

Human Rights Situation in Sri Lanka

June 2025



The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, visited the Chemmani mass grave site in Jaffna and laid flowers before a flame remembering those who were killed and forcibly disappeared during the last phase of war. The families of

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Human Rights Situation in Sri Lanka in June 2025.

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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 war, and to report on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national, and international levels. INFORM also focused on working with other communities whose rights were frequently and systematically violated. Currently, INFORM focuses on election monitoring, freedom of expression, and human rights defenders. INFORM is based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and works closely with local activists, groups, and networks as well as regional (Asian) and international human rights networks.

Contents

Contents	2
Executive Summary	3
1. Updates on General Human Rights Situation	6
1.1. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visits Sri Lanka	6
1.2. Despite some progress, Human Rights Under Strain in Sri Lanka: Key Findings from HRMI Survey 2025	10
2. Freedom of Expression and Media	13
2.1. Media policy reforms	13
2.2. Ongoing legal case on the disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda	14
2.3. Press Freedom	14
2.4. Restraining orders and Defamation	14
3. War Crimes, Reconciliation and Accountability	16
3.1. International advocacy on War Crimes and Accountability	16
3.2. Mass Graves	17
3.3. Families of the Forcefully Disappeared	20
4. Land Seizure and Disputes	22
4.1. Supreme Court Suspends State Effort to Seize Land in the North and East	22
4.2. Land Encroachment of Tissa Viharaya	22
4.3. Other Land Appropriation attempts by the state	23
4.4. Case against land rights protesters dismissed	24
4.5. Land rights of the Malaiyaha people	24
5. Legal and Policy Reforms	25
5.1. Legal reforms proposed to ban all forms of corporal punishment	25
5.2. Advocacy and policy engagement on repealing Prevention of Terrorism Act	25
5.3. Supreme Court Rules Exclusion of 'Bhikkhuni' Identity on National Identity Cards Violates Fundamental Rights	27
6. Rights of Marginalized and At-Risk Groups	29
6.1. Rights of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers	29
6.2. Rights of People with Disabilities	29
6.3. Discrimination Against Ethnic Minorities	30
7. Labour Rights	32
References	34

Executive Summary

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Visits Sri Lanka

From 23–26 June 2025, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk visited Sri Lanka, meeting government officials, civil society, and victims to assess the country’s human rights situation. He focused on reconciliation and transitional justice, stressing the need for credible accountability mechanisms and the State’s responsibility to ensure justice. Türk highlighted ongoing surveillance and harassment of human rights defenders, persistent reports of torture and custodial deaths, and called for reforms in the security and justice sectors including the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the Online Safety Act, and laws criminalizing same-sex relationships. He particularly expressed concern over slow progress on issues such as enforced disappearances.

Key Findings from HRMI Survey 2025

In June 2025, the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) released its 2024 scores for Sri Lanka. Arbitrary arrest, torture, freedom of expression, and freedom of association remained in the “bad” range, despite slight improvements. Freedom from torture scored 5.1/10—the lowest in this category—followed by 5.2/10 for freedom from arbitrary arrest. Freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of opinion and expression both scored 5.2/10, also in the “bad” range. Sri Lanka also recorded low scores in education, reproductive health, and the right to water, raising serious concern.

Freedom of Expression and Media

In May and June 2025, the Ministry of Mass Media released the Draft of the National Media Policy, originally made in July 2024 before the current government took office. The policy includes positive provisions such as affirming media rights, editorial independence, journalist safety, and proposing a co-regulation model involving both the state and civil society. However, media rights groups have flagged gaps, particularly the lack of measures to reduce state control and ensure legal safeguards for implementation.

Retired Brigadier Shammi Kumararatne, the main suspect in the 2011 disappearance of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda, was arrested for repeatedly threatening a key witness by phone.

A female sub-editor at a state-run newspaper was reinstated after the Supreme Court ruled in her favor in a political transfer case. In Nuwara Eliya, journalists were initially barred from covering the District Coordination Committee meeting on the 11th. An interim restraining order was issued against two YouTubers and a former politician, prohibiting them from making any further comments about MP Mujibur Rahuman. In a live-streamed social media video, Rahuman also stated that he had lodged a complaint against a senior journalist for allegedly making a false statement about him on social media. It was further reported that

the CID has launched an investigation into alleged defamatory statements made on social media against staff members of the Attorney General's Department.

Sri Lanka Core Group Meeting at UNHRC

At the 59th UN Human Rights Council session, the Sri Lanka Core Group—Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and the UK—expressed deep concern over the lack of substantive progress on human rights, accountability, and reconciliation. They criticized continued use of repressive laws and impunity in cases such as enforced disappearances, and reiterated willingness to engage constructively with the government.

Mass Graves and Accountability

Excavations at the Chemmani mass grave revealed evidence of mass killings, with at least 33 skeletal remains unearthed in June. Families of the disappeared, human rights groups, and political leaders called for transparent, internationally monitored investigations. Civil society groups submitted a letter to the High Commissioner urging urgent international intervention. Tamil families of the forcibly disappeared in the North and East marked over 3,000 days of continuous protest, demanding justice through an international inquiry due to impunity in domestic processes.

Land Rights

The Supreme Court suspended a government gazette seeking to declare all unclaimed land in the North and East as state property. The Mallakam Magistrate's Court issued injunctions against 27 individuals and organizations protesting land appropriation for Tissa Viharaya in Jaffna. The Fisheries Minister announced compensation or alternative land for Tamil landowners affected by the temple's construction. Opposition MPs raised concerns about unauthorized clearing of 8,000 acres for an Air Force base in Mullaitivu, surveying of private lands near a Navy camp in Mannar, and prolonged military occupation of 2,400 acres in Valikamam North. In Batticaloa, the Eravur Magistrate's Court acquitted 30 people charged over a land rights protest.

Legal Reforms

The Cabinet is drafting legislation to ban corporal punishment. The government plans to replace the PTA, though civil society opposes introducing new counterterrorism laws, arguing the existing framework suffices. Justice Minister Nanayakkara insists a new law is needed to address global terrorism threats. In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court held that refusing to recognize Bhikkhunis and assigning them the lesser Dasasil Matha status when issuing national ID cards violates fundamental rights under the Constitution.

Rights of Marginalized and At-Risk Groups

Sri Lanka's handling of refugee and asylum seeker cases has drawn criticism, triggering calls for urgent policy reform. In June, a UNHCR-certified refugee returning from India was detained at Palaly Airport under outdated laws. According to some Ministers, the government is considering legal reforms. Separately, 116 Rohingya asylum seekers have been held at an

SLAF camp in Mullaitivu since December 2024. The government has denied UNHCR access, classifying them as “illegal migrants” and stating that only courts can decide their status. The Cabinet of Ministers have granted approval for the long-awaited Sign Language Bill, formally recognising sign language as an official means of communication. In Mullaitivu, two Tamil farmers from Kurunthumalai, arrested for cultivating land claimed by a Sinhala Buddhist monk as an archaeological site, were released as court found no evidence to claim that it is an archeological site. An activist from Batticaloa was arbitrarily arrested at his workplace without a warrant, detained for several hours, and subjected to physical assault by prison officers before being released without charges. The Supreme Court ordered two police officers to personally compensate a victim of illegal arrest and torture. The Chairperson of the Trincomalee District Association of Families of the Forcibly Disappeared, Sebastian Devi, was subjected to a lengthy interrogation by the Terrorism Investigation Division, pressured to disclose affiliations with numerous organizations and questioned about international advocacy work. Tensions also escalated at sea, where a 23-year-old Tamil fisherman from Kuchchaveli was critically injured after Sri Lankan Navy personnel opened fire during an alleged anti-poaching operation.

Labour rights

The sudden and controversial shutdown of NEXT Manufacturing Ltd.’s garment factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ), which resulted in the loss of employment for over 1,400 workers with little warning and conflicting explanations, has drawn significant criticism from various stakeholders. A joint statement from a coalition of trade unions and advocacy groups described the closure as “union-busting dressed up as a business strategy,” noting that it was the only unionized factory in the area and had successfully secured safer working conditions and other rights through collective bargaining.

1. Updates on General Human Rights Situation

1.1. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visits Sri Lanka

The recent visit by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR) to Sri Lanka underscores this pivotal moment, highlighting the opportunities for reconciliation, justice, and inclusive development, while also identifying the deep-seated challenges that must be overcome. The Commissioner's reflections, based on extensive engagement with government officials, civil society, victims of human rights abuses, and religious leaders, illuminate the pathways toward a more just and peaceful future for all Sri Lankans.



Figure 1: The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, visited the Chemmani mass grave site in Jaffna and laid flowers before a flame remembering those who were killed and forcibly disappeared during the last phase of war. Photo Courtesy:

Reconciliation and Transitional Justice

One of the central themes of the HCHR's visit was the need for genuine reconciliation rooted in truth, justice, and accountability. The High Commissioner acknowledged the Sri Lankan Government's willingness to engage on complex issues and its openness to dialogue. The visit to the Chemmani mass grave and meetings with families still searching for their loved ones emphasized the haunting legacy of the civil war. These families, alongside victims from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, continue to seek answers and closure.

The Commissioner emphasized that without credible accountability mechanisms, impunity persists, eroding public trust. While some cases—such as investigations into the Easter Sunday attacks—have been reopened, broader progress remains slow. The international community, including the Office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), can play a supporting role, but it is ultimately the State’s responsibility to ensure justice. Truth-telling and memorialization, as seen in Jaffna, are steps in the right direction, but must be complemented by systemic reforms to ensure non-recurrence.

The Role of Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders

The OHCHR report also highlighted the continued surveillance and harassment of civil society members and human rights defenders, despite some improvements. The Commissioner reminded the Government that civil society should be viewed not as adversaries, but as partners in nation-building—particularly important in a resource-constrained country. Sustained peace and development require a robust, participatory civic space where all voices, including those of women and marginalized groups, are heard and respected.

Legal and Institutional Reform

Urgent reforms in the security and justice sectors were also stressed. The continued reports of torture and custodial deaths, despite legal prohibitions, point to systemic issues within law enforcement. The Commissioner called for the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the Online Safety Act, along with an expedited review of long-term detainees. These steps are essential to align national laws with international human rights standards and to restore public faith in institutions.

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka received praise for its engagement with the police and efforts to address custodial abuses. Strengthening its independence and capacity will be key to addressing human rights violations and ensuring accountability.

Economic Justice and the Human Rights Economy

The economic crisis of 2022 exposed the deep inequalities and structural weaknesses in Sri Lanka's economy. The Commissioner expressed particular concern for plantation workers facing extreme hardship and called for urgent action to address landlessness, inadequate housing, and unfair wages. The “Aragalaya” protest movement of 2022 demonstrated the public's demand for economic justice and accountability for corruption.

The High Commissioner proposed a transition to a "human rights economy"—an approach that integrates human rights principles into all aspects of economic policy. This includes universal access to education, healthcare, social protection, and decent work. The Commissioner also pointed to the affordability of such measures, citing ILO studies that show social protection schemes cost as little as 1.6% of GDP. A rights-based economy not only addresses inequality but also strengthens societal resilience and trust in governance.

Gender Equality and Minority Rights

Progress in gender equality was noted, including the doubling of female representation in Parliament to 9.8% after the 2024 elections. Yet, challenges persist: women continue to earn significantly less than men and face widespread sexual and gender-based violence. The Commissioner welcomed the decriminalization bill for same-sex relationships and urged reform of discriminatory laws such as the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act.

The return of displaced Muslim communities to their lands was also stressed as an essential component of reconciliation. The Commissioner emphasized that land disputes—often involving military occupation or religious and archeological claims—must be resolved through inclusive dialogue with affected communities.

Lessons for Sri Lanka and the World

The speeches placed Sri Lanka's situation within the broader global context, marked by mounting crises in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and Myanmar. The erosion of international law and rising authoritarianism underline the urgency of defending human rights everywhere. The Commissioner noted that Sri Lanka, despite its challenges, can become a model for peaceful coexistence and inclusive development if it commits to accountability and reform.

Citing examples from South Africa, Northern Ireland, and The Gambia, the Commissioner stressed the importance of acknowledging the past, holding perpetrators accountable, and honoring the voices of victims. Without this, the "impunity trap" deepens, leading to revisionist narratives and continued division. Similarly, economic inequalities rooted in discrimination and corruption must be tackled to escape the "inequality trap."

A New Social Contract and Path Forward

The vision set out by the OHCHR is ambitious but achievable. It calls for a new social contract in Sri Lanka—one based on truth, justice, equality, and inclusion. Religious leaders, political parties, civil society, and international partners all have a role to play. The Government must seize this moment of opportunity to implement quick wins, build trust, and lay the foundation for lasting peace.

The High Commissioner concluded with a hopeful message: Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural tapestry and history of resilience, can become a beacon of hope in a troubled world. By embracing its diversity and committing to human rights, it can show that reconciliation and prosperity are possible, even in the aftermath of conflict and crisis.

During a meeting held at the Presidential Secretariat on June 26, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, extended his full support for the direction Sri Lanka is pursuing under the leadership of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. The High Commissioner commended the government's efforts to strengthen national unity, promote reconciliation, and uphold human rights, highlighting the growing public confidence in the administration from both the North and South of the country.



Figure 2: The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk met with the Sri Lankan President to discuss reconciliation and safeguarding Human Rights in Sri Lanka. Source: Department of Government Information

Türk acknowledged the political and social transformation underway in Sri Lanka and noted a sense of renewed optimism among the population regarding the country's future. A key focus of the discussion was the issue of missing persons, with the High Commissioner recognizing the shared pain experienced by families across all regions. He emphasized the UN Human Rights Office's expectation that the Government of Sri Lanka would honour the trust placed in it by these families. The need to strengthen and restructure institutions responsible for addressing this issue was also discussed, particularly in light of past political impediments.

President Dissanayake reaffirmed his administration's deep understanding of the suffering caused by enforced disappearances, noting that his political movement had experienced it firsthand. He reiterated his government's commitment to implementing meaningful reforms aimed at fostering unity, reconciliation, and protecting human rights. Furthermore, the President underscored the importance of restoring economic stability and called for continued international cooperation, particularly with the UN, to accurately present Sri Lanka's evolving reality to the global community and enhance its international standing.

The meeting was attended by several senior UN officials, including UN Resident Coordinator Marc-André Franche, OHCHR Asia-Pacific Chief Rory Mungoven, and others. Representing the Government of Sri Lanka were Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara, Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala, and Senior Additional Secretary to the President Roshan Gamage, among other officials.

1.2. Despite some progress, Human Rights Under Strain in Sri Lanka: Key Findings from HRMI Survey 2025

In June 2025, the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) released its annual scores on Sri Lanka’s human rights situation in the year 2024. New scores show arbitrary arrest, torture, freedom of expression, and freedom of association are still in the ‘bad’ range, despite Sri Lanka has made some progress compared to previous years.

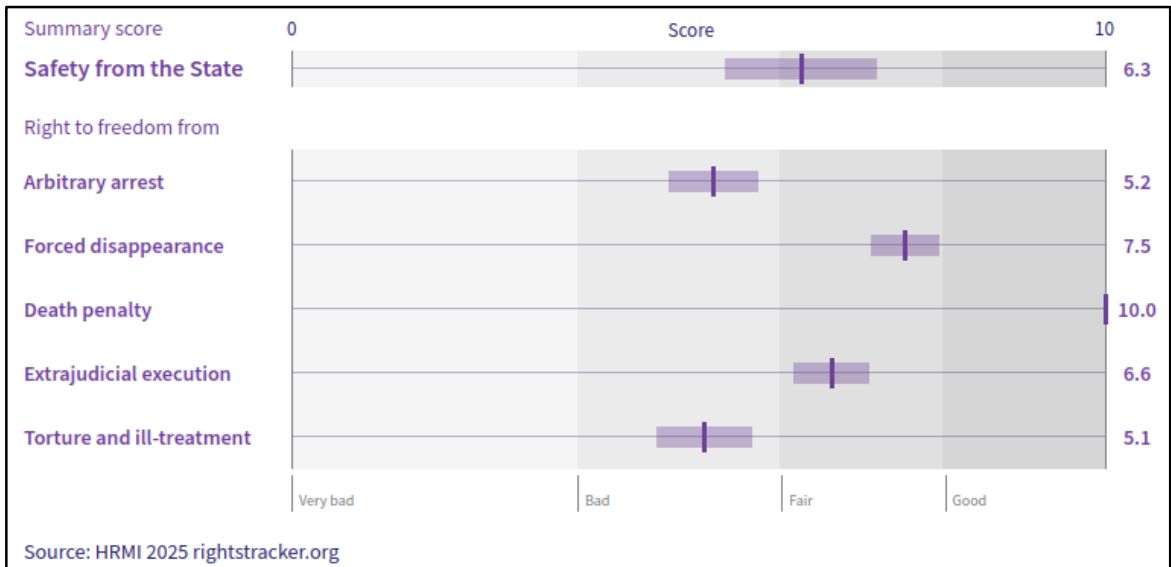


Image: HRMI Scores for Safety from the State rights

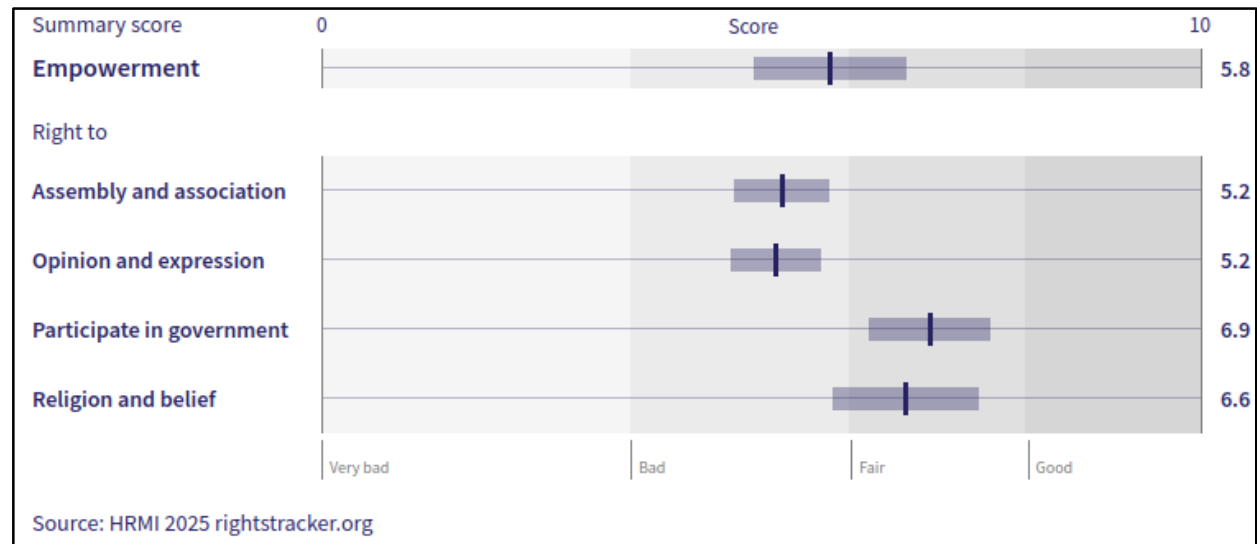
Safety from the State rights:

Sri Lanka’s summary score for the four Safety from the State rights - Rights to (i) Arbitrary Arrest, (ii) Forced Disappearance, (iii) Extrajudicial Execution, and (iv) Torture and Ill-treatment is 6.3 out of 10, which falls within the ‘fair’ range. The score for the right to freedom from torture and ill-treatment is 5.1 out of 10, the lowest in this category of rights, followed by a score of 5.2 out of 10 for freedom from arbitrary arrest. Both scores fall within the 'bad' performance range. The scores for freedom from extrajudicial execution (6.6 out of 10) and freedom from forced disappearance (7.5 out of 10) are relatively better. While these scores largely resonate with the qualitative data documented by INFORM, we have concerns regarding freedom from torture and ill-treatment. The number of Police Brutality cases we have documented in 2024 and 2025 are higher compared to previous years though we are unable to make a claim on the statistical data. However, Human Rights Commission Sri Lanka (HRCSL) has received over 500 torture complaints in 2023, and more than 700 in 2024, indicating an average of two or more complaints each day (Attanayake, 2025).

Human Rights Defenders and experts in Sri Lanka identified Human rights advocates, LGBTQIA+ people, people who protest or engage in non-violent political activity, people suspected of terrorism, detainees or those accused of crimes, people of particular ethnicities among others as vulnerable to safety from state rights. Compared to previous years, Sri Lanka has improved their Safety from the State rights scores showing a gradual progress. Freedom

from death penalty remains the same since there were no reports of a formal death penalty execution in 2024. All other safety from the state rights have significantly improved in the year 2024.

HRMI Scores for Empowerment Rights



Empowerment Rights

Sri Lanka's summary score for the four empowerment rights - Rights to (i) assembly and Association, (ii) Opinion and expression, (iii) Participate in Government, and (iv) Religion and Belief is 5.8 out of 10, and it largely falls in the 'bad' performance range. The scores for both the right to freedom of assembly and association and for the right to freedom of opinion and expression are 5.2 out of 10, which are the lowest scores in this category. This is followed by the scores for freedom of religion and belief (6.6 out of 10) and freedom of participation in government (6.9 out of 10), both of which fall into the 'fair' range.

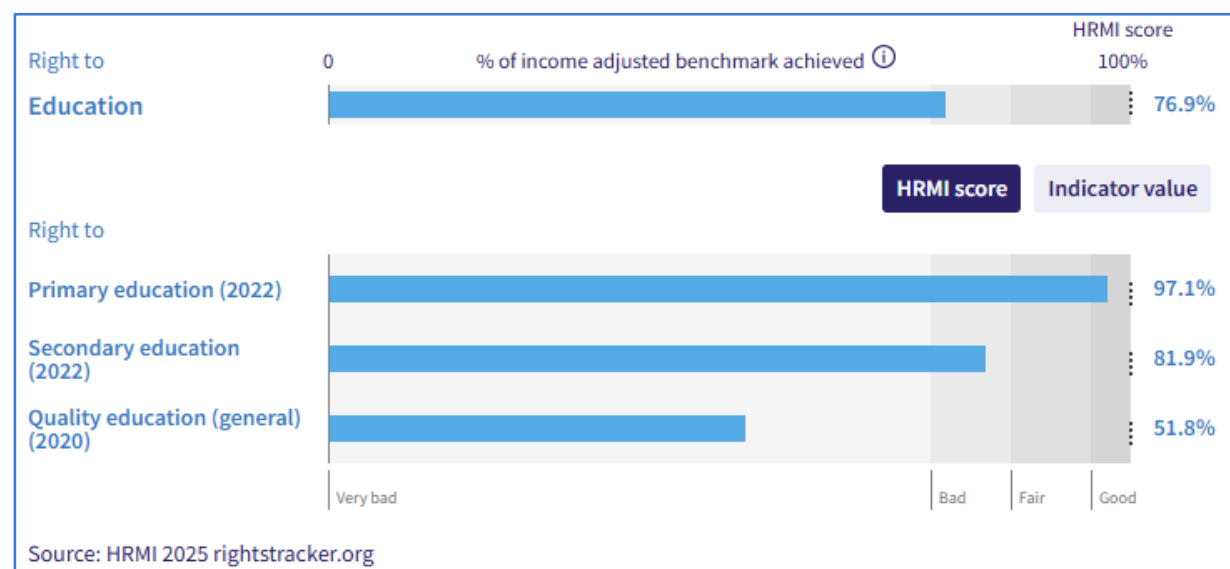


Image: HRMI Scores on Right to Education

Human Rights Defenders and experts in Sri Lanka identified members of labour unions / workers' rights advocates, Human rights advocates, LGBTQIA+ people, people who protest or engage in non-violent political activity, people suspected of terrorism, detainees or those accused of crimes, people of particular ethnicities among others as vulnerable to safety from the state and empowerment rights. Compared to previous years, Sri Lanka has gained a sharp increase in its all four empowerment rights scores in 2024. However, freedom of assembly and association and freedom of opinion and expression are still in the 'bad' range.

Social and Economic Rights

Despite Sri Lanka's well-known Universal Free Education policy up to the first University Degree, Sri Lanka performs 'bad' in relation to right to education, which is the lowest income-adjusted score in the Quality of Life Scores by HRMI on Sri Lanka. This is largely resulted from the score on the right to quality education (general) score, in which Sri Lanka is doing 51.8% of what should be possible at its level of income. Sri Lanka's score on Right to Sufficient and Healthy Food is also in the 'bad' range, as Sri Lanka is doing 81.9% of what should be possible at its level of income. While Sri Lanka's scores on the Right to Health comes under the 'fair' range, it is concerning that Sri Lanka's Right to Reproductive Health (Contraception) is still in the 'very bad' range, a concern that should be subjected to much attention of those at the policy level, as well as civil society actors working on Right to Health. It is surprising that despite Sri Lanka having access to many natural water sources, Sri Lanka's score on the Right to Water is also in the 'bad' range, as it is doing 78.3% of what should be possible at its level of income.

Human Rights Defenders and experts in Sri Lanka identified People with low social or economic status, LGBTQIA+ people, People who are homeless, and sex workers, street children or homeless youth, people with disabilities, and others as vulnerable to social and economic rights.

In general, findings of the survey indicated significant and serious gaps in Sri Lanka's human rights landscape despite considerable progress in some areas.

2. Freedom of Expression and Media

2.1. Media policy reforms

During May and June 2025, Ministry of Mass Media published the Zero Draft of the National Media Policy,¹ a document drafted on 18th July 2024, before the appointment of the current government. As shown in the below table, the proposed policy includes positive provisions such as affirming media rights, editorial independence, journalist safety, and proposing a co-regulation model involving both the state and civil society. However, media rights groups have flagged gaps, particularly the lack of measures to reduce state control and ensure legal safeguards for implementation.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of the proposed National Media Policy

Strengths (Positive Aspects)	Potential Concerns & Risks
1. Clear Affirmation of Rights - Recognition of freedom of expression and media freedom as constitutional and international rights aligning with international human rights jurisprudence.	1. Role of the Ministry of Mass Media – implementation, coordination, and oversight led by the Ministry could lead to conflicts of interest.
2. Media Pluralism and Diversity – Strong emphasis on media pluralism, with commitments to ensure diverse ownership, viewpoints, and access, including marginalized voices.	2. Ambiguity in Restrictions – The policy restates Constitutional restrictions on expression in the interest of “racial and religious harmony” and uses other vague terms.
3. Editorial Independence – Acknowledges that journalistic independence is a public good, and recognizes editorial independence	3. Lack of Legal Safeguards – Lack of concrete legal or institutional safeguards to ensure independence of regulatory mechanisms.
4. Safety of Journalists – Commitment to end impunity relating to violence and to create safe working environments for journalists	4. Editorial Independence May Be Undermined Without Legal Backing
5. Media Accountability Through Co-Regulation – proposes a co-regulation model in which both the state and civil society are involved.	5. Unclear Oversight of State Media – No concrete measures are proposed to transform state-owned media into truly independent public service media.
6. Legal Reform Commitment – Recognizes the need to review outdated media laws to suit modern digital realities and international standards.	6. Lack of Mechanism for Enforcing Ethical Standards –, the enforcement mechanisms for ethical conduct remain underdeveloped.
	7. Online Content Regulation and Foreign Platform Engagement – Engagement with global tech companies is encouraged, but the lack of jurisdiction and absence of a clear digital expression framework could lead to issues.

Source: [Sri Lanka Brief](#) (29 June, 2025)

¹ The Ministry of Media published two versions on 9th of June and 23rd of June. It was shared among the media organizations, in May before being made public. <https://media.gov.lk/media/attachments/2025/06/09/zero-draft-final-english.pdf>; <https://media.gov.lk/media/attachments/2025/06/23/zero-draft-english-final06202025.pdf>

2.2. Ongoing legal case on the disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda

Retired Brigadier Shammi Kumaratne, the primary suspect in the abduction, murder, and disappearance of journalist Prageeth Ekneligoda in 2011, was arrested and remanded for threatening and intimidating a key witness on 19 separate occasions using his personal phone number (Farzan Z., 11 & 13 June 2025; *BBC Sinhala*, 12 June 2025). According to *Sri Lanka Brief* (26 June 2025), two key witnesses—Sumathipala Sureshkumar (alias Murali) and Army Intelligence officer Sergeant Major Ranbanda—were among those reportedly threatened.

2.3. Press Freedom

Sumudu Chaturani Jayawardena, Deputy Editor of *Silumina*, resumed her position following a court order. In February 2025, she filed a fundamental rights petition against the state-run Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), challenging its decision to transfer her from Deputy Editor to the Lake House Media Academy, effective 3 January, allegedly for political reasons (The Morning, 2025; Lanka Leader, 2025).

In Nuwara Eliya, journalists were initially barred from covering the District Coordination Committee meeting held on the 11th. The District Information Officer stated that media access had not been authorized, and although all MPs, including the Chair, were informed, the issue appeared to go unnoticed. Journalists were subsequently allowed to attend the following three meetings (Ceylon Today, 2025).

2.4. Restraining orders and Defamation

Under the provisions of the controversial Online Safety Act (OSA), the Colombo Fort Magistrate issued a conditional restraining order against YouTubers Nadeesha Amaranath and Thushara Sewwandi, as well as Pradeep Charles, Chairman of the United National Self-Employed Traders' Association and former SJB member. The order followed a complaint by MP Mujibur Rahuman of the Chief Opposition Party, filed under Section 24 of the OSA, citing the continued publication of defamatory content despite a prior court ruling in his favour (Newswire, 14 June 2025).

MP Mujibur Rahman said he has lodged a police complaint against senior journalist Poddala Jayantha, who allegedly made a false statement on Facebook claiming that a company owned by the MP had defaulted on payments of 14 million rupees to the Colombo Municipal Council for Colombo parking lots. The MP denied the allegations, stating that neither he nor any business associated with him has any dealings with the Colombo Municipal Council (Sri Lanka News, 2025).

The Colombo Fort Magistrate directed the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to submit a report to the court regarding a statement allegedly made by Opposition MP Udaya Gammanpila, who reportedly claimed he had received unverified information that President

Dissanayake intended to meet with a former LTTE member during an official visit to France. The order was issued following a request from an Additional Secretary to the Presidential Secretariat (Daily Mirror, 2025; Whatnews, 2025).

In a separate case, the Justice Minister stated in Parliament that Opposition MPs Udaya Gammanpila and Dayasiri Jayasekara would be summoned to the CID for an inquiry into false statements they had allegedly made (Ceylon Wire, 2025).

It was also reported that the CID had launched an investigation into false allegations posted on social media against staff of the Attorney General's Department, following a complaint lodged by the Attorney General (Padmasiri, 2025).

3. War Crimes, Reconciliation and Accountability

3.1. International advocacy on War Crimes and Accountability

Human Rights Watch's Philipp Frisch urged Chancellor Merz to leverage Germany's historical leadership in sponsoring UN resolutions and Sri Lanka's EU trade relationship to press President Dissanayake for tangible reforms on human rights and accountability during their Berlin meeting. With renewed opportunities to influence Sri Lanka's human rights trajectory, Merz is encouraged to ensure that promises translate into concrete actions, thereby supporting justice for victims and safeguarding minority rights (Tamil Guardian, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Despite multiple United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions calling for accountability and establishing mechanisms to gather evidence, the government under President Dissanayake has thus far continued the pattern of its predecessors by shielding senior officials implicated in war crimes and continuing to reject these resolutions. There has been little progress in addressing justice for past atrocities (The Island, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025).



Figure 3: During the 1980s Keenie Meenie Services in the UK trained the Special Task Force of the Sri Lankan police, and Air Force. Photo Courtesy: BBC and JDS Lanka:

The UK government has confirmed an ongoing Metropolitan Police investigation into allegations that British mercenaries, including former SAS soldiers from private companies such as Keenie Meenie Services (KMS), may have been involved in war crimes alongside the Sri Lankan military during the 1980s. KMS also helped establish Sri Lanka's Special Task Force (STF), implicated in mass atrocities and ongoing harassment in the North-East. The UK Foreign

Office emphasized its commitment to human rights and referenced recent sanctions imposed on Sri Lankan individuals implicated in serious abuses. However, some transparency efforts, such as compelling testimony from retired mercenaries, have been blocked in UK courts (Tamil Guardian, 2025)

At the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the Sri Lanka Core Group—comprising Canada, Malawi, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and the UK—expressed deep concerns over the lack of substantive progress by Sri Lanka on human rights, accountability, and reconciliation. UK Human Rights Ambassador Eleanor Sanders highlighted the government’s failure to advance commitments on constitutional reforms, good governance, and accountability. The Core Group stressed the need to address longstanding impunity, protect journalists and human rights defenders, and ensure an inclusive reconciliation process that earns the trust of affected communities. They also criticized the continued use of the PTA and called for revitalizing the Office on Missing Persons to address enforced disappearances. The Core Group reiterated its willingness to engage constructively with the Sri Lankan government on these issues (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

3.2. Mass Graves



Figure 4: A School bag distributed to children in Northern Sri Lanka in the 1990s was found along with a child's skeletal remains in the Chemmani mass grave site in Jaffna. Courtesy: Kanapathipillai Kumanan

Recent revelations of mass graves across Northern Sri Lanka have intensified long-standing demands for truth, justice, and international oversight into wartime atrocities. Excavations at several sites, including Chemmani, Mannar, and Jaffna, have unearthed chilling evidence of mass killings, prompting calls from families of the disappeared, human rights groups, and political leaders for transparent investigations aligned with international standards.

The Mannar Magistrate's Court convened a hearing concerning the Mannar Sathosa mass grave, with the participation of Attorney V.S. Nirainjan representing families of the disappeared. A court-ordered site visit was held with legal and municipal officials, during which the Mannar City Council pledged to clean the burial pit area and drain water accumulated within it. Authorities agreed to partially close the pit post-drainage, while police were instructed to submit details about previously removed soil, currently held by the Sathosa Company (Tamilwin, 2025).

Excavations on June 7 at the burial pit near the Siddhupathi Hindu Temple uncovered 19 human skeletons, all of which were handed over to Forensic Medical Officer Dr. Chelliah Pranavan under court custody. Magistrate A. Anandaraja authorized a 45-day extension to continue the excavation process, with work scheduled to resume on June 26, contingent on budget availability (Tamilwin, 2025).

Excavations initiated on May 15, 2025, at Chemmani-Sindhubathi under a court order have revealed at least 33 skeletal remains so far, including remains believed to belong to a child discovered with a blue alphabet-print schoolbag. As of early June, seven skeletons had been recovered at Sittupatthu in Chemmani, prompting forensic and legal experts to designate the site a mass grave (Chaturanga, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

The excavation is led by archaeologist Prof. Raj Somadeva, judicial medical officer Dr. S. Piriniwan, and supported by the police. Human rights attorney V.S. Niranjana's team confirmed that more than three individuals' remains were found, qualifying the site as a mass grave by international standards (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

The Jaffna Magistrate's Court officially declared the Chemmani-Sindhubathi site a mass grave on June 8, authorizing a second phase of excavation to begin on June 26. The site has deep historical relevance, being linked to the infamous 1996 Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case, in which over 600 burials were allegedly involved (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Widespread protests have erupted across the North, reflecting deep public mistrust in Sri Lanka's domestic investigative systems. Demonstrations were held in Semmani and Jaffna, including one at Chemmani junction on June 5, 2025, organized by the Association for the Relatives of the Forcibly Disappeared. Protesters demanded international forensic supervision, transparency, and unrestricted media access (Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

The North East Coordination Committee also launched a major protest themed "We demand justice for our loved ones who were brutally robbed, murdered and buried in mass graves by the Sri Lankan government," emphasizing slogans such as "Justice for the Chemmani massacre" and calls for UN involvement (Tamilwin, 2025).

From June 23–25, the youth-led collective *Makkal Seyal* (People’s Action) staged a powerful three-day protest titled *Anaiya Vilakku* (Eternal Lamp) in Chemmani, blending cultural symbolism with political demands. A sacred lamp was lit at 10:10 AM on June 23 by families of the disappeared and kept alive continuously as a beacon of their unyielding demand for justice.

The event featured symbolic hunger strikes, poetry readings, dramatic performances, exhibitions, and concluded with a commemorative procession. The eternal flame was ceremonially distributed to key Tamil memorials before being immersed in the sea at Thondamanaru (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

A bronze plaque engraved with six demands was presented to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, who visited the site on June 25:

1. Grant UN’s Sri Lanka Accountability Project (OSLAP) full technical and monitoring access.
2. Enable OSLAP access to all war crimes and genocide evidence per UNHRC Resolution 46/1.
3. Allow families to provide technical input with independent resources.
4. Approve all Jaffna Magistrate Court excavation funding requests without delay.
5. Reopen and internationally monitor all known mass grave sites.
6. Escalate Sri Lanka’s accountability failures to the UNGA and Security Council for ICC prosecution. (*Tamil Guardian*)

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara confirmed the recovery of 19 skeletons at Chemmani and reiterated that determining mass grave status is the court’s responsibility. He acknowledged the government’s commitment to funding and facilitating the excavation. Yet, critics argue that the partial release of the Rs. 12 million allocated funds has hindered progress. Excavation continues in 15-day phases, intermittently delayed by weather and resource gaps (Ceylon Today, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Minister Nanayakkara dismissed allegations of a mass grave at Mandathivu as hearsay, stating no official action would be taken without a formal complaint—prompting backlash from Tamil leaders and affected families (Siriwardana, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025; Yohan Perera, 2025).

Cabinet Spokesperson Nalinda Jayatissa emphasized continued government cooperation but deferred decisions on grave status to the judiciary (Tamilwin, 2025).

Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam has persistently demanded that Chemmani be declared a mass grave, calling for immediate funding, site protection, and international assistance. He referenced sworn testimony from 1996 implicating the Chemmani area in over 600 burials, warning that delayed or underfunded

investigations could jeopardize vital forensic evidence (Tamil Guardian, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Batticaloa MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam criticized inadequate shelter, restricted media access (limited to five minutes per day), and lack of CCTV surveillance at Chemmani, contrasting it unfavorably with other sites like Kokkuththoduvai (Daily Mirror, 2025).

Amnesty International South Asia echoed these concerns, urging transparency, timely funding, and proper site security to prevent evidence tampering. They warned that flawed investigations could once again fail victims and survivors (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Ceylon Today, 2025).

The Chemmani site first garnered international attention in 1998 when Sri Lankan soldier Somaratne Rajapakse testified that the military buried hundreds of Tamil civilians there during its reoccupation of Jaffna (1995–1996 Operation Riviresa). Initial exhumations in 1999 unearthed 15 skeletons, but investigations stalled amid political and institutional inertia (Gunasekara, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Sri Lanka's pursuit of reconciliation remains fraught. Though mass graves have also affected Sinhalese families—such as those from JVP insurrections—accountability remains elusive across ethnic lines. Experts urge Sri Lanka to emulate global precedents (Argentina, Rwanda, South Africa) in addressing violent legacies through truth commissions and credible justice mechanisms (Gunasekara, 2025).

3.3. Families of the Forcefully Disappeared

Tamil families of the forcefully disappeared across Sri Lanka's North and East have now entered over 3,000 days of continuous protest, demanding justice for their loved ones who were forcibly disappeared during and after the final stages of the civil war. Most recently, families gathered in Mankulam to mark the 3,007th day of their campaign, a protest movement that began on March 8, 2017, in Mullaitivu and has since become the longest-running demonstration on the island. The protest, largely led by elderly Tamil women, featured families from Thunukkai, Mankulam, and Maanthai East. They carried photos of the missing and placards calling for international accountability, declaring firmly that justice is impossible within Sri Lanka's domestic systems and that "only international intervention can bring justice" (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

At the same time, the Association of Families of the Disappeared in Vavuniya marked their 3,036th day of protest. They issued a scathing indictment of Tamil political leadership, accusing them of lacking vision, strategy, and courage. "The only goal of Tamil politicians is to survive in office," they said, further expressing their distrust in elected Tamil representatives and disappointment over their failure to engage the international community meaningfully

or to follow the example of other oppressed nations who secured sovereignty through external diplomacy and strategic alliances (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).



The Association of Families of the Disappeared in Vavuniya marked their 3,036th day of protest calling on the United States and the European Union to fulfill past promises. Photo Courtesy: Tamil Guardian

The association called on the United States and the European Union to fulfill past promises made during the conflict to protect Tamil lives and push for a political solution. “To this day, there is no such solution—only continued suffering and grief,” demonstrators said. They emphasized that only Tamil sovereignty could bring lasting peace to all peoples on the island (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

In Kilinochchi, the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Persons from the North and East urged the United Nations to prioritize justice for the disappeared at its upcoming session. Leader Yogarasa Kalaranjini appealed for the UN representative visiting Sri Lanka to not only meet families of the disappeared but also to visit known mass gravesites such as Semmaniputhai Kuji and Thoduwai Mannar (Tamilwin, 2025).

Meanwhile, in Ampara, a protest was held in front of the Thambiluvil temple and erupted in tension when individuals claiming to be representatives of a minister attempted to intimidate the demonstrators. The chairman of the Thirukoil Pradeshiya Sabha issued a pamphlet banning protests in the market area, further escalating the situation. Former Karaitivu Pradeshiya Sabha Chairman Krishnapillai Jayasiril, who participated in the protest, condemned the attempts at intimidation (Tamilwin, 2025).

This protest in Ampara also spotlighted broader Tamil demands: justice for the Chemmani mass grave, protection of Tamil heritage from archaeological encroachment, release of political prisoners, and the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Tamilwin, 2025).

4. Land Seizure and Disputes

4.1. Supreme Court Suspends State Effort to Seize Land in the North and East

The Supreme Court issued an interim order suspending the March 28 gazette notification, following a Fundamental Rights petition by former parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran, challenging the legality of the land claim process (Sooriyagoda, 2025).

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara informed Tamil National People's Front leader and MP Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam that the government will announce the date to revoke Gazette Notification No. 2430 after consultations with Lands Minister Lal Kantha. The gazette, published on March 28, declared that if no claims are made within three months for 5,940 acres of land in the Northern Province, those lands would be declared state property under Section 4 of the Government Land Determination Ordinance. Strong opposition from Tamil political groups demanded full repeal, and although the Cabinet decided to revoke it, the repeal notification has yet to be published, causing frustration among affected communities and political leaders. Meanwhile, the Bar Association offered free legal aid to those impacted by the gazette notification (Tamilwin, 2025).

4.2. Land Encroachment of Tissa Viharaya



Large vehicles with water cannons and Police riot control squads were brought to the protest site, despite the handful of protesters. Courtesy: Virakesari and Kumanan

The longstanding land dispute of Tissa Viharaya has reignited tensions—conflict centers on allegations by local Tamil villagers that the temple was built illegally on privately owned Tamil lands without consultation or legal authorization. This issue gained renewed prominence ahead of Poson Poya day, after nationalist groups circulated messages on social media claiming that “a hundred thousand people from the South will arrive at Thissa Viharaya on Poson Day.” In response, over 500 police officers, including riot control units and water cannon vehicles, were deployed to maintain security in the area. Despite the online hype, only around 30 visitors from the South attended the temple, while approximately 100 local villagers gathered peacefully outside to voice their concerns (Mohamed, 2025; Tamil Guardian, 2025).

On June 9, 2025, a protest demanded the removal of Tissa Viharaya and the return of the land to its rightful Tamil owners. Ahead of this protest, the Palali Police, acting on an order from the Mallakam

Magistrate's Court, issued injunctions against 27 individuals and organizations—including Tamil politicians and landowners such as Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam—prohibiting them from protesting near the temple on June 10 and 11 (Tamilwin, 2025).

The issue was intensified as the site was previously home to the Vairavar Kovil, an ancient Hindu temple, intensifying fears of cultural erasure and Sinhualisation. Tamil National People's Front (TNPFF) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam has criticized the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC), whose president, Chandra Nirmal Wakishta—a former National Intelligence Bureau director—is alleged to have lobbied for the formalisation of the temple and surrounding land (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Despite ongoing protests and international criticism, recent government moves have raised fears of further formalizing the illegal occupation. On June 12, Fisheries Minister Ramalingam Chandrasekar announced plans to either compensate the Tamil landowners or provide alternative land for the property seized for the temple's construction. Chandrasekar stressed the need to resolve the dispute quickly and instructed the District Secretary to return lands surrounding the temple, excluding the area directly occupied by it, to private owners through the Divisional Secretariat. However, this move has been met with skepticism and concern from Tamil politicians and civil society, who view it as insufficient and fear it sets a precedent for future land disputes to be resolved without full restitution (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

4.3. Other Land Appropriation attempts by the state

Vanni District MP Durairasa Ravikaran accused government departments—including Forestry, Archaeology, and Wildlife—of illegally seizing indigenous settlements and agricultural lands by declaring residential and farmland areas as forest or archaeological reserves, depriving local Tamil communities of their livelihoods and forcing displacement. He urged transparent investigations into these actions, particularly highlighting unauthorized clearing of 8,000 acres of forest for a Sri Lanka Air Force base at Oddusuddan, Mullaitivu (Tamilwin, 2025).

MP Selvam Adikkalanathan condemned attempts to survey private lands occupied where the Navy camp is located in Mannar's Pallimunai Beach Road area, asserting that locals will resist any such land seizures. The MP vowed to raise the issue with the President and Parliament, demanding the return of Pallimunai lands to their rightful owners (Tamilwin, 2025).

Meanwhile, residents of Silavaththai in Mullaitivu successfully halted a land survey intended to formalize acquisition of private land occupied by the Navy since 2009. Despite letters notifying owners of acquisition, locals have challenged the Navy's occupation, citing lack of compensation or legal consent (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamiwin, 2025).

Tamil MPs raised land release issues at a meeting of Sri Lanka's Ministerial Consultative Committee on Defence chaired by President Dissanayake. They pressed for urgent release of lands under military occupation in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, which remain inaccessible more than 16 years after the end of the armed conflict. Defence officials were instructed to consider the concerns and take appropriate steps (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

In Valikamam North, Jaffna, protests demanding the release of 2,400 acres of land under military control for over 30 years have intensified. Despite partial releases by successive governments, affected communities continue to live displaced or in rented accommodation. Protesters staged peaceful demonstrations in Mayiliddy junction and elsewhere, coinciding with the anticipated visit of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk. The protesters called on the UN to pressure the government to demilitarize the region and return lands (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

4.4. Case against land rights protesters dismissed

In Batticaloa, the Eravur Magistrate's Court acquitted 30 suspects—including former MPs, activists, and journalists—charged with obstructing a road protest demanding a solution to the Mayilathamadu Madhavanai Mechaldhara issue during former President Ranil Wickremesinghe's 2023 visit. The case was dismissed due to lack of evidence (Tamilwin, 2025).

4.5. Land rights of the Malaiyaha people

In the hill country, the Ceylon Workers' Congress pledged full support to the Upland People's Land Rights Movement's peaceful protests, emphasizing that land rights are essential to the liberation and dignity of the Malaiyaha people. CWC General Secretary Jeevan Thondaman stressed the need for unified action to raise land rights demands nationwide (Tamilwin, 2025).

5. Legal and Policy Reforms

5.1. Legal reforms proposed to ban all forms of corporal punishment

The Cabinet of Ministers has granted comprehensive approval to draft and enact legislation aimed at banning all forms of corporal punishment in Sri Lanka. This decision builds upon an earlier Cabinet resolution made in April 2024 under the previous administration, which approved amendments to the *Code of Criminal Procedure Act No. 15 of 1979* to prohibit physical punishments that cause bodily harm. Reaffirming its commitment to this initiative, the current Cabinet approved a proposal by the Minister of Justice and National Integration to proceed with drafting the necessary legal reforms (The Morning, 2025).

The approved amendments target both the *Code of Criminal Procedure* and the *Penal Code*—specifically through the 19th Authority Amendment—with the intention of outlawing physical and psychological harm caused by corporal punishment across all settings, including domestic, institutional, educational, and custodial environments. The proposed *Penal Code* amendment introduces specific penalties for such acts and enforces a blanket ban, supported by scientific evidence highlighting the severe and lasting physical and mental damage inflicted, particularly on children (Daily Mirror, 2025; The Island, 2025).

Although the Legal Draftsman’s Department prepared the draft legislation, it had not yet been published or submitted to Parliament. Acknowledging the urgency of the issue, the Cabinet has now authorised the publication of the draft *Penal Code (Amended)* in the government gazette and its formal submission to Parliament for debate and enactment. This legislative move marks a critical step forward in protecting human rights and promoting non-violent disciplinary practices in Sri Lanka (Daily Mirror, 2025; The Island, 2025; The Morning, 2025).

5.2. Advocacy and policy engagement on repealing Prevention of Terrorism Act

Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka. (2025, June 12) issued a set of recommendations in relation to the case of Mohamad Liyaudeen Mohamed Rusdi, a Muslim youth who has been arbitrarily arrested and detained under draconian law PTA for pasting anti-Israel stickers.

HRCSL recommended the Director of Counter Terrorism Investigation Division to take immediate measures to recommend to the Minister of Defence to discontinue the restriction order currently issued against the victim, to establish a procedure to obtain advice of the Director (legal), Sri Lanka Police and other relevant authorities before arresting suspects in relation to offenses concerning expressions under the PTA, or any other similar laws, and other recommendations to establish standard procedures to ensure the rights of the arrestees and detainees such as issuance of a receipt when arrested, producing before a magistrate within 72 hours. On 19th June, writing a letter on the matter to the Justice Minister, they also submitted HRCSL’s recommendations on repealing the PTA.²

² <https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/HRC-1072-25.pdf>

1. "...the offence of 'terrorism' [shall] be dealt with under general law. Any new offence with respect to 'terrorism' introduced under the general law should contain a specific and narrow definition of 'terrorism'....
2. any person arrested with respect to the offence of 'terrorism' [shall] be produced before a judicial officer without delay....
3. a judicial officer [shall] be vested with meaningful authority to grant bail to any suspect taken into custody on suspicion of the offence of 'terrorism' or to a person accused of the offence of 'terrorism' in terms of the Bail Act, No. 30 of 1997.
4. ... any person arrested or kept in custody with respect to the offence of 'terrorism' [shall] be granted prompt access to legal counsel. Persons deprived of liberty ought to be guaranteed prompt and meaningful access to legal counsel without arbitrary or unreasonable conditions being placed on such access.
5. only a confession made by a person (suspected of the offence of 'terrorism') before a judicial officer [shall] be admissible in a court of law.

Some of the [recommendations made by the HRCSL to the Minister](#)

Sri Lanka is currently engaged in a significant process to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) No. 48 of 1979, a law widely criticized for its draconian provisions and potential application to violate human rights. The Ministry of Justice has received numerous submissions from diverse stakeholders—including prisoners, civil society groups, mental health professionals, and affected families—on drafting a new anti-terrorism law that aligns with international standards. This review process is expected to take two to three months, after which a new draft will be circulated for public comment (Waravita, 2025).

While some, such as former Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) Commissioner Ambika Satkunanathan, recognize the necessity of having a counter-terrorism law to comply with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, they stress that any new legislation must adhere strictly to principles of necessity, proportionality, and legality. Satkunanathan warns against vague terms like "incitement to discrimination" or "interference with essential services," which have historically been used to suppress dissent and legitimate civic freedoms. She recommends excluding provisions that empower the armed forces to arrest civilians or conduct crime prevention, ensuring judicial review within 48 hours of arrest, guaranteeing access to legal counsel and family communication, prohibiting administrative detention, and requiring magistrates to conduct unannounced visits to detainees. She further insists that confessions should only be admissible if made before a judicial officer, bail should be the norm, and no death penalty should apply for terror offences. Additionally, she highlights the need to prevent unilateral presidential powers to impose curfews or restrict movement without parliamentary or judicial approval and cautions against legislation that broadly criminalizes speech or media content under the guise of protecting national security (Waravita, 2025).

Meanwhile, organizations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and the Law and Society Trust (LST) have criticized the PTA's foundational deficiencies, emphasizing that the

new law must not replicate its systemic human rights violations. The CPA notes the chilling effect of anti-terror laws on personal liberties, while the LST calls for a victim-centred reparations process (Waravita, 2025).

Mental health professionals have documented severe and lasting psychological harm caused by arbitrary and prolonged detention under the PTA, including high rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and social alienation that affect not only detainees but their families and communities. They call for reparations and trauma-informed legislative measures (Waravita, 2025).

On the other hand, over 240 signatories—including the Movement for Peoples’ Council, the National Shooru Council (NSC), and the Jaffna Bar Association—argue strongly against any replacement law. They contend that existing laws within the criminal justice system are sufficient to address terrorism-related crimes and warn that new legislation risks perpetuating repression, particularly targeting minority groups like Tamils and Muslims, as historically observed. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK) align with this view, emphasizing that extraordinary anti-terror laws enable abuse and undermine law enforcement efficacy (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Waravita, 2025).

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara maintains that a new anti-terrorism law is essential to protect the country against global terrorism threats. He underscores that the current government has taken steps to incorporate public input, distancing the new draft from any repressive misuse based on ethnicity or religion. The committee, headed by President’s Counsel Rienzie Arsecularatne, is carefully reviewing Supreme Court recommendations related to previous bills and aiming to produce a law compliant with international human rights norms within a three-month timeline pledged to the European Union (The Island, 2025; Waravita, 2025).

5.3. Supreme Court Rules Exclusion of 'Bhikkhuni' Identity on National Identity Cards Violates Fundamental Rights

In a landmark ruling delivered on 17 June, the Supreme Court declared that the Commissioner General of the Department of Registration of Persons violated the Fundamental Rights of Ven. Welimada Dhammadinna Bhikkhuni by refusing to issue her National Identity Card (NIC) under the official designation '*Bhikkhuni*' instead of '*Sil Matha*.' The petitioner, a Buddhist nun ordained under the *Rangiri Dambulu Rajamaha Vihara Sangha Sabhawa*, challenged the Department’s refusal, which was based on claims that the Sangha Sabha was not officially recognised by the Government and that Bhikkhunis fell outside the Commissioner’s jurisdiction (Sooriyagoda, 2025).

The Court held by majority that this refusal violated Article 12(1) of the Constitution guaranteeing equality and equal protection before the law, noting that such difficulties would not have arisen if the petitioner were male.

The Court emphasised that denying recognition of her status as a Bhikkhuni constituted unlawful and discriminatory treatment, especially since the Bhikkhuni sect has been functioning under the Rangiri Dambulla Sangha Sabha since 1998 without objection from Buddhist disciplinary authorities (Nanayakkara, 2025).

The petitioners pointed out that the Department had previously issued NICs with the title '*Bhikkhuni*' but had shifted to using '*Sil Matha*' without any rational basis, thereby denying the petitioner's legitimate expectation and imposing unjust hardship (Sooriyagoda, 2025).

This decision represents a significant step towards addressing longstanding discrimination faced by Buddhist Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka, many of whom remain disenfranchised due to the lack of official recognition by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, as highlighted in a BBC Sinhala investigation revealing nearly 8,000 Bhikkhunis denied NICs and voting rights (Nanayakkara, 2025). The Supreme Court ordered the immediate issuance of the NIC bearing the title '*Bhikkhuni*,' upholding the petitioner's constitutional rights and setting an important precedent for gender equality in official documentation (Abeynayake, 2025).

6. Rights of Marginalized and At-Risk Groups

6.1. Rights of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

The government has come under scrutiny for its handling of refugee and asylum seeker cases, prompting urgent calls for policy reform. On 1 June, a UNHCR-certified refugee returning from India was detained at Palaly Airport and remanded by the Mallakam Magistrate's Court. Minister Bimal Ratnayake clarified that the detention resulted from outdated laws still applying to those who emigrated through unauthorized ports, but detention is not the current official policy, and confirmed that Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala would take immediate steps to revise the legal framework (Daily Mirror, 2025).

Meanwhile, 116 Rohingya asylum seekers remain in custody at an Air Force (SLAF) camp in Mullaitivu since their arrival by boat in December 2024. Despite the UNHCR's request for access, the government has refused, labelling them 'illegal migrants' and maintaining that only the courts can determine their status. Human rights lawyer Lakshan Dias noted that the legal proceedings only assess the legality of their entry, while the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) emphasized that anyone seeking refuge qualifies as an asylum seeker and cannot be repatriated without assessing the risk of enforced disappearance—an obligation under both international and Sri Lankan law. HRCSL further urged access for child welfare and health agencies and called for more female police officers at the camp to safeguard vulnerable detainees. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which visited the group in April, helped relay 44 messages to family members abroad. Though Sri Lanka has hosted Rohingya refugees since 2007—most of whom have been resettled elsewhere—the current group's indefinite detention highlights the urgent need for a clear, humane refugee policy (The Morning, 2025).

6.2. Rights of People with Disabilities

A significant step has been taken to ensure inclusivity and equal rights for persons with disabilities, with the Cabinet of Ministers granting approval for the long-awaited Sign Language Bill, formally recognising sign language as an official means of communication. This move aims to provide the hearing-impaired community with improved access to information and full participation in public life without discrimination (Cabinet Office, 2025).

Despite earlier Cabinet decisions on 12 September 2017 and 18 January 2021 instructing the Legal Draftsman to prepare the necessary legislation, progress had stalled until the current Cabinet approved a renewed proposal by the Minister of Rural Development, Social Security and Community Empowerment to finalise the Bill (Jayawardhana, 2025). Once enacted, the legislation will institutionalise the use of sign language across sectors including education, government services, legal systems, public communication, media, and employment, aligning

with Sri Lanka's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In a related effort to improve accessibility, the Railways Department announced a special assistance programme for disabled passengers, offering support during boarding and disembarkation. Passengers are encouraged to inform authorities in advance via the dedicated hotline 1971. This service was launched on 15 June 2025 (Daily Mirror, 2025).

6.3. Discrimination Against Ethnic Minorities

Recent developments in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority regions reveal ongoing state harassment and human rights violations affecting Tamil farmers, activists, and fishermen. In Mullaitivu, two Tamil farmers from Kurunthumalai, arrested for cultivating land claimed by a Sinhala Buddhist monk as an archaeological site, were released after the court found no official government gazette declaring the land under the Department of Archaeology's authority. This case highlighted the persistent conflict between Tamil farming communities and Buddhist monks backed by state security forces seeking to construct religious structures on privately owned land (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, Batticaloa social activist E. Premnath was arbitrarily arrested at his workplace without a warrant, handcuffed forcibly, detained for an hour in public, and later subjected to physical assault by prison officers before being released without charges. This incident, condemned by Premnath, reflects broader patterns of intimidation against Tamil activists, journalists, and civil society members by Sri Lankan police (Tamil Guardian, 2025; Tamilwin, 2025).

In a rare judicial ruling, the Supreme Court ordered two police officers to personally compensate a victim of illegal arrest and torture after they subjected him to brutal treatment in custody, including suspension by his wrists and threats of fabricated charges. The court reaffirmed constitutional protections against torture and arbitrary detention, marking a significant judgment against police misconduct (Daily Mirror, 2025).

Further, 30 individuals, including former parliamentarians and activists, were acquitted in Batticaloa after being charged with obstructing road traffic during protests demanding resolutions to local land issues, due to insufficient evidence (Tamilwin, 2025).

The Chairperson of the Trincomalee District Association of Families of the Forcibly Disappeared, Sebastian Devi, was subjected to a lengthy interrogation by the Terrorism Investigation Division, pressured to disclose affiliations with numerous organizations and questioned about international advocacy work. Such intimidation exemplifies the ongoing state efforts to silence families seeking accountability for enforced disappearances during and after the armed conflict (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

Tensions also escalated at sea, where a 23-year-old Tamil fisherman from Kuchchaveli was critically injured after Sri Lankan Navy personnel opened fire during an alleged anti-poaching

operation. The navy claimed enforcement of fishing regulations, but Tamil fishermen allege harassment and violence under military occupation of the region. Following this, mass protests in Kuchchaveli and Thirukkadalur condemned the Navy's actions and the authorities' failure to address an earlier attack on a fishing vessel by a tanker. Hundreds, including community groups and political representatives, demanded justice and protection for Tamil fishing livelihoods amid ongoing militarization (Tamil Guardian, 2025).

7. Labour Rights



Some of the employees of NEXT's plant in Katunayake Export Processing Zone, after the company was closed.

Courtesy: [FT.LK](#)

The sudden and controversial shutdown of NEXT Manufacturing Ltd.'s garment factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) has drawn significant criticism from labour unions, legal experts, rights activists, and economic stakeholders. The factory ceased its operations on 19 May by laying off over 1,400 workers with little warning and conflicting explanations.

A joint statement from the Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union, Clean Clothes Campaign, and other civil society groups, in response to NEXT's closure of its Katunayake factory in Sri Lanka, described the move as "union-busting dressed up as a business strategy." The factory was the only unionized workplace in the area and had secured safer working conditions, better pay, and a significant reduction in incidents of sexual harassment through unionization.³

According to Anton Marcus, General Secretary of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees' Union (FTZGSEU), the management cited high production costs when informing employees of the closure. However, the Labour Commissioner General was told that a drop in orders necessitated a reduction in workforce. Marcus highlighted the illegitimacy of these contradictory justifications, noting that such inconsistencies render the closure questionable from both legal and ethical perspectives (Tennekoon, 2025). Marcus pointed out that not all operations had ceased—some sections of the company remained active—making the situation even murkier. What has disturbed rights activists and workers most is the manner in which the shutdown occurred. Employees were reportedly informed of the closure via a

³ <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2025/next-shuts-down-its-only-unionised-factory-in-sri-lanka-after-posting-ps1-08-billion-profit-forecast>

WhatsApp message after their Friday shift on 19 May. Chamila Thushari, Executive Director of the Dabindu Collective, condemned the closure as a clear violation of national regulations, noting that the company failed to notify not only the employees but also the Labour Department and the trade union that had representation within the factory (Waravita, 2025).

In contrast to the unions' alarm, industry representatives have characterized the closure as a unique, isolated issue. Yohan Lawrence, Secretary General of the Joint Apparel Association Forum Sri Lanka (JAAFSL), attributed the decision to unusually high labour costs driven by a collective agreement between the company and the union. He noted that while most factories in the FTZ granted Rs. 3,000 wage increases in 2025, NEXT was obligated to provide Rs. 5,000 hikes, which rendered the business model unsustainable (Fernando, 2025). Renuka Weerakoon, Director General of the Board of Investment (BOI), echoed this sentiment, stating that the issues faced by NEXT were not industry-wide but unique to the company. She added that disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical challenges had further pressured the business. Weerakoon confirmed that NEXT had not completely withdrawn from Sri Lanka and that some operations were continuing. She also stated that the BOI had been informed of ongoing discussions between the company and the union and was assured that compensation would exceed legal minimums (Fernando, 2025).

Despite these reassurances, labour rights advocates fear that the manner of the closure could set a damaging precedent for how multinational companies treat workers in Sri Lanka. Thushari also raised concerns about displaced workers, many of whom are internal migrants and not eligible for government welfare schemes like Aswesuma. With no jobs, no state assistance, and now facing tax deductions from their severance, many find themselves in precarious positions, struggling to pay rent, educate their children, or even buy groceries (Waravita, 2025).

Commercial and Industrial Workers' Union (CIWU) President Swasthika Arulingam noted that employers have long been frustrated with the Termination of Employment of Workmen Act (TEWA), as it limits their ability to hire and fire at will. But she argued that dismantling or bypassing TEWA could have disastrous consequences for national labour stability. Labour Commissioner General H.M.D.N.K. Wataliyadda clarified that while companies do not require approval to make business decisions like closures, they are legally obligated to inform the Labour Department about their actions and the compensation to be offered. He confirmed that NEXT submitted its closure application on 20 May, a day after notifying employees via WhatsApp, and that subsequent meetings had included the Labour Minister and union representatives (Waravita, 2025).

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