

**SOUTH ASIA: INDIA, PAKISTAN, SRI LANKA**

**Anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination and the right to freedom of thought, conscience religion or belief – a submission from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)**

**India**

In the Preamble of India’s constitution, the country is defined as a secular state. The constitution also designates freedom of religion as a fundamental right and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion (Article 25). Other relevant articles in the constitution include Article 26, which protects the freedom to manage religious affairs.

India’s obligation under international law includes its accession to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). India has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These conventions protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to minority religions.

However, hate speech by far-right Hindu nationalist groups fuels hostility towards religious minorities. The situation is abetted by officials in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who fail to prevent and investigate attacks and are known to permit the spread of hate. The incumbent Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, has made public statements calling for forced sterilisation of Muslims and Christians, for Hindus to fight back against the perceived attack from Muslims and Christians, for Muslim voting rights to be revoked, and asserting that India is facing a battle between demons and gods. These are perceived by some to give moral legitimacy to communal violence. Such acts are illegal under Section 153(A) of the penal code.

**Northeast Delhi targeted attacks**

Following the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 (CAA), which determines nationality based on a person’s religion, a nationwide civil protest against the draconian law followed - none more intense than the protests in Delhi, which continued into 2020.

On 23 February 2020, Kapil Mishra, from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and former Legislative Assembly member, addressed a rally where he incited and instigated mobs to rampage the protestors in Kardampuri. He called on the mob to attack Muslims and Dalits, in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner of Police North-East Delhi.

A 22 year-old, resident of Karawal Nagar, Delhi and a member of the Bajrang Dal, described how the police had encouraged the mob to attack shops and vehicles belonging to the Muslim community.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On 25 February, along with Hindu rioters, men in uniform brutally assaulted Muslims performing their *Maghrib namaz* (evening prayers) in Farooqia Masjid, Brijpuri, Mustafabad before setting the mosque on fire. Eyewitnesses described that amongst the rioters were policemen.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Delhi police are yet to register a First Information Report (FIR).

The Delhi Minorities Commission (DMC) in its fact-finding report,[[3]](#footnote-3) found that the police failed to apprehend Kapil Mishra. The DMC highlighted the failure of the police to exercise its prohibitory powers to stop the violence on life and property.

On 24 December, the office of Mehmood Pracha was raided by the Delhi Police Special Cell. Mr Pracha is the legal counsel in several cases involving the February Delhi violence. Local sources report that the police raid was an attempt to stop him from pursuing the cases. Mr Pracha had claimed RSS, the Delhi Police and leaders from the ruling BJP complicity in the violence. On 25 December, victims of the Delhi violence held a press conference where they revealed that the Police had threatened register false cases against them and pressured them to drop the cases.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Covid-19**

In March 2020, news broke that six attendees at the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic religious gathering in Nizamuddin, Delhi, had died of Covid-19. Local monitoring groups subsequently observed a surge in false allegations on social media which claimed that Muslims actively tried to spread the virus in India, leading to violent attacks, including in Haryana[[5]](#footnote-5).

Babita Phogat, a BJP member who contested in the 2019 state assembly elections, tweeted on 2 April 2020, saying: “#niazmuddinidiots – Bats may have spread it at your [China]. But here in Hindustan, ignorant pigs are spreading it” [translated from Hindi]. Ms Phogat, who is a former professional wrestler who represented India in international competitions and has won numerous medals, has almost six hundred thousand followers on her Twitter account. On 9 April, she contributed to an article in a local newspaper called *Haribhumi*, where she alleged that a Muslim man in Charkhi Dadri, had deliberately infected other villagers. However, her article was discredited after the man was tested negative. Local reports have suggested that as a result of the accusations, the man and many Muslim villagers continued to live in fear and may move out of the village.

Prime Minister Modi had called on the nation to light diyas and candles on the 5 April, as a show of the nation’s solidarity in the fight against the pandemic. On 6 April 2020 four brothers were severely injured and required medical attention after they were attacked in Dhatrath village, Jind District. Bashir Khan, Sadiq Khan, Nazir Khan and Sandeep Khan, who work as the village masons, were attacked because they had not extinguished the lights in their home after 9pm the night before. A village meeting was held on 11 April and the attackers apologised to the brothers for their actions.

On 7 April 2020, Gayur Hasan (60) from Keorak village, Kaithal District, learnt that his workshop was on fire from his son. He ran an ancestral iron and welding business in the village. Hasan referred to the rumors and conspiracy theories that have been circulating on social media about Muslims spreading Covid-19, which may have led to his workshop being targeted. The parents of the perpetrators apologised for the behaviour of their sons.

**Vigilantism – lynching related to cow slaughter/consumption**

Vigilantism in the name of cow protection (*gau raksha*) has increasingly become an issue of concern since the BJP’s election in 2013. Human Rights Watch (HRW) observed that “between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 persons – 36 of them Muslims were killed across 12 Indian states. Over that same period, around 280 people were injured in over 100 different incidents across 20 states.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Attacks are mainly perpetrated and carried out by organised militant groups, which belong to the *Sangh Parivar* (the generic name for groups under the RSS).

The handling of complaints of alleged cow slaughter and methods of investigations used by law enforcement officials, raise serious concerns about police racism and endemic prejudice towards the Muslim community.

On 8 May 2020, the police raided seven Muslim homes in Faridpur Kazi, Uttar Pradesh during *iftar*, the evening break of fast during Ramadan. Without giving reasons, they searched the homes and kitchens, throwing out leftover food, while hurling verbal abuses at the families. A few male members of the families were physically assaulted and taken into custody. The men were released the following day after intervention from the village head.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On 30 August 2020, Uttar Pradesh police brutally assaulted fruit seller Salim Qureshi, aged 55, at his house in Dildarnagar village, Ghazipur District. He was hit so badly that his heel broke away from his right foot. According to Dr Khalid Anis Ansari, a sociologist at the Glocal University in Saharanpur district said that when the police does not find evidence, they beat up people and instil fear.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**“Love jihad”**

Following in the steps of Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, the Uttar Pradesh government on 24 November 2020, passed a draft ordinance criminalising “unlawful religious conversions” and “inter-faith marriages with the sole intention of changing a girl’s religion,” with a 10 year imprisonment term, if found guilty.[[9]](#footnote-9) The move is a broader measure to introduce an anti-conversion law, which is already enforced in seven other states in India. Human rights observers have criticised BJP and RSS officials for creating unsubstantiated false narratives of blaming Muslim men for alluring Hindu girls into marriage with the objective of converting them to Islam by using communal terms such as “love jihad” to propagate further hatred of Muslims. According to Professor Ram Puniyani, “the cleverly crafted love jihad campaign is based on the patriarchal notions, which are one of the core ingredients of communal politics.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

On 11 June 2019, Kayum Khan from Jaipur, Rajasthan was assaulted in public by Indrapal Choudhury and three others. Kayum was accused of molesting Saloni (17). Indrapal is the brother of Saloni and Shveta. Ms Shveta and Kayum met in 2016. In 2018, the couple decided to get married. However, due to intense opposition by the Choundhury’s who are Jats (Hindus), the marriage did not take place. Shveta was sent to a shelter for women in distress.

Kayum required medical treatment and was taken to the hospital. Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal (outfits under the Sangh Parivar) surrounded the police station where Kayum had registered his First Information Report (FIR), shouting slogans against “love jihad” and demanding for Kayum’s arrest.

He was arrested on 12 June and charged under the Indian Penal Code and under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. There was no arrest of his assailants.

On 1 July, a local human rights organisation condemned the arrest and charges as being influenced by false narratives of “love jihad” made-up by Kayum attackers. Shveta, in a letter from the shelter claimed that her sister Saloni was being used by her family to build a case against Kayum. She further asserted that the Bajrang Dal had been visiting her home for one year and inciting hate against Muslims, causing the family to turn against Kayum.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Recommendations:**

* Conduct a review of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), to ensure that it is in keeping with the country’s commitment to its people under the Constitution.
* Conduct an independent inquiry into police responses to anti-CAA/NRC protests, to determine reports of disproportionate use of force, arrests and deaths of civilians.
* Pursue policies to reform its law enforcement agencies, including establishing mechanisms to increase the accountability of law enforcement officers, and ensuring that First Information Reports are effectively investigated and prosecuted.
* Repeal anti-conversion legislation currently in force in seven states, namely Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha and Jharkhand.
* Increase efforts to reverse the culture of impunity that leads to communal violence by ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice and adequate levels of compensation are granted to victims.
* Adopt a national plan on human rights in order to prevent violence committed in the name of religion, and other forms of oppression related to religion or belief.
* Work towards the introduction of a comprehensive framework to deal adequately with communal and targeted violence.

**Pakistan**

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) continues to be eroded in Pakistan. The increased weaponisation and politicisation of the blasphemy laws, hate speech by extremist Muslim clerics and Islamist groups, radicalisation through biased education, and abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage are several factors which contribute to widespread religious intolerance. Recent years have also seen increased sectarian violence and targeted attacks on religious minorities.

Religious minorities face multifaceted discrimination which permeates all aspects of society, from education to employment. Discrimination against the Christian community is deeply rooted and historic. The legacy of the caste system means that Christians continue to face endemic discrimination and are often perceived as unclean by the Muslim majority, who describe them using derogatory terms such as ‘chura’ or ‘kafir,’ which means infidel.

One of the worst incidents occurred on 16 February 2017, when a suicide bomber attacked a Sufi shrine in Sindh Province visited by Hindus, Muslims and Christians: at least 88 people were killed and over 300 injured. According to Amjad Nazeer, Executive Director of the Institute of Development Research and Corresponding Capabilities (IDRAC), an Islamabad-based research institute, ‘The whole fabric of society is polarised in terms of religion as well as politics. Even within different Islamic schools of thought, hostile theological divides and mutual disagreements exist in which religious scholars of different sects and ideologies along with their followers assert their interpretation of Islam to be authentic and final, and accuse one another of “not being true Muslims”’. The various Islamic traditions – Sunni, Shi’a, Ahmadi, Wahhabi, Barelvi and Deobandi among others – each have their own ideological, regional and cultural differences.

**Ahmadiyya Community**

The Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan has been the target of hatred and violence for several decades and is the most widely institutionally and constitutionally persecuted religious group in Pakistan. Persistent and systematic structural discrimination, as well as targeted physical violence, affects their economic, social and employment status, political life and educational activities. Electoral disenfranchisement, legal discrimination and social ostracism essentially leave the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan today without a voice or the scope to construct their own public identity. The violence affects every aspect of their lives including the desecration of their grave sites, and the destruction of mosques. Even within civil society, human rights defenders, activists, faith leaders or anyone else who attempts to speak up on behalf of the plight of the Ahmadis becomes a target for the extremist lobby.

Pakistan is the only country in the world that declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslims by law. A 1974 constitutional amendment declared persons not believing in the finality of the Prophet Mohammed to be non-Muslims, thereby making the propagation and practice of Ahmadi religious beliefs punishable by law. In 1984 the promulgation of Ordinance XX (20) and addition of Sections 298(B) and 298(C) to the penal code categorised Ahmadiyya as ‘non-Muslims’ and imposed further restrictions on the community. The introduction of laws which deprive them of their rightful identity as Muslims and as equal members of society, and the perpetual hateful rhetoric that has been perpetrated against them has entrenched societal hostility to this community.

More recently, the government established National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has been criticized for excluding the Ahmadiyya community from participation in the commission. In May 2020, Pakistan’s Information Minister Shibli Faraz noted in a post-cabinet meeting that “the religious minister has come up with the summary that suggested non-inclusion of any Ahmadi in the commission because they do not fall in the definition of minorities.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

On 20 November 2020, an Ahmadi doctor was murdered in front of his family at his home in Murch Balochan, Nankana Sahib District, Punjab. His murder is the latest in a series of killings of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan.

The incident took place in the afternoon, just after Dr Tahir Mahmood[[13]](#footnote-13), 31, and his family finished their Friday afternoon prayers. Local sources report that a teenage male, identified as Mahad, opened fire with a pistol as a family member opened the door. Dr Mahmood was killed instantly. His father, Tariq, was also shot and remains in a critical condition, while his uncles, Saeed and Tayyab, both took shots to their legs.

A First Information Report (FIR), required for the police to open an investigation, has been registered under the Pakistan Penal Code and the Anti-Terrorism Act. According to local sources, the suspect was apprehended by residents in the area and taken into police custody where he confessed to carrying out the attack based on “religious differences.” Prime Minister Imran Khan’s special representative on religious harmony, Hafiz Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi subsequently condemned the targeted killing on Twitter.[[14]](#footnote-14) The murder of Dr Mahmood is the latest in an upsurge in targeted killings of Ahmadis in recent months.

Ahmadis are also frequent victims of blasphemy accusations, attacks and widespread hate speech by mullahs, extreme clerics and radical groups, who instigate discrimination and incite violence against them. Instead of putting a halt to this discrimination and intimidation, the law legitimises the individual and organised actions of religious extremists.

A disproportionate number of blasphemy cases are filed against Ahmadis. In one instance in October 2017 three Ahmadi men, Mubasher Ahmad, Ghulam Ahmed and Ehsan Ahmed, were sentenced to death for blasphemy. Khalil Ahmed, a fourth accused, was shot and killed in police custody just days after the incident. The three men were arrested in May 2014 after they tore down religious posters calling for a boycott of the Ahmadi community in Bhoiwal, a village about 22km south-west of Lahore.

A report by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community released in July 2020 found that from 1984 to July 2020: “269 Ahmadi Muslims have been killed on the grounds of [their] faith.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Within the education system Ahmadi students are often segregated from other Muslims and made to pray separately. Students report suffering a range of physical and psychological abuse from teachers and students, including exclusion from activities, and insults and beatings. Students shared how they were physically abused by both teachers and classmates because of their religious beliefs. Ahmadi students described how they were called derogatory terms such as kafir and qadiyani and that some teachers used abusive language and negative comments to refer to the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement. They reported that classmates and teachers repeatedly bullied them to convert, and some teachers deliberately segregated and humiliated Ahmadi students by instructing them to eat, drink and sit separately from the rest of the class. Some teachers also incited students to harass Ahmadis.

The curricula and textbooks currently used in government schools and madrassas (Islamic religious schools) are rife with biases against religious minorities, and continue to emphasise Pakistan’s fundamental Islamic identity and the need for unity within the Muslim community, to the exclusion of religious minorities

CSW conducted interviews with a number of women who described how they experience a ‘continuous campaign of hate’ once people learn that they are Ahmadi. They described the social marginalisation, violent threats and isolation they encounter which hinders their movements within society, at work and during routine activities such as shopping. Some shops even have banners stating that they do not serve qadianis. One woman said that after one shopkeeper refused to serve her, three men on a motorbike accosted her, stole her jewellery and told her, ‘Because you’re Ahmadi we are allowed to shoot you.’ One respondent, the daughter of a well-known Ahmadi lawyer, said that when she was younger the family suffered abuse because of their religion. On one occasion their house was attacked. ‘People came with sticks and bricks. They were abusive about our religion and they destroyed all our files, pictures, property, all my father’s professional documents.’ CSW interviewed Ahmadi women in 2017 who described the ‘mental and physical torture’ that they and their families endure from non-Ahmadi community members in schools, jobs and daily life. They were fearful for their own and their family’s safety. They said the segregation they encounter is form of ‘religious apartheid’ which impedes their ability to move independently in society, at work and during routine activities such as shopping or going to the market, once people know they are Ahmadi. Ahmadi women face overt discrimination when shopping. Some shops display signs and banners stating that they will not serve qadiyanis. According to Hafsa, a shopkeeper told her, ‘You are Ahmadi, we will not give you anything, don’t come in my shop, get out of my shop.’

The social alienation which women experienced forced them to stay at home to avoid ridicule and abuse from the community. One woman recalled that she was taught in school that ‘Non-Muslims don’t have the right to live – you should be killed.’ Some women said they choose not to reveal their religion to colleagues for fear of reprisals including losing their jobs. Zainab said she had lost her three previous jobs and was fearful that her current role would be terminated. The anti-Ahmadi legislation was blamed for creating an environment of hatred which incites the killing of Ahmadis. ‘People feel Ahmadis do not have the right to live, should not be allowed to live, and that we should be killed.’ One women was told by her colleague, ‘If I knew you were Ahmadi when you were hired I would definitely kill you.’ He advised their boss to terminate her employment.

**The Shi’a Hazara Community**

The Shi’a Hazara have increasingly experienced sectarian violence and systematic oppression, especially from extreme Sunni groups. Attacks on Shi’as escalate during the month of Muharram, when Shi’as mourn the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet by taking part in street processions. Militant Islamists attack Shi’as not only during their religious celebrations, but also while they are worshipping at mosques, travelling to work or shopping. Perpetrators of these attacks are indoctrinated through religious seminaries, hate speech and a biased education system which omits reference to Shi’a schools of thought.

The Shi’a Hazara community in Pakistan, whose members mostly live in Quetta, where regular attacks take place, have a distinct religious, linguistic and ethnic identity which makes them easily identifiable and therefore more vulnerable. Sajjad Changezi, a Hazara activist, said, ‘As Hazaras, we cannot hide anything; we are like sitting ducks, waiting for bullets.’

Religious sectarian terrorism targeting Hazaras has resulted in increasing intolerance, alienation and social division. Hazaras employed in military, politics and corporate jobs have been deliberately targeted and killed, causing many to leave high-ranking posts. Private employers often refuse to hire Hazaras, worried about the risk of attacks on their business and staff if there is a Hazara employee. This marginalisation has resulted in lower participation of Hazaras, especially females, in education and other social spheres.

One of the worst assaults occurred on 23 June 2017 when three attacks took place in a single day. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) claimed responsibility for two bomb explosions in Parachinar, a predominantly Shi’a area, in which at least 75 people were killed and over 200 injured. An earlier suicide bomb in Quetta killed at least 14 people. The Shi’a Hazara have increasingly experienced sectarian violence.

On 12 April 2019 the community suffered an attack when a bomb exploded inside the Hazar Ganji, a fruit and vegetable market on the outskirts of Quetta. At least 24 people were killed and almost 50 injured.

Historically, the Shi’a community has rarely been considered a minority in Pakistan (at least in treatment, if not in number): Shi’as being targeted in the same way as other religious minorities is a relatively recent phenomenon. Though the government does not officially support discrimination against Shi’as, it is failing to effectively counter the influence of extremists and bring an end to violence against the community and attacks against the Shi’a and Hazara communities have become routine.

**Recommendations:**

* Review Sections 295(A), (B) and (C) of the blasphemy laws and ensure procedural amendments are implemented, in order to minimise the abuse of these laws in the short term and move towards their full repeal in the long term.
* Repeal Sections 298(B) and 298(C) concerning the Ahmadiyya community, in line with constitutional.
* Rewrite textbooks so that they are based on scientific and empirical principles of thought and inquiry, and incorporate lessons on peace, tolerance, diversity and respect for human rights.
* Provide the necessary protections and safeguards to civil society activists and human rights defenders (HRDs) to enable them to speak out against violations without fear of being attacked themselves; and prosecute those who attack them.
* Prosecute and bring to trial without delay all those responsible for committing violent attacks against minorities and other vulnerable groups.
* Prioritise reforms to the police and criminal justice system to ensure corruption, torture and illegal detentions are rooted out.
* Fully cooperate with all UN Special Procedures and issue a standing invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit Pakistan, with unhindered access to all parts of the country.

**Sri Lanka**

Religious intolerance in Sri Lanka has been increasing since 2000, despite the end of the 30 year ethnic civil war in 2009. Acts of violence motivated by religious hatred have increased since 2012, and crimes are committed in an environment of impunity. Buddhist nationalist groups continue to discriminate against, intimidate and attack Muslim and Christian communities.

Although Sri Lankan legislation does not require the registration of religious places of worship or any religious body, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment (presently the Ministry of Buddha Sasana) issued a Circular on 16 October 2008 concerning the construction of new places of worship. The Circular has been used by law enforcement and local government officials to discriminate against religious minority groups and their places of worship, and forcibly and arbitrarily close places of worship.

In 2015 Sri Lanka co-sponsored a UN resolution entitled ‘Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka’, pledging to implement a robust transitional justice process and reaffirming that “all Sri Lankans are entitled to the full enjoyment of their human rights regardless of religion, belief or ethnicity…” However, challenges to unify Sri Lanka’s diverse ethno-religious population remains increasingly uncertain following the 2019 terror attacks on Easter Sunday, posing further challenges to a successful transition to justice. A fundamental Islamic presence has further heightened challenges to peace and security.

In the wake of the attacks, a spate of anti-Muslim violence ravaged the North Western province and the Gamapal district. Nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist mobs attacked mosques, and Muslim homes and businesses in apparent retaliation for the bombings, resulting in the death of one person. Several accusations have been levelled against the police and security officials for being complicit in these attacks and refusing to intervene and mitigate the damage caused.

Religious intolerance towards Muslims, however, pre-dates the 2019 Easter bombings. Many propagators of hate speech towards Muslims play on economic factors, suggesting that all Muslims are successful businessmen. Responses to this include Halal boycotts and repeated attacks and destruction of Muslim businesses.[[16]](#footnote-16) Many Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists also fear a rapid rise in the Muslim population which would turn them into the dominant ethno-religious group. In July 2019, Gnanasara Thero, General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), called for the creation of a Sinhalese government, and for politicians to let Buddhist monks combat Islamist extremism, claiming that “It’s our responsibility because this is a Sinhalese country. We are the historical owners of this country.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Role of social media in fostering hatred against minority Muslims**

Social media in Sri Lanka has a big influence on the spread of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding religious minorities. For many, Facebook has become synonymous with the internet, with more traditional media such as newspapers being ignored. Facebook is often the medium of choice for those seeking news and those disseminating real or fake stories.[[18]](#footnote-18) Social media is also frequently used by Buddhist nationalist groups and individuals to create a climate of intolerance, making it easier to mobilise people when they want to.

In February 2018 false rumours were spread on Facebook about a seizure of 23,000 sterilisation pills from a Muslim pharmacist in Ampara in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka.[[19]](#footnote-19) It was rumoured that the pills were being put in the food of Sinhalese customers to ensure the dominance of Islam. The next day a customer in a Muslim-owned restaurant found a lump in his food. He asked one of the owners in Sinhalese if he put sterilisation medicine in his food. The owner, who did not understand Sinhalese, and was unaware of the rumours, replied in broken Sinhalese, “Yes, we put?” thinking that the customer was correctly identifying the object as a lump of flour.[[20]](#footnote-20) A mob which had gathered during the complaint beat the owner, destroyed the shop and set fire to the local mosque.

**Anti-cattle slaughter law and burial rites**

In September 2020, the Sri Lankan government approved Mahinda Rajapaksa’s proposal to ban domestic cattle slaughter. Cabinet spokesman and Mass Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella announced that legalising the decision would occur in ‘due course’.[[21]](#footnote-21) The proposed ban was welcomed by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist and Hindu groups who are against the ‘consumption of meat due to religious beliefs.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Under the proposed ban, beef imports will still be permitted and can be sold at a concessionary price to people who consume it, while a programme will be launched for ageing cattle which can no longer be used for agricultural purposes.

Anti-animal slaughtering proposals are not new to Sri Lanka and have been entwined with anti-*halal* campaigns. Both the anti-slaughter and anti-*halal* campaigns conducted by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist groups argue that the slaughter of animals for human consumption and rituals and *halal* meat preparation are against Buddhist values. As Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation these practices are ‘an insult to the nation.’[[23]](#footnote-23) The ban will have almost exclusively negative economic consequences for the Muslim community, while the fact that the importation of beef will still be permissible suggests that the ban is not necessarily about the ethics of cattle slaughter but tied to long held Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist fears of Muslim economic dominance.

Since March 2020, the government guidance has required victims of Covid-19 to be cremated, a practice that contradicts Islamic burial traditions. A panel of medical experts, appointed by the Ministry of Health on 24 December recommended to the government that there was no evidence of transmission by cadavers coming in contact with water in the ground.[[24]](#footnote-24) On 28 December, Buddhist monks protested outside the Presidential Secretariat calling on the government to continue with cremation policies.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Recommendations**

* Guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief in its fullness for all religious minorities in accordance with international human rights standards.
* Remove the 2008 Circular on construction of places of worship and ensure that it is not misused to intimidate members of religious minorities.
* Call on Sri Lanka to crack down on hate speech against religious minorities whilst also ensuring that the right to freedom of expression is fully respected, including prosecuting those responsible for perpetrating hate speech against religious minorities and taking measurable steps to hold social networks/online accountable for content inciting hatred and violence.
* Actively establish mechanism to increase accountability, providing training on key human rights areas to the Sri Lanka police.
* Take effective measures to improve reconciliation and social cohesion among the different ethnicity and faith groups.
* Urge Sri Lanka to respect Muslim and Christian funeral rites, allowing the communities to bury their dead, which is permitted according to WHO guidelines.

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