry religions for Hinduism and Buddhism. Religious resentments and bitterness are deeply rooted in this region.

3) *Geopolitical competition in the region*: A geopolitical manipulation between regional and international powers may have contributed to the victimization of Muslim minorities in many countries, including Sri Lanka.

4) *Political incorrectness*. Politics is mixed up with Buddhist extremism both in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. It is generally believed that Buddhist extremism groups are created, financed, and supported by some politicians. Thus, politics and ethnocentric Buddhist extremism are intertwined.

However, the RFI in its analysis highlights that despite nearly 30 years of civil war, and continued tensions between ethnic and religious groups, the nation is rebuilding a sense of unity, belonging, and common nationhood. The recent lifting of a ban on the Tamil version of the National Anthem, “Sri Lanka Matha,” and its first-ever public performance during the Independence Day celebrations in 2015 were major steps toward reconciliation. Most Sri Lankans respect tolerance as a social ideal, which is enshrined in the preamble of Sri Lanka’s constitution. The preamble assures “to all People – Freedom, Equality, Justice, Fundamental Human Rights and the Independence of the Judiciary, as the intangible heritage that guarantees the dignity and well-being of succeeding generations of the people of Sri Lanka and of all the people of the world, who come to share with those generations the effort of working for the creation and preservation of a just and free society.”³⁵

The report also mentions the establishment of the Inter-Religious Council under the president, brings together leaders from many different religions, sponsors peace talks, and offers hope to victims of sectarian violence. Its mandate is to increase society’s understanding of and respect for other religious systems and institutions, serving as a platform for discussions and mediations, as well as general peace-building activities, planning, and advising.

ACTOR ANALYSIS

According to the SFCG baseline assessment conducted in 2021, most of the individuals and organizations working on the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) are not directly focusing on FoRB, but rather focusing broadly on inter-faith dialogue, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and transitional justice. Only a few individuals and organizations openly state that their focus of work is on FoRB. The assumption was that this is a result of the political sensitivity of working on FoRB. A lack of resources available for this type of work given that FoRB is not a mainstream issue is also a factor. There is also the pervasive belief shared by many members of Sri Lanka’s majority faith groups that all religious groups in Sri Lanka have FoRB. Hence, working on FoRB issues can be perceived as a threat to peace and harmony in the country.³⁶

The [NCEASL](#), the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), originally the Evangelical Fellowship of Ceylon (EFC), was founded in June 1952 and has a membership of more than 200 churches, denominations, and organisations, representing more than 200,000 Evangelical Christians in Sri Lanka. The NCEASL has monitored issues related to religious freedom in Sri Lanka since the 1990s, focusing on FoRB violations documentation, monitoring the legal and judiciary responses, and building the capacity of religious actors.

[The National Peace Council](#) was established in 1995 by an inter-religious group of civil society leaders during the height of Sri Lanka's internal war to promote a peaceful end to the conflict. The NPC works in partnership with different groups, including religious clergy, community leaders, government officials, women and youth for promoting religious and ethnic tolerance, social cohesion and reconciliation, promoting and protecting of religious freedom, supporting victims of rights violations, and building the capacity of human rights first aid centers.

There is also a National Network on Religious Freedom (NNRF), which consists of civil society representatives who are members of local platforms. They conduct national training on religious freedom for senior-level police officers. They have already conducted two training programs, with more coming down the pipeline for community policing units (for national and local interventions).

[Right to Life Human Rights Centre](#) (R2L), Katunayake, is a civil society organization aiming to promote and strengthen fundamental human rights, through providing legal and financial assistance to seek social justice. In 2011 & 2016, R2L led the initiative to prepare an alternative joint UNCAT report consisting of several civil society organizations on torture, extra judiciary killing and disappearance issues. This report is a collective product of the Sri Lankan NGO's Collective Against Torture, which is initiated and maintained by Right to Life with 20 national civil society organizations.

[INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre](#), INFORM was established in 1990 to monitor and document the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the ethnic conflict and civil war. They work by reporting on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national and international level. INFORM also conducts rights advocacy and awareness-building work, including work on policy change.

[The Asia Foundation](#) is a non-profit international development organization working across Asia. Their programs address critical issues affecting Asia in the 21st century: governance and law, economic development, women's empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation.

ENDNOTES

1. Arasaratnam, S. and Peiris, . Gerald Hubert (2022, July 3). Sri Lanka. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka>
2. Wagner, E. (2022, June 2). *Sri Lanka - United States Department of State*. United States Department of State; <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/>
3. Arasaratnam. (2022). "*Sri Lanka - Plant and animal life.*" Encyclopedia Britannica; <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/Plant-and-animal-life#ref24279>
4. Udin, Z., (2021, October), *Country Update: Sri Lanka, Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka*, The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-new-report-about-religious-freedom-sri-lanka>
5. The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, (2021), *Sri Lanka*, Nations Online, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/sri_lanka.htm
6. *The World Bank in Sri Lanka*. (2022, April 7). World Bank; www.worldbank.org. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka/overview>
7. *Infographic: Sri Lanka's economic crisis and political turmoil | Al Jazeera*. (2022, April 7). Aljazeera; www.aljazeera.com. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/7/infographic-sri-lankas-economic-crisis-and-political-turmoil>
8. Wagner, E. (2022, June 2). *Sri Lanka - United States Department of State*. United States Department of State; www.state.gov. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/>
9. Shah, T. (2020, September 1). *Sri Lanka Religious Freedom Landscape Report - Religious Freedom Institute*. Religious Freedom Institute; <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/sri-lanka-religious-freedom-landscape-report/>
10. Denis, T., & Kumari, N. (2022, March 11). *Revisited - Wounds of Sri Lanka's civil war remain impossible to heal*. France 24; <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/revisited/20220311-wounds-of-sri-lanka-s-civil-war-remain-impossible-to-heal>

11. Anandakugan, N. (2020, August 31). *"The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020."* Harvard International Review; hir.harvard.edu. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>
12. Handunnetti, D. (2022, April 21). *"'A curse': Three years since Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka/Al Jazeera."* Aljazeera; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/21/a-curse-three-years-since-easter-sunday-bombings-in-sri-lanka>
13. Imtiyaz, A. (2020). *"The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims,"* Journal of Asian and African Studies, SAGE, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021909619868244>
14. Ibid
15. Shah, T. (2020, September 1). *Sri Lanka Religious Freedom Landscape Report - Religious Freedom Institute.* Religious Freedom Institute; <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/sri-lanka-religious-freedom-landscape-report/>
16. Wagner, E. (2022, June 2). *Sri Lanka - United States Department of State.* United States Department of State; [www.state.gov. https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/](https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/)
17. Ibid
18. Ibid
19. Udin, Z., (2021, October), *Country Update: Sri Lanka, Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka,* The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/sri-lanka-country-update>
20. Udin, Z., (2021, October), *Country Update: Sri Lanka, Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka,* The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/sri-lanka-country-update>
21. *Locked Up Without Evidence: Abuses under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act | HRW.* (2018, January 29). HRW; <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/01/29/locked-without-evidence/abuses-under-sri-lankas-prevention-terrorism-act>
22. Udin, Z., (2021, October), *Country Update: Sri Lanka, Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka,* The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/sri-lanka-country-update>
23. Anandakugan, N. (2020, August 31). *The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020.* Harvard International Review; hir.harvard.edu. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>
24. Shah, T. (2020, September 1). *Sri Lanka Religious Freedom Landscape Report - Religious Freedom Institute.* Religious Freedom Institute; <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/sri-lanka-religious-freedom-landscape-report/>
25. Ibid
26. Ahmed, S. (2020), *"Visit to Sri Lanka: report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief,"* A/HRC/43/1 3 Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to development, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3883351#record-files-collapse-header>
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
29. Denis, T., & Kumari, N. (2022, March 11). *"Revisited - Wounds of Sri Lanka's civil war remain impossible to heal."* France 24; <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/revisited/20220311-wounds-of-sri-lanka-s-civil-war-remain-impossible-to-heal>
30. Ibid
31. Shah, T. (2020, September 1). *Sri Lanka Religious Freedom Landscape Report - Religious Freedom Institute.* Religious Freedom Institute; <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/sri-lanka-religious-freedom-landscape-report/>
32. Imtiyaz, A. (2020). *"The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims,"* Journal of Asian and African Studies, SAGE, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021909619868244>
33. Rifai, Dr. Sulaiman Lebbe, 2020, Dec), *"Religious Freedom in Theory and Practice in Sri Lanka,"* Eastern University Sri Lanka, SSRN, Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3754506> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3754506>
34. Rifai, Dr. Sulaiman Lebbe and Rifai, Dr. Sulaiman Lebbe, (2020, Dec 23), *"Religious Freedom in Theory and Practice in Sri Lanka."* Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3754506> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3754506>
35. Shah, T. (2020, September 1). *Sri Lanka Religious Freedom Landscape Report - Religious Freedom Institute.* Religious Freedom Institute; <https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/sri-lanka-religious-freedom-landscape-report/>
36. *Dakshitha Wickremarathne and Sanjana Ravi.* Religious Freedom Roundtables. Baseline Assessment: Sri Lanka, 2021

CROSSCUTTING CHALLENGES

Most of the challenges to enjoying religious and ethnic freedom in the region are shared from country to country to various extents and with different specific issues. For example, the objects and subjects of religious nationalism differ depending on which religion is dominant: Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. However, the mechanisms are identical, such as the use of hate speech, attacks on believers and places of worship, damage to the property of religious minorities, discriminatory rules in law, and favoritism of the majority religion. In addition, violations are of an intersectional nature and must be considered in conjunction with others. For example, blasphemy allegations and the enforcement of these violations are often coupled with extrajudicial violence, imminent threats to violence or even intimidation tactics, including the presence of mobs.

A partial list of regional challenges includes growing religious nationalism, conversion, the operation of religious related violent groups, and hate speech.

Religious nationalism. In all the countries analyzed, religion has shaped history through colonialism and imperialism, whether in the 1970s or 1990s, so that nationalism has become a unifying expression to break with the country's colonial past and shape identity. Countries, formed as secular earlier in the 20th century, have changed in the end. They seek secularism as an external product and look for origins, unity, and pride in religion and their historical past. Such narratives are often underpinned by conspiracy theories and the “destructive” influence of external traditions on one's own local traditions. The neutral notion of religious nationalism, in its extreme manifestations and in countries where religion is virtually indistinguishable from deeply rooted cultural traditions, leads to the manipulation of religious and ethnic identities.

To varying degrees, the politicization of religion (as well as the “religionization” of politics) can be observed in all countries covered by this analysis. This is more evident in forms of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and Islam in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan; and less in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Philippines. Obviously, the secular nature of the state, as enshrined in the constitutions of the countries, restrains the growth of nationalist sentiments to a certain extent. Religious nationalism is a major backdrop when considering the challenges and causes of violations of rights to religious freedom. It is accompanied by deepening social divisions along religious lines, intolerance not only of minorities – whether religious, ethnic, or gender – but also within the mainstream itself. This gives rise to disputes about the purity of faith or the correctness of its expression. It provides moral justification for structural violations, discriminatory laws, and access to education, jobs and decision-making institutions.

Conversion. Over the last decade, governments across the region have taken legal measures to prohibit religious conversions. Often the motivation behind these laws, though not officially stated as such, is to protect the dominant religious tradition from a perceived threat from minority religious groups. The methods for preventing conversions vary: national laws may prohibit proselytizing directly, blasphemy laws may be used to criminalize attempts to convert members of the majority, and governments tighten controls on foreign missionary groups. Moreover, narratives of betrayal of faith and financial motivation for adopting another religion are widespread in society. Converts face intense societal pressure and hostility. Some have gone into hiding or concealed their newly adopted faith for fear of social stigmatization. However, feelings of insecurity exist not only among converts, but also in communities from which people have converted. Women who converted are even more often subject to discrimination, constant verbal or physical harassment, and are sometimes even forced to convert back to the religion of their birth.

Blasphemy and related laws. Blasphemy laws are found in criminal codes in all analyzed countries. Often blasphemy laws are vaguely worded, do not specify intent, and carry unduly harsh penalties for violators. Blasphemous acts might be criminalized through the enforcement of other criminal laws, such as apostasy laws, anti-conversion laws, incitement to hatred laws, or anti-extremism laws.

Blasphemy laws not only target ordinary citizens and believers, but can also affect lawyers, human rights activists, political opponents, journalists, and scholars. Blasphemy accusations are often accompanied by mob action, violence, or threats thereof, as well as growing religious intolerance. In addition, by virtue of the nature of social media, its accessibility, and its approval (likes) and dissemination (shares) functions, the possibility of being caught in blasphemous or hateful acts is increased. Social media blurs the distinction between the public and private spheres, allowing the state to act against behavior that may never have been intended for public consumption or wide distribution. These laws violate fundamental human rights, including rights to freedom of expression; freedom of religion or belief; freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and fair trial rights.

Terrorism and violent extremism. This analysis showed that terrorism and violent extremism are seen as a serious threat in all the countries analyzed. The activities of homegrown, regional, and global terrorist networks, as well as attacks and hate narratives have implications on the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief in the region. On one hand, the subjects of such attacks are religious minorities, representing both dominant and non-dominant religions, as well as representatives of various beliefs – be they communists in the Philippines, or secular bloggers in Bangladesh, Malaysia, or Pakistan. Violent groups impede any peacebuilding, interfaith or human rights activities by threatening or attacking the initiators and participants. In countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, such incidents are less common, but the consequences of the response show a general trend. On the other hand, the states’ response prioritizes a military and hard measures approach, including the use of anti-extremism and anti-terrorism laws to severely restrict the activities of religious communities, suppress peaceful dissent, and imprison people through “national security” measures. Peaceful religious practitioners or organizations might be imprisoned or fined after being accused of crimes of extremism or terrorism. In some cases, there is an abuse of extended powers by law enforcement agencies. In some countries, this is accompanied by extrajudicial executions, restriction of access to justice or the persecution of political opponents and journalists.

Gender issues. Most research and data on religious freedom violations covered by the analysis were gender blind. Gender based violence related to FoRB is often blended in with other areas, such as domestic violence, and is not recognized as violations against religious minorities or groups. According to the Stefanus alliance, women tend to be disproportionately more affected by Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) violations than men, both in terms of frequency and in level of severity. Women are more likely to be subject to discrimination and persecution based on their religion or belief because of their gender. In addition, they do not have equal access to resources. Women and religious minorities are more likely to access informal justice systems, which are still highly patriarchal (referring to local religious leaders). Muslim women have fewer protections in Muslim communities. All these factors shape the gender dimension of FoRB violations. Women in most of the countries covered by the analysis appear to be victims of double and triple forms of discrimination, because of the intersection between ethnicity, gender, religious or belief identity, and sometimes socio-economic status. These different identity layers mutually reinforce each other, making women particularly vulnerable to discrimination. It might be a part of legislation (religious and family laws), honor killings, kidnappings, abductions, forced conversions and forced marriages of minority girls and young women. Women, in particular, have suffered violence at the hands of Islamist groups, who inflict vigilante punishments against women charged with adultery or other alleged violations of Islamic law.

In addition, hostility and violence against the LGBTQ+ community is common in the region. Cases of discrimination and abuse against LGBTQ+ persons are regularly reported, including in employment, education, health care, housing and social services, attacks on representatives, and — in some cases — killings. If there is a tendency for FoRB violations against women needed to understand the correlation between gender-based violence and FoRB, then the issue of violations of LGBTQ+ experience of FoRB violations is not on the agenda at all. Given the sensitivity of the issue, an examination of the nature of FoRB violations in the LGBTQ+ communities is appropriate.

CONCLUSION

The countries analyzed represent different patterns of religious and ethnic freedom challenges in the Asian region. They represent diversity with respect to constitutional systems (secular and religious), dominant religions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), varying degrees of state restrictions and social hostilities, and different levels of civil society development. Virtually all countries are post-conflict societies, and while the nature of conflict lay more in the political realm, it has had far-reaching consequences, shaping entrenched images of the “other,” shaping social intolerance, and justifying disproportionate state interventions. Yet, the challenges faced by such seemingly different countries are quite similar: they all require working at a structural level and community engagement. This similarity allows us to find common solutions through Asia REF programming. The intended results of Asia REF programming now covers the major challenges of religious freedom such as preventing and responding to REF-related violations, countering exclusionary narratives, supporting media efforts to cover such violations, and providing technical assistance to state agencies.

In addition, the complexity of non-governmental organizations in the region is worth considering. Virtually all countries have state restrictions on the activities of the civil society sector, especially human rights organizations, supported by narratives fearing the promotion of “Western,” or “alien” values. In Central Asia, civil society is restricted by an information campaign for the forming of images of “foreign agents,” “grant-eaters,” and are heavily supported by similar Russian discourse. In other Asian countries, attacks on civil society can go as far as physical violence and threats of violence. Where people are suspicious about international organizations, locals who received funding also becoming subject to monitoring. While some assume that partnering with religious organizations (particularly in the majority) and the government would be more effective, there are risks to consider. Religious organizations involved in peace and development work often have weak transparency and accountability mechanisms, which is combined with a perceived sense of moral superiority. A lack of coordination among organizations from different religious traditions is common. This can undermine the work of these religious groups, but since public demand for religion remains very high, these problems are rarely addressed.

Moreover, bias and lack of trust in civil society organizations demonstrates the challenges of promoting human rights – including religious freedom – which is also seen as an external construct. As the analysis has shown, to avoid prejudice some organizations frame their initiatives in protecting religious freedom as interreligious dialogue and engagement, round tables, and promoting peace and co-existence. Considering that virtually all countries have constitutional freedoms of religion or belief and non-discrimination provisions, law reform initiatives can take place under the umbrella of bringing laws and regulations into conformity with the constitution. In any form, concepts of religious freedom and gender must be strongly applied locally before starting any Asia REF programs. This study also revealed different understandings of the concept of secularism in the countries. For example, some South Asian countries introduced the idea of positive secularism, calling for a reasonable level of religious freedom; while Central Asian countries see secularism more as an atheistic model, which leads to a negative perception of the secular state as godless.

Since the analysis of actors was based on those mentioned in English-language reports and media, it lacks complete coverage and should be supplemented by country stakeholder mapping. At the same time, it shows the limited number of organizations working directly on religious freedom, which suggests the need to build capacity to work with FoRB, increase interaction between “secular” and religious NGOs, and strengthen the gender sensitivity of REF programs.

In every country, there are efforts to resolve conflicts and promote human rights. In post-conflict societies, these include government and civil society efforts to reconcile after civil wars, positive judicial precedents in favor of a secular state, media efforts to build and strengthen national unity.

Efforts by religious leaders to foster interfaith relations might be recognized as a good opportunity to promote religious and ethnic freedoms.

At the same time, today's society, wracked by political-economic and social crises, may prefer to scapegoat a minority with the potential for violence against it (e.g., the belief that Muslims intentionally infect others with COVID-19). On the other hand, in the face of external challenges, society can find the strength to reconcile.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building state and public demands to promote REF:

- Conduct an awareness raising campaign on the positive impact of religious diversity on peace and the development of each country;
- Demonstrate to governments the economic advantages of fulfilling international obligations on FoRB (e.g. economic preference mechanisms);
- Support local civil society actors to build public demands for addressing violent acts of religious intolerance, gender violence, and discrimination;
- Develop initiatives and activities aimed at understanding the strategic importance of a tolerant attitude toward religious, beliefs, and ethnicity. For example, optional training courses (online and offline) on FORB and inter-religious tolerance in mass media in local languages could be developed.

Efficiency of state authorities:

- Strengthen the neutrality principle of public services along with state agencies for civil service and local self-governments, judiciary and law enforcement;
- Assist government capacity building for local law enforcement on addressing religious and ethnic freedom violations (e.g., the rights of minorities, the investigation and prosecution of offenders attacking minority groups) and mob negotiation tactics;
- Establish monitoring and evaluation systems of state policies on religion and countering extremism/terrorism;
- Provide technical support to governments in the reform, development, or adoption of REF relevant legislation. For example, blasphemy, conversion, and anti-extremism laws should have a non-religious purpose to protect potential victims, rather than protecting a majority religious group from alleged threats from religious minorities. These laws also must define the main concepts.

Protecting victims:

- Support local human rights organizations providing legal assistance/consultations for REF violation victims; and engage in strategic litigation related to REF issues outlined in the constitution;
- Build the capacity of small local NGOs to strengthen the community oversight of REF violations; hold capacity-building workshops for various religious freedom protection skills.
- Build the capacity of relevant groups and organizations and start an informational campaign among those groups on local, national and international access to justice mechanisms and on local legislation (e.g. the Vested Property Return Act in Bangladesh.)
- Establish a national mechanism for documenting and responding (early warning mechanisms) to religious and ethnic freedom violations, strengthen the interaction between the central apparatus of government and the heads of state, and strengthen the system of response to cases of religious discrimination.

Countering societal polarization:

- Reconstruct exclusionary narratives through work with community actors, religious and ethnic leaders, as well as media representatives;
- Work with local officials and media representatives on reframing narratives about “non-traditional,” “destructive,” or “deviant” religions, portraying converters as “betrayers”; and develop conflict-sensitive journalism guidelines for the mass media to cover the subject of religion, taking into account international standards and journalism ethics;
- Support civil society organizations to address the rapid spread of disinformation and hate speech online. Religious or belief-based hate speech is not a focus in some countries in the region. Most interventions are directed at political narratives or anti-extremism/counternarratives;
- Focus on activities indirectly promoting REF, stimulating intra-faith, interfaith and inter-ethnic engagement (For example, preserving and supporting cultural and linguistic heritage);
- Efficiently distribute efforts in the country. For example, in recent years the emphasis of NGO work in Kyrgyzstan has been on the south of the country, leading to an increase in protest sentiments in the northern regions. In Kazakhstan, religious freedom observers noted that the Kordai District experienced a disproportionate number of religious freedom prosecutions;
- Programs should seek adequate representation from all relevant stakeholders. For example, in Central Asia, religious minorities are often excluded. In Southeast Asia it is indigenous groups.

Gender:

- Strengthen gender sensitive approaches in REF protection and capacity building;
- Address gender inclusion in ensuring access to justice for the victims of REF violations;
- Reconstruct narratives to address the traditional attitudes and social norms that legitimize bride kidnapping, polygamy, early marriages, honor killings, etc.;
- Initiate positive masculinity campaigns. Work with male leadership to champion women’s rights to REF.

Research:

- Understand how different religious, ethnic, and belief groups make sense of their presence as minorities in each country. Arguably, these nuances shape their understanding of their own religious freedom;
- Understand intersections of REF and gender (including LGBTQ+) and consult with local women’s group to ensure strong gender analysis and mainstreaming in projects;
- Provide opportunities for localization of REF, gender, and secularism concepts: What does religious freedom mean to people in the countries where Asia REF intends to do projects? Is religious freedom and secularism about the separation of church and state? Does it also factor in individual liberties of exercising beliefs, practices, and even moral choices?
- Establish stakeholder mapping exercises/actor analysis in the countries where Asia REF works. Identify different organizations/bodies/people/institutions that are in their REF field and seek their classification and evaluation.