



04 May 2021

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Dear USCIRF Commissioners,

We write to express our serious concerns with the recent report that the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs is currently drafting a legal framework for the implementation of anti-conversion laws in Sri Lanka, legislation that would strip individuals of their freedom of speech and conscience.¹ This step follows earlier statements by the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka on his plans to introduce an anti-conversion law into the country and to restructure the constitution of Sri Lanka to accommodate such a law.² We wrote to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in mid-March 2021 to raise our concern and would like to urge the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to take similar actions.

Sri Lanka is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and is therefore bound to the commitments it promised to uphold since 1980. International law is clear that anti-conversion laws are frequently incompatible with the core principles of freedom of religion or belief. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has also reported on how anti-blasphemy, anti-apostasy and anti-conversion laws “often serve as platforms for enabling incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence against persons based on religion or belief.”³ Moreover, restrictions on fundamental freedoms such as religious freedom must pass the test of legality, proportionality and necessity; no anti-conversion law has yet passed this test.⁴

As USCIRF has noted on numerous occasions, religious freedom has tangible social benefits beyond simply the spiritual. Religious freedom promotes economic growth and social harmony by encouraging acceptance of others. Conversely, anti-conversion laws

¹ Pamodi Waravita, *New laws against unethical conversions* (18 February 2021), <https://www.themorning.lk/new-laws-against-unethical-conversions/>.

² Arjuna Ranawana, *Mahinda raises controversial Anti-Conversion Bill issue*, *Economynext* (3 March 2020)

³ UN General Assembly, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, (28 August 2017), A/72/365, para 27.

⁴ UN General Assembly, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, (13 August 2012), A/67/303, para. 44.

often have negative social consequences. While we denounce all religious conversions obtained by force and violence, anti-conversion laws are often written in a way that is overbroad and ambiguous, enabling accusations against religious groups for merely engaging in worship, sharing one's faith, and performing charitable works. They encourage false accusations and cause unrest by emboldening intolerant and extremist actors. By contrast, religious groups very frequently provide moral, social, emotional, and physical advantages for the individuals, their families, and communities.

In light of the above we respectfully urge USCIRF to make a renewed call to the US to press Sri Lanka to:

- Abandon the introduction of anti-conversion legislation.
- Promote religious tolerance and pluralism by upholding Articles 10 and 14 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, and Article 18 of the ICCPR, including the freedom to adopt or leave a religion or belief.

We also ask that USCIRF Commissioners raise these concerns in communications with Sri Lankan authorities.

Sincerely,

Signatures

Organizations

ADF International

Advocates International

Bitter Winter - daily magazine on religious liberty

Center for Pluralism, Washington, DC

Center for Studies on New Religions CESNUR,

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

CSW UK

Global Christian Ministers Federation (GCMF)

Hindus for Human Rights

Human Rights Without Frontiers

Indian American Muslim Council

International Christian Concern

International Human Rights Committee

The International Multi-Faith Coalition

International Society for Peace and Justice

Jubilee Campaign

Justice For All - Sri Lanka Task Force

Legalise Apostasy UK

Minh Van Foundation

St. Charles Institute

The Orthodox Public Affairs Committee (OPAC)

Representative of Association for Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief -Vietnam (AAFoRB-VN)

Saint Nicholas Freedom Group

Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ)

Muslim Women Speakers

Individuals

Fr. John Anderson

President

Saint Nicholas Freedom Group

Matthew Brooks

Minister

Soraya M. Deen

Founder

Muslim Women Speakers

Hamid Gharagozloo

U.S. Representative

International Organization to Preserve Human Rights (IOPHR)

Mike Ghouse

President

Center for Pluralism

Lauren B. Homer

President

Law and Liberty International

Dr. Rehan Khan

President

International Society for Peace and Justice

Dipan Mitra
Founder President
Bureau of Minority Rights Bangladesh (BMRB)

Scott Morgan
President
Red Eagle Enterprises

Nehemiah Christie
Human Rights Defender

Dr. Jianli Yang
Founder and President
Citizen Power Initiatives for China

Loan Vo
Coordinator
Buddhist Solidarity Association