

# Rise of Buddhist-Extremism in Sri Lanka

Roman P. Storzer - Asian Tribune, 2004. 09. 14

An unholy alliance of local Christians and fundamentalist Christian groups in the US is being formed. The following article spewing out misinformation and partial truths is a result of this alignment. The Christian churches for a brief period after Independence attempted to distance itself from their colonial role of being lackeys of foreign powers. They are now going back to Mama and reverting to their role as agents of foreign interests.

The rise of theocratic extremism in the Middle East is known and deplored by most everyone around the globe. Fewer, though, are aware of a similar rise in South Asia. Anti-conversion and anti-blaspemy legislation has already become law in India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Sri Lanka may be next—further threatening the stability of this island nation.

Sri Lanka, blessed with a diverse population of Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, has suffered a miserable recent history. A 20-year civil war between ethnic Sinhalese and Tamils resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Happily, this racial strife has decreased dramatically since the 2001 ceasefire. However, religious oppression—both official and otherwise—is now taking its place. A small but determined segment of its population is intent on maintaining Buddhist hegemony at all costs, enlisting politicians, religious leaders, and the police in their efforts. And last week, the

nation's highest court added its authority to this movement.

In the last two years alone, more than a hundred Sri Lankan churches have been burnt, demolished, or otherwise attacked. And there were 44 assaults on churches in the first four months of this year. But the anti-Christian campaign is not limited to attacks on property. Ministers and their friends are attacked, their bones broken; women are sexually assaulted, all in the name of protecting Buddhism. Sadly, the police and local courts are alternatively unwilling or unable to address the problem. Visiting with Sri Lankan ministers, I was distressed by their obvious helplessness. I was dismayed to learn that this violence against Christian ministers, laymen and women—including beatings and death threats—has become routine. Even more troubling is the fact that even when the perpetrators are known—it is often the residents and head monk of the local village—they are never prosecuted. The attackers—led by the politically powerful monks—act with impunity.

This violence will be legitimized by new legislation currently making its way through the Parliament. This bill, introduced by a political party comprised of Buddhist monks who ran on a platform

of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, would be nothing less than a tool that would allow the government to regulate which faiths Sri Lankans may profess. They would criminalize any speech or conduct that could lead to Christian conversion. Sri Lankan politicians and others justify this bigotry by claiming that Christians engage in “unethical conversions.” In fact, these “unethical” conversions involve Christians simply engaging in the same social service activities—education, health care, food provision—that they pursue everywhere else in the world. The mere use of the term “unethical conversion” should raise red flags in any society that believes in the fundamental human right of religious liberty.

On August 13, the country's Supreme Court officially sanctioned religious intolerance by ruling that this “anti-conversion” law was constitutional. Not only does this decision ignore the country's own organic law, which declares that “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,” but it also violates the international norms and obligations that Sri Lanka has explicitly agreed to abide by through United Nations protocols and con-

ventions. More threateningly, it promises to increase instability between various religious factions during these tenuous times.

The Becket Fund brought this issue to the attention of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, explaining how these actions violate Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which mandate that “Everyone shall have the right 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” The anti-conversion bills, blithely ignore these constraints.

And far from stabilizing this still fragile democracy, the Supreme Court ruling will continue to favor majority Buddhist control and, in the words of one commentator, “will sharpen the division of communities on religious lines.” The ruling gives sustenance to militant segments of Sri Lankan society that have turned to ever more sinister means to terrorize religious minorities.

Observers from around the world, and of various religious traditions, including Hindus, Mus-

lims, and moderate Buddhists, have strongly condemned Sri Lanka's proposed anti-Christian legislation. But the Supreme Court decision gives the government a clear path to deny its citizens one of the most basic of human rights, freedom of conscience. What can believers in religious tolerance do to prevent this?

The international community must put pressure on the Sri Lankan parliament. Enactment of either bill would represent an egregious violation of the freedom of religion, expression, and assembly of Sri Lankan citizens guaranteed under that country's various, enforceable international treaty obligations. We should also remind members of parliament how much Sri Lanka's economy owes to its burgeoning textile industry—and encourage businessmen and politicians worldwide to forge an unbreakable link between human rights and free trade. Nothing less than the lives of thousands of Christians in Sri Lanka are at stake.

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## Mahatma Gandhi on Conversions