

# SRI LANKA

## OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



Photo by Presidency of Sri Lanka/Anadolu via Getty Images



## INTRODUCTION

In September 2024, left-leaning politician Anura Kumara Dissanayake from the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political party, won Sri Lanka's [presidential election](#). The election was the first to be held since [mass protests](#) in 2022 [unseated](#) the country's leader, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, after Sri Lanka suffered its worst economic crisis. President Dissanayake's alliance, the National People's Power (NPP) – of which the JVP is a part – rose to prominence during the 2022 protests. In November 2024, the NPP coalition won a [landslide victory](#) in snap parliamentary elections, taking 159 seats in the 225-member assembly.

During his campaign, Dissanayake made [pledges](#) in the NPP [manifesto](#) to address several longstanding human rights issues, promising to abolish all oppressive laws, ensure civil rights for people in all parts of Sri Lanka, repeal the draconian 1978 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), remove abusive provisions of the Online Safety Act and establish an independent Directorate of Public Prosecutions separate from the attorney general's office. The NPP has also committed to [dismantling the executive presidency](#) that centralises excessive power in one individual, undermining democracy and parliamentary governance.

Despite this, over the last year the CIVICUS Monitor, a civil society platform tracking civic space around the world, has documented various violations of civic freedoms in Sri Lanka, including the targeting of human rights defenders, activists and journalists, efforts to control civil society, protests restrictions and the failure to support efforts to ensure accountability for violations during Sri Lanka's 1983-2009 civil war.

These civic space violations are inconsistent with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Sri Lanka ratified in 1980. The ICCPR imposes international obligations on the state to respect and protect civic freedoms, including freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. These rights are also enshrined in Sri Lanka's constitution.

This brief assesses actions undertaken by the Sri Lankan government over the past year, highlights issues of concern and makes recommendations for improvements.

## ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor, an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Sri Lanka as **Repressed**.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

**CLOSED****REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

## CONSTRAINTS ON CIVIL SOCIETY REGISTRATION AND OPERATIONS

Freedom of association is enshrined in articles 14(1)(c) of the constitution. ICCPR article 22 also obliges the state to respect, protect and fulfil freedom of association.

[According](#) to the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the current government has taken initiatives to interact and consult with some civil society organisations (CSOs) in the executive and judicial capital, Colombo, on various processes, including on some draft laws, such as the draft Non-Governmental Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act.



The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk on his official visit to Sri Lanka, June 2025 (Photo Credit: News.lk)

However, the OHCHR has stated that activities and funding sources of CSOs are [closely monitored](#) by intelligence services, particularly in northern and eastern Sri Lanka where the minority Tamil population predominantly lives and where the civil war was concentrated. In August 2025, it also raised concerns about [persistent restrictions](#) faced by CSOs, including limitations on access to funding and the imposition of onerous bureaucratic requirements, which continue to constrain CSOs' operating environment, particularly in the north and east.

There are also concerns about the registration of CSOs with the National Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organisations, which sits under the Ministry of Public Security, and the requirement for the Ministry of Defence to grant clearances for registration. [According to the OHCHR](#), the security oversight of CSOs risk repression of dissenting voices and reflects the militarisation of civilian administrative functions.

In December 2024, it was [reported](#) that the government had issued a directive to make it compulsory for all domestic and international CSOs operating in Sri Lanka, including those registered under the Companies Act, to register with the National Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organisations, which has been under the Ministry of Public Security since July 2022. Registration has been made mandatory under the Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act No. 31 of 1980.

According to the registration procedure, CSOs are also required to hand relevant documents to the National Secretariat. They will be sent to the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the relevant line ministries for clearance. In cases where security clearance from the Ministry is not given, [registration is refused](#), with no avenues for appeal.

Concerns were also raised by the [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#) in February 2025, following its review of Sri Lanka's record. The UN body reported on funding restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles that disproportionately hinder the work of women's rights organisations, particularly those operating in conflict-affected areas.

The Committee noted that the requirement to register with the National Secretariat establishes excessive regulations that place a disproportionate burden on smaller organisations and pose a direct threat to the autonomy and effectiveness of organisations working on women's human rights and gender equality.



## HARASSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND ACTIVISTS

While many human rights defenders and activists have been able to operate without restrictions, there have incidents of intimidation and harassment.



Activist Thambirasa Selvarani and other mothers seeking justice  
(Photo Credit: Lanka Files)

In October 2024, police [issued a summons](#) to Thambirasa Selvarani, head of the Association for Enforced Disappearances in Ampara, an eastern province. Selvarani has been at the forefront of efforts to locate victims of enforced disappearances, and this is not the first time she has faced such intimidation. She said the police had [accused](#) her of trying to resurrect the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the armed separatist group that was defeated in 2009.

On 28 May 2025, the Counter Terrorism Investigation Division (CTID) [summoned](#) Vasuki Vallipuram, a well-known women's rights activist and Coordinator of the Women Life and Rights Association – Kilinochchi, a northern province, for interrogation.

CTID officials visited Vallipuram's home in Kilinochchi and handed over the summons in person. She was instructed to appear at the CTID Sub-Branch Office in Paranthan on 31 May 2025. The notice directed Vallipuram to bring complete details of beneficiaries associated with her organisation.

Vallipuram is a prominent voice advocating for women's rights. Her summons has raised concern among civil society groups, which view it as part of a continuing trend of intimidation and surveillance targeting Tamil activists and community leaders.

In July 2025, human rights activist S Sivayoganathan was [summoned](#) to appear at the office of the Assistant Superintendent of Police in Batticaloa for further inquiry, months after he lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka over the blocking of a Tamil commemorative event. The event was intended to commemorate Annai Poopathi, a prominent woman remembered for her role in the struggle for Tamil rights.

[Human rights defender Hejaaz Hizbullah](#), a minority rights advocate and legal counsel for many Muslim victims of human rights violations, continues to [face trial](#) on baseless charges. He was arrested in April 2020 under the PTA and kept in pretrial detention for 22 months until February 2022. In March 2021, almost a year after his arrest, Hizbullah was officially charged with 'inciting communal disharmony' under the PTA, 'advocating national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence' under the [ICCPR Act of 2007](#) and abetment and conspiracy charges under the Penal Code. Human rights groups have highlighted that the proceedings have been marked by irregularities and the prosecution has consistently failed to present credible and convincing evidence.

Since August 2024, the [OHCHR has received reports](#) of harassment and intimidation by state security officials against seven human rights defenders who had engaged with the UN or others in the international community. The CTID summoned three other human rights defenders and questioned them about their alleged participation in events and demonstrations domestically and abroad, including at UN Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva.

## RESTRICTIONS AND DISPERSAL OF PROTESTS

Freedom of peaceful assembly is guaranteed by the constitution's article 14(1)(b) and ICCPR article 21. However, there are concerns the police have continued to restrict protests and arrest protesters. The government has also continued to [renew extraordinary Gazette notification 2381/06](#) under section 12 of

the Public Security Ordinance issued in April 2024, which authorises the president to deploy the armed forces to maintain public order, including during protests.

On 2 December 2024, police dispersed a protest organised by the Joint School Development Officers' Association outside the education ministry office in Pelawatte, Colombo and [arrested](#) four School Development Officers (SDOs). The SDOs were protesting to demand absorption into Sri Lanka's teaching service and the same rights as other teachers.

[According to reports](#), the government deployed hundreds of police officers to disperse the protest. Police attacked protesters, kicking and punching them. Three police officers also [reportedly](#) sustained injuries. Police accused the four teachers of being members of an unlawful gathering and blocking traffic. They were subsequently granted bail

In March 2025, police [arrested 27 student activists](#), including Madushan Chandrajith, convener of the Inter-University Students' Federation (IUSF), during a protest held outside the Ministry of Health in Colombo. The Allied Health Sciences Students' Union has been protesting against the recruitment process for state services, particularly the introduction of examinations instead of a merit-based recruitment system. The demonstration began peacefully but tensions arose after police arrived at the scene. In an attempt to disperse the crowd, the police forcibly removed and arrested protesters, taking them into custody before [releasing them on bail](#). At least five protesters [sustained injuries](#).

The Maligakanda Magistrate's Court also issued a legal order prohibiting these activists from holding protests or demonstrations in key areas, including the Maradana Police Division's Hospital Square, the Ministry of Health and surrounding roads.



Arrests during student protests in Colombo, May 2025 (Photo Credit: Ada Derana)

Protesters held another demonstration on the same issue on 16 May 2025. Police [arrested](#) Madushan Chandrajith and at least seven others.

According to INFORM, a civil society group, on 5 April 2025, the police secured an [order](#) from the Fort Magistrate's Court preventing members of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and IUSF entering the Colombo Fort and Galle Face areas, where a protest was planned. This order specifically targeted senior FSP members Pubudu Jayagoda and Duminda Nagamuwa, along with other activists involved in the protest. The protest was intended to [raise concerns on the agreements](#)

to be signed between Sri Lanka and India during a visit to Sri Lanka of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

According to the OHCHR, police also [arrested and detained](#) other people, mainly from the Muslim and Tamil communities, in 2024 and 2025, including for participating or being involved in the organisation of memorialisation activities or protests.

There is also concern that those who were involved in the 2022 [mass protests](#) about the state of the economy continue to face judicial harassment.

In February 2025, civil society group Law and Society Trust (LST) wrote to the government about some 3,000 people who were arrested in the [aftermath of the 2022 protests](#). Some remain in police custody while others have unresolved cases hanging over them, preventing them finding work or travelling, and they are generally subjected to police harassment. There has been little to no progress in most of these cases. A vast majority of cases are still 'under investigation'; in some cases, charge sheets have been served, and only a handful are at the trial stage. LST called on the government to review all police action in cases currently pending before court.

## CONCERNS ABOUT THE ANTI-TERRORISM LAW AND ONLINE SAFETY ACT

The authorities have used the PTA to [target perceived opponents](#) and minority communities without credible evidence, despite repeated pledges to end the practice. Since it first came into force in 1979, the PTA has primarily been used to target Tamil people.

The NPP's campaign manifesto explicitly pledged to abolish the PTA. In February 2025, the government appointed a committee to review the PTA and provide recommendations for new counter-terrorism laws. In May 2025, the Ministry of Justice and National Integration issued a [two-week public notice period](#) inviting comments and submissions for the draft of a new Anti-Terrorism Bill, a very short consultation period for legislation of such importance. The government stated that it expected to gazette new legislation by September 2025. Meanwhile, the new government has continued to use the PTA to arrest and detain people.

In January 2024, lawmakers [passed the Online Safety Act](#) to regulate internet use, sparking concerns among human rights groups of a free speech crackdown. [Civil society](#) and [UN experts](#) have raised concerns about the Act, pointing out that it is inconsistent with international human rights standards and the constitution. The Online Safety Act [provides broad powers](#) to an Online Safety Commission to decide on what constitutes 'prohibited statements' and make recommendations to internet service providers to remove such content and disable access for those deemed offenders.

Despite this, in May 2025, the government [decided](#) to retain the Online Safety Act and to appoint a committee to make amendments to the law. This runs contrary to the promise to abolish the act altogether made by the NPP during the presidential election campaign.

## CRIMINALISATION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The right to freedoms of expression and opinion is guaranteed in article 14(1)(a) of the constitution and ICCPR article 19. However, the government has continued to use restrictive laws to criminalise expression.

The ICCPR Act, a law meant to protect human rights, but which has been used to stifle freedom of expression, remains in effect. The law, among other provisions, criminalises advocacy for 'national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence'. The Act has not been applied in a manner that would protect minorities against incitement; instead, it is invoked to protect religions or beliefs against criticism or perceived insult. The UN has found that the law is [not fully compatible](#) with ICCPR article 19.

There have also been reports of the authorities trying to silence expression and dissent using other restrictive laws, such as the anti-terrorism law and the Penal Code.

In November 2024, the CTID [arrested](#) Manoharan Kajendroopan, a young Tamil man from Inuvil West, Chunnakam, in Jaffna under the PTA over a Facebook post. Kajendroopan was reportedly detained for uploading a photo of deceased LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The post occurred around Maaveerar Naal (Heroes Day), 27 November, established to commemorate those killed during the civil war.

On 1 December 2024, The Criminal Investigation Department and the CTID [arrested three people](#) for allegedly sharing videos related to Maaveerar Naal. The police allege the trio circulated old videos of Maaveerar Naal on social media and falsely presented them as being from 2024. They were charged under section 120 of the Penal Code and section 27 of the Provisional Measures for the PTA No. 48 of 1979. Charges include inciting public unrest, promoting the activities of a banned organisation and spreading false propaganda.

On 2 December 2024, the Computer Crime Investigation Division [arrested](#) political and social activist Kelum Jayasumana under section 120 of the Penal Code. Jayasumana was accused of resharing a picture related to



Social activist Kelum Jayasumana (Photo Credit: Ada Derana)

the LTTE that had been shared by a woman in France and that ‘had the potential to incite public unrest’. He was [released on bail](#).

In March 2025, the CTID [detained](#) Mohamed Rusdi, a 22-year-old young Muslim man, under the PTA for his Palestine solidarity activism. Rusdi was accused of pasting up stickers opposing Israel’s genocidal attacks in Gaza. The police identified Rusdi after checking CCTV footage.

The CTID held Rusdi under a 90-day PTA detention order, [signed off](#) by Dissanayake on 25 March in his capacity as the Minister of Defence. [According to Amnesty International](#), Rusdi was

detained under the suspicion that he was connected with or concerned in unlawful activity with regard to ‘associating with members of extremist or terrorist organisations, motivated by extremist ideologies and acting in a manner detrimental to peace and harmony among communities and knowingly concealing such information from security forces’.

Owing to the lack of evidence that he had committed any offence under the PTA, the detention order was suspended, and on 7 April 2025 Rusdi was [released on bail](#) after being produced before court.

The [Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka](#) undertook an inquiry, issuing its findings on 12 June 2025. The Commission noted with concern that this case presents a stark example of the PTA’s inherent dangers and the propensity of law enforcement officials to deploy the PTA’s provisions in bad faith. Despite the lack of evidence that Rusdi had committed any offence, the CTID arrested him, failed to produce him before a judicial officer, secured a detention order against him and held him in custody for 14 days.

## RESTRICTION AND INTIMIDATION OF JOURNALISTS

Sri Lanka is ranked 139th out of 180 places in the [Reporters Without Borders](#) press freedom index published in May 2025.

The government has taken steps to improve press freedom. [According to INFORM](#), in May and June 2025, the Ministry of Mass Media published the Zero Draft of the National Media Policy. The proposed policy includes positive provisions such as affirming media rights, editorial independence and journalist safety, and proposing a co-regulation model involving both the state and civil society. However, media rights groups have [flagged gaps](#), particularly a lack of measures to reduce state control over the media and ensure legal safeguards for implementation.

Journalists critical of the government continue to face intimidation, harassment and surveillance by the police and army, particularly reporters based in the north and east.

In September 2024, [international journalists](#) attempting to travel to Sri Lanka to cover the presidential election faced visa delays and some outright refusals.

[According to the International Federation of Journalists](#), police arrested Batticaloa-based Tamil journalist Selvakumar Nilanthan on 21 October 2024 for his reporting on protests against alleged corrupt activity involving a local government official in 2020, forcing him to spend a night in a police cell. Nilanthan was arrested on charges related to the obstruction of official duties. He claims he has been subjected to ongoing harassment and intimidation as a result of his reporting, including threats from police officers at his home.

On 26 December 2024, unknown assailants attacked Tamil journalist and writer Murugaiyah Thamilselvan on a road in Kilinochchi town. [According to reports](#), Thamilselvan was on his way home



Freelance journalist Selvakumar Nilanthan (Photo Credit: CPI)



from work when two people in a vehicle blocked him and tried to abduct him. When he resisted, the assailants attacked him before fleeing the scene. Thamilselvan was taken to Kilinochchi District Hospital for emergency treatment. Thamilselvan reports on administrative malpractice, environmental destruction, the illegal drugs trade, political corruption, social issues and soil and sand smuggling.

In April 2025, police obstructed Fazir Mohamed, Secretary of the Young Journalists Association and a reporter for Satahan media, while he reported at the Kuliapitiya Magistrate's Court and [dragged him out](#) of the courtroom. Satahan had previously reported on police torture.

In May 2025, photojournalist Lahiru Harshana was allegedly [forced to remove](#) a photograph of Dissanayake which had been published on his personal Facebook page due to external pressure from the President's Media Division. Harshana took the photo during the NPP's May Day rally. It showed Dissanayake addressing the rally at Galle Face on 1 May 2025 with his hands raised and mouth open. In the background, a stage decoration featuring the hammer and sickle – the emblem of communism – was visible.

That same month, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association [condemned](#) the government's decision to make state-issued identity cards [mandatory for journalists](#), calling it a serious threat to press freedom and an attempt to control the media.

In August 2025, the CTID [served](#) Tamil journalist Kanapathipillai Kumanan a summons to appear for an inquiry. The police notice does not state the reason for the inquiry, although Kumanan was informed by phone that it was in connection with his social media posts. It is believed the summons has come in reprisal for Kumanan's reporting, which focuses primarily on human rights issues and, most recently, mass grave excavations in Chemmani, Northern Province.

Since the bloody end of the armed conflict in May 2009, Kumanan has played a key role in reporting on issues such as enforced disappearances, environmental crimes, military land acquisition and the campaigns of survivor communities demanding truth, justice and redress for wartime violations and abuses.

In February 2025, Attorney General Parinda Ranasinghe issued a letter to the effect that legal proceedings against three suspects involved in the 2009 brutal murder of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge [will be halted](#), paving the way for their release. This shocking move raises serious concerns about accountability and the rule of law.

Wickrematunge, editor-in-chief of The Sunday Leader, was a [prominent](#) senior Sri Lankan journalist known for his critical reporting on the government. In January 2009, eight helmeted men on four motorcycles forced his car to the side of a busy street outside Colombo and beat him with a blunt object. He died in a local hospital a few hours later.

## ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PAST CRIMES

Despite overwhelming evidence gathered by the UN and human rights groups of war crimes and human rights abuses by state security forces, successive governments have [failed](#) to launch any credible accountability process. Meanwhile, Tamil activists and victim communities continue to face repression and other violations.

In 2024, many Tamils voted for Dissanayake for president, hoping he would [break from previous administrations](#) and address the legacy of repression and discrimination.

However, the Dissanayake government has backed the failed initiatives of previous governments,



Sri Lanka seat at the UN Human Rights Council (Photo Credit: Tamil Guardian)





including the Office on Missing Persons, the Office for Reparations and the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, which have made little if any progress. These institutions have been rejected by many victims' families, who see them as part of a [pattern of failed promises](#).

Sri Lanka has been on the UN Human Rights Council agenda since 2012. Despite multiple council resolutions calling for accountability there has been no tangible progress. In 2021, the [Human Rights Council](#) mandated the OHCHR to report and monitor progress on accountability and establish the [Sri Lanka Accountability Project](#) to gather evidence of international crimes for use in future prosecutions. However, the Dissanayake government has opposed the Council's intervention as '[divisive and intrusive](#)'.

The UN human rights chief Volker Türk [visited Sri Lanka](#) in June 2025 to discuss a wide range of human rights issues, including accountability and effective remedies for victims of human rights violations and reconciliation efforts. In August 2025, his office published [a report](#) calling on the government to seize the historic opportunity to break with entrenched impunity, implement transformative reforms and deliver long-overdue justice and accountability for serious violations and abuses committed in the past, including international crimes.

Further, [the OHCHR observed](#) continued patterns of surveillance, intimidation and harassment of families of the disappeared, community leaders and civil society personnel, particularly those working on accountability for enforced disappearances and other conflict-related crimes. Military and civilian intelligence officials, including from the Criminal Investigation Department and the CTID, often summon them or visit them at their homes or offices to question their programmes, funding, staff contacts and international travel, without legal basis. There has also been repression of people organising and participating in [memorialisation events](#) and marches, including harassment from officials and restraining court orders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Sri Lanka should:

### **PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND JOURNALISTS**

- Review all laws, including the Voluntary Social Service Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act No. 31 of 1980 and draft Non-Governmental Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Act, to remove undue restrictions on freedom of association.
- Provide civil society members and human rights defenders with a safe and secure environment in which to carry out their work, conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of killings, enforced disappearances, attacks, harassment and intimidation against them and bring the perpetrators of such offences to justice.
- Ensure human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate activities without fear or undue hindrance, obstruction, or legal harassment of themselves or their families.
- Ensure journalists may work freely and without fear of retribution for expressing critical opinions or covering topics that the government may deem sensitive.
- Systematically apply legal provisions that promote and protect human rights and establish mechanisms that protect human rights defenders, including by adopting a specific law on the protection of human rights defenders in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 27.31.

### **UNDERTAKE REFORMS OF LAWS AND END RESTRICTIONS ON PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND EXPRESSION**

- Review all laws, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, Online Security Act and the ICCPR Act No. 56 of 2007, to bring them into line with the ICCPR and international law and standards.
- Ensure impartial investigations into all instances of arbitrary arrest and excessive force committed by security forces in the context of protests and bring the perpetrators to justice in trials that meeting international fair trial standards.
- Review and, if necessary, update existing human rights training for the police, with the assistance of independent CSOs, to foster the more consistent application of international human rights standards
- Refrain from using laws to curb freedom of expression or to arrest and detain people for their exercise of their freedom of expression.



## ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PAST CRIMES

- Demonstrate the government's commitment to accountability for past crimes by backing the Human Rights Council resolution to renew the Accountability Project and work towards ensuring truth-telling, justice, reparations and non-recurrence.
- Order all security and intelligence agencies to immediately end all forms of surveillance and harassment of and reprisals against civil society personnel, human rights defenders, journalists, victims and their families who are mobilising for justice and accountability.
- Halt the use of court orders to prevent or block memorialisation events and marches.