

Christians in Sri Lanka Face Attacks, Threat of Anti-Conversion Bills

Observers say religious tension has replaced the unity forged between Christians and Buddhists after December's tsunami

In the months following the tsunami that claimed thousands of lives in south Asia, Christians in Sri Lanka again faced violent attacks by Buddhist mobs and the renewed threat of legislation that would criminalize conversion.

Evangelical pastors and converts from Buddhism were the most frequent targets of beatings and terrorism, with several churches and homes attacked and burned in recent months. The perpetrators were often Buddhist mobs, frequently led or instigated by radical Buddhist monks.

Though 70 percent of Sri Lankans are Buddhists, according to the U.S. State Department, in recent years growing numbers have converted to Christianity. A sharp increase in religious violence has followed, and proposed "anti-conversion" bills and a possible 18th amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution have worsened the situation.

Sri Lankan pastor Jebamoney Ratnam of Holy Trinity Church in Colombo said in addition to Buddhists, some Catholic and mainstream Protestant leaders support the proposed legislation as a means of combating alleged "unethical conversions" at the hands of "fundamentalist sects."

“This label targets evangelicals as ‘extremist crusaders funded by Western colonists,’ and we are falsely accused of preying on poor Buddhists by offering financial inducements in exchange for conversion,” he said.” Although proponents speak often of unethical conversions, not a single case has been documented.”

In April 2004, the Buddhist-led Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party won nine seats in Sri Lanka’s Parliament after promising to pass an anti-conversion bill. The following July, the JHU introduced the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion bill.

“Under the language of the JHU bill, simply sharing with a Buddhist the benefits of a relationship with Christ could be construed as ‘allurement,’ and the very assertion of such relationship as ‘fraudulent,” said Sam Thevabalasingham, president of the South Asia Institute of Theology.

Violators of the proposed bill could face up to five years in prison and a fine of roughly \$1,500. If the “victim” is a minor, woman, student, welfare recipient, prison inmate or member of another protected group, the sentence may be increased to seven years in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

Last August, the Supreme Court ruled that though the JHU bill is constitutional, it would be struck down on the basis of two minor provisions deemed unconstitutional.

In September, the JHU proposed an 18th amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution, which would make Buddhism the official state religion and prohibit attempts to "convert Buddhists into other forms of worship or to spread other forms of worship among the Buddhist."

The government also introduced its own bill called the Act for the Protection of Religious Freedom, which would make any religious conversion illegal. That bill, which is the most restrictive of all the proposed legislation, had not been formally considered when the killer tsunami hit.

Christians hoped the unity forged after the disaster would end the dispute, but the government's bill was reintroduced in a March 16 Cabinet meeting and was scheduled for a vote in Parliament in April. The vote has again been postponed, but its threat looms heavily over the country.

"This law would jeopardize faith-based aid exactly when it's needed most," said Roger Severino, an attorney with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. "Unfortunately, the campaign of threats and attacks against religious minorities has survived the tsunami, and the proposed anticonversion law would only encourage the religious persecution we've already seen."

Observers say passage of any of the legislation also could jeopardize the assistance Sri Lanka receives from the newly

created Millennium Challenge Account, as recipient nations are required to respect their citizens' civil and human rights.

MICHELE LOMBARDO IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA