

TREND ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN SRI LANKA

November 2022 - October 2023



Trend Analysis of Violence Against Christians in Sri Lanka

REPORT

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The study is based on data collected by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). NCEASL, headed by the renowned social transformation, religious liberty and human rights activist Deshamanya Godfrey Yogarajah, is affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), a worldwide network of over 620 million Christians in 129 countries.

NCEASL works actively in three broad areas:

1. Mission and Theology
2. Religious Liberty and Human Rights
3. Relief and Development

The Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) of NCEASL has monitored and documented incidents of violence, intimidation and discrimination against the Sri Lankan Christian community for over two decades. However, the ultimate goal of the RLC is to advance religious liberty for all Sri Lankan communities through advocacy and lobbying, research and documentation and training and education.

This study was compiled by Verité Media, a division of Verité Research. Jonathan Cruse was the lead researcher and author of the study. Ashvin Perera generated the quantitative insights. Data was tabulated by Tirani Wijewickrama, Buwanajee Coralage and Lehan Kongalage. The report was edited by Suresh Yogasundram and Diresh Thevanayagam. Layout and infographics were done by Adrian Marcus. Overall research supervision was provided by Mahoshadi Peiris, Deepanjali Abeywardana and Nishan de Mel. The author is deeply indebted and grateful to the aforementioned individuals for their time, ideas, input and feedback.

Contents

Executive Summary	6
Introduction	8
Socio-Political Context	9
Chapter 1	
Key Insights on Violence Against Christians	12
Violence Over the Years.....	12
Overview of Violence: Type of Harm, Key Perpetrators and Primary Targets (November 2022 to October 2023).....	14
Gender and Incidents of Violence Against Christians	17
Chapter 2	
Social Dynamics of Violence Against Christians – Three Core Empirical Insights	18
Element One: Key Perpetrators and their Primary Targets – The State and the People Target Counterpart in Rank	18
Element Two: Key Perpetrators and Type of Harm – The State Engages in Non-Physical Violence, the People Engage in Physical Violence	21
Element Three: The Role of the State – The Protector and the Perpetrator	22
Chapter 3	
Geographic Distribution of Violence (District-level Breakdown)	25
Demographic Characteristics of Puttalam, Kalutara and Jaffna	26
Chapter 4	
Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms	27
Overview of Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms	27
Uncovering the Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms.....	31
Observations Related to the Targets of Harmful Speech Content	33
Conclusion	34
Annexures	35
Annexure 1: Violence against Christians – Methodology	35
Annexure 2: Incidents of violence and intimidation against Muslims and Hindus.....	40
Annexure 3: Harmful content on online platforms – Methodology.....	56

List of Figures

Exhibit 1: Total number of incidents of religious violence targeting Christians by year (2013 –2023)	13
Exhibit 2: Total number of incidents of violence by month (November 2022 – October 2023)	13
Exhibit 3: Categorisation of severity of violence or harm	14
Exhibit 4: Distribution of the types of harm (November 2022 – October 2023)	14
Exhibit 5: Breakdown of the most common types of harm inflicted on Christians over the years	15
Exhibit 6: Involvement of key perpetrators in violence against Christians as a percentage	15
Exhibit 7: Distribution of key perpetrators of violence against Christians (November 2022 – October 2023)	16
Exhibit 8: Distribution of primary targets of violence against Christians (November 2022 – October 2023)	16
Exhibit 9: The targets of violence by groups of perpetrators (2022–2023)	19
Exhibit 10: The targets of violence by state officials over the years	20
Exhibit 11: The targets of violence by identifiable individuals over the years	20
Exhibit 12: The different forms of violence employed by key perpetrator groups (2022–2023)	21
Exhibit 13: Involvement of key perpetrators using violence in the form of discriminatory practices or actions as a percentage over the years	22
Exhibit 14: Involvement of key perpetrators using violence in the form of threats, intimidation or coercion as a percentage over the years	22
Exhibit 15: Police response to institutions or public servants over the years	24
Exhibit 16: Police response to identifiable individuals over the years	24
Exhibit 17: District-level breakdown of incidents of violence targeting Christians (2022–2023)	25
Exhibit 18: Language composition of online posts of violence	28
Exhibit 19: Online platforms in which the harmful content was generated	28
Exhibit 20: Form of content generated	28
Exhibit 21: Origins of harmful content	30
Exhibit 22: Targets of harmful content by religion	31
Exhibit 23: Composition of harmful content on online platforms	32
Exhibit 24: Descriptions of key messages	32
Exhibit 25: Targets of harmful speech content	33
Exhibit 26: Underlying narrative – Muslim ‘cultural peculiarities’	40
Exhibit 27: Underlying narrative – Land acquisition and/or encroachment	42
Exhibit 28: Underlying narrative – Contestation over religious sites	44
Exhibit 29: Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Muslims	45
Exhibit 30: Contestation over religious sites	47
Exhibit 31: Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Hindus	52

Executive Summary

Ethno-religious violence against minority groups in Sri Lanka is a long-entrenched phenomenon that has persisted irrespective of changes in the political landscape of the country. This study examines key trends in religiously motivated violence against Christians between November 2022 and October 2023, based on data collated by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). A total of 63 incidents of violence against Christians were analysed in depth. However, due to very limited data collated regarding violence against Muslims and Hindus, only brief descriptions of those incidents have been included. These descriptions can be found in Annexure 2 of the report.

The analysis of violence against Christians is presented in four chapters. Chapter 1 of the report examines key insights on the violence against Christians, focusing on the historical development of the phenomenon, a comparison of these developments with patterns of violence from the period under review, and the gender dimensions of incidence of violence. Chapter 2 discusses three empirical insights that are informed by a datadriven analysis of the social dynamics of violence against Christians. Chapter 3 analyses the geographical clustering of violence against Christians and the patterns of violence within regions in Sri Lanka. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the composition of harmful speech and its influence in inciting violence against specific religions.

The analysis of incidents of violence against Christians over the years suggests that the forces driving the phenomenon have remained fairly consistent. Collating data regarding these incidents reveals three key empirical insights into the factors that lead to violence. These insights are data-driven explanations of who the primary perpetrators are, their main targets, and the modality through which they incite violence against Christians.

1. **The state and the individual-perpetrators each target their counterpart rank in the church community:** Violence against Christians in Sri Lanka is mainly perpetrated by state officials and identifiable individuals. State officials tend to target Christian/church leadership and the symbols of Christianity, while non-state actors tend to target Christian/church congregants. This difference in focus is supported by historical data drawn from previous studies.
2. **The severity of state led violence is limited while that of individual-perpetrators is not:** Violence against Christians manifests in many forms, from discriminatory practices and actions (the least severe form of violence) to actual physical harm (most severe form of violence). State officials are more likely to engage in non-physical, systemic violence such as discrimination and coercion. In contrast, non-state actors are more prone to direct physical violence. This dichotomy in the nature of violence inflicted on Christians highlights the power and influence exerted (often with impunity) by these different perpetrators.

3. **State participation in violence targeting Christians across the different civil institutions of the state apparatus contradicts its legal obligations:** The state plays a paradoxical and often contradictory role in the violence against Christians. On the one hand, the state is obligated to protect religious freedoms and ensure people's right to practice their religion as enshrined in the Sri Lankan Constitution and international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). On the other hand, state appendages, including the police, often act as perpetrators of violence against minorities, including Christians. This contradictory role suggests a persistent 'negative bias' within the state apparatus towards Christians.

Patterns of violence against Christians emerged across the 15 districts that violence against Christians was observed in Sri Lanka. Puttalam district (18), Kalutara district (seven) and Jaffna (seven) recorded the three highest number of violent incidents per district in the country. In Puttalam and Kalutara, Buddhists are the religious majority, comprising 43% and 83% of the population respectively and in Jaffna, Hindus are the majority (83%). Puttalam and Jaffna present interesting cases; in Puttalam where despite majority influence being only marginal similar patterns of behaviour could be seen and in Jaffna, despite the majority being Hindu, a higher number of incidents of violence against Christians could be observed.

An evaluation of harmful speech content posted on online platforms revealed that harmful content was generated predominantly (85%) in Sinhala, and the majority (86%) of harmful content was found on Facebook. The evaluated data was categorised by Hashtag Generation into hate speech, harassment, disinformation, and organised advocacy of violence. Hate speech was predominant, accounting for 76% of posts, primarily targeting Christians, followed by Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. The data revealed that 50% of these posts originated from individual user accounts, 35% from fake accounts. Patterns of harmful speech targeting Christians online are clearly distinct from interactions between Christian and non-Christian communities on the ground. Online, individual user accounts take centre stage as the perpetrator, generating harmful content against Christians, mostly in the form of hate speech.

Introduction

Ethno-religious violence against minority groups is a long-entrenched phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Violence motivated along ethno-religious lines and the social dynamics influencing violence against Christians endure in Sri Lanka irrespective of changes to the country's political, social, and economic landscape.

This study explores ethno-religious violence targeting minority groups during the period November 2022 to October 2023. It also builds on previous analyses of trends in religious violence conducted by Verité Media, a division of Verité Research. This study takes place within the specific socio-political context of the period under review, and is presented in four chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 examines key insights on violence against Christians, focusing on the historical development of violence against Christians, and a comparison of these developments with patterns of violence from the period under review. This chapter also explores how gender intersects with these violent incidents. Chapter 2 analyses relevant data to develop three empirical insights that help reveal the social dynamics of violence against Christians. Chapter 3 analyses geographic locations in the country that are prone to occurrences of violence against Christians to establish patterns and clusters of incidents. Finally, Chapter 4 investigates the composition and scope of harmful speech content targeting religions.

This study employs the classification system previously developed by Verité Research to evaluate types of harm, primary targets, perpetrators, and the state's response to incidents of violence (please refer Annexure 1 for the complete methodology used in this study). Each incident of violence used to compile this report and its findings was recorded and verified by NCEASL.

Due to limitations in data collated by NCEASL, this study does not feature a separate analysis of the violence and discrimination directed at Hindu and Muslim communities. However, similar to the previous study, Annexure 2 provides a brief description of recorded incidents of violence and discrimination directed at these communities and the underlying narratives that compel prejudice towards minorities in Sri Lanka.

Socio-Political Context

Ethno-religious violence targeting minority groups must be perceived in light of the socio-political context of the time, as it is understood only within the framework of the historical events, economic trends, and political shifts that shaped it.

Beginning in early 2022, the government of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa faced severe criticism from the electorate for its mismanagement of the national economy.¹ The government's poor economic policy decisions forced the country into a severe economic and debt crisis, resulting in the suspension of external debt repayments in April 2022.² The crisis led to a significant erosion in the economic and social well-being of Sri Lankan citizens. Poverty levels doubled, and the overall cost of living skyrocketed as the country's inability to afford imports caused hikes in the prices of food and essential items.³ On 14 November 2023, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, in a historic ruling, determined that former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and several others were responsible for the country's economic crisis. The court ruled that the government's mismanagement of the country's economy from 2019 to 2022 violated the fundamental rights of the people.

Last year, the continuing economic and debt crisis caused severe shortages of essential goods and services and 13-hour-long daily power cuts, triggering widespread public discontent and anger directed at the government.⁴ The mounting public discontent reached a crescendo in island-wide protests, collectively known as the *aragalaya* (democratic peaceful struggle). The *aragalaya* advocated for change in the entrenched political leadership, demanding the immediate resignation of then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and the removal of all members of the Rajapaksa family from positions of state authority.⁵ The *aragalaya* transcended communal differences garnering broad support nation-wide, and represented almost every ethnic and religious community, social class, professional organisation and private sector entity. The *aragalaya* was a uniquely Sri Lankan movement, symbolising a unified front and unity of purpose seldom seen before in the nation's history.⁶

Despite government backlash, the *aragalaya* persisted with predominantly peaceful protests for several months, until the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in July 2022.⁷ His resignation paved the way towards the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to accede to the presidency by parliamentary vote.⁸

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government immediately employed its mandate to implement stringent measures aimed at restoring the country's economic stability, including fiscal adjustments, negotiations with creditors, restructuring repayment strategies and reaching a staff-level agreement for a 48-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁹ Despite these initiatives, Sri Lanka's economic and financial condition remains fragile. In September 2023, for instance, the government faced challenges securing the second tranche of funding from the IMF after failing to meet its commitments under the agreement.¹⁰ Following the IMF's first EFF review, Senior IMF Mission Chief for Sri Lanka Peter Breuer shared his assessment that while there were initial signs of economic stability in Sri Lanka, a complete

economic recovery was not assured.¹¹

Sri Lanka's economic crisis cannot be solely attributed to fiscal issues – it is also closely interwoven with weak governance structures and widespread corruption. The country's governance crisis has come to the forefront over the past year, revealing poor governance practices, mismanagement of public finances, vested interests, and lack of transparency as contributing significantly to the current situation. Attempting to solve the immediate economic crisis without resolving the underlying issues in governance that caused it has resulted in Sri Lanka facing a fundamental threat to its already damaged democracy.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government has faced significant criticism over the past year, foremost of which are allegations of undermining democracy.¹² Critics argue that President Wickremesinghe has stifled dissent and enacted laws repressing democracy.¹³ In August 2022, Wickremesinghe authorised the detention of protesters under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a draconian piece of legislation primarily employed to curtail political dissent and target religious and ethnic minorities.¹⁴ In September 2022, the Wickremesinghe government proposed the Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill, and came under scrutiny for the bill's broad potential to detain individuals advocating for social change, democratic rights, and freedom of religion or belief.¹⁵ In September 2023, the government came under strong criticism for tabling the Online Safety Bill and the Anti-Terrorism Bill intended to replace the PTA.¹⁶ Both bills face broad-based opposition and condemnation for their vague and overreaching provisions, lack of public consultation, and concentration of state power, raising legitimate concern that they are aimed at silencing public discourse and suppressing freedom of expression.

The Wickremesinghe government has also come under severe criticism for contributing to religious discord. In January 2023, YouTube content creator Sepal Amarasinghe was arrested for making 'defamatory remarks' when referring to the tooth relic of the Buddha, sacred to Buddhists. He is recorded to have said "*Oya daladaawa kiyana labbata api baya naa*" – translated as: "We are not afraid of the worthless thing that is called the tooth relic."¹⁷ The majority Sinhala media were critical of Amarasinghe and labelled him an 'anti-Buddhist secularist' working to undermine Sinhala-Buddhist cultural security and ethnic and religious harmony.¹⁸

Similar incidents embroiled Pastor Jerome Fernando and comedian Natasha Edirisooriya who were both accused of making 'defamatory remarks' against Buddhism, highlighting the state's heightened fear and insecurity that Sinhala Buddhism is being systematically undermined. Delivering a sermon at his church in early 2023, Pastor Jerome Fernando was reported to have made 'insulting' and 'derogatory' comments about Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism.¹⁹ Subsequently, on 15 May 2023, President Wickremesinghe ordered an immediate investigation into the pastor's remarks, citing their potential to disrupt religious harmony in the country.²⁰ Politicians and the media drew attention and gave prominence to the comments made by Fernando, stoking fears of Christian fundamentalism and forcible conversion.²¹ In the Sinhala-Buddhist cultural mindset, free churches—loosely referred to as 'evangelical/charismatic groups'—are often perceived as 'fundamentalist' compared to mainstream Christian denominations.²² This perception stems from the view that religious fundamentalists share characteristics across cultures – a strong reliance on religion for identity, the establishment of geographic boundaries to define belonging and adherence to strict behavioural standards.²³ Minority religious groups that display some of these traits are often perceived as fundamentalist, engendering fear and insecurity among the majority Sinhala Buddhist community which views Sri Lanka as an exclusively 'Sinhala-Buddhist nation' and feels compelled to protect its 'Sinhala-Buddhist identity'. Following in the wake of the incident involving Pastor Jerome Fernando in May, stand-up comedian Natasha Edirisooriya was arrested for allegedly insulting Buddhism during the Modabimanaya (Fool's Pride) comedy show held in Colombo.²⁴ Natasha Edirisooriya was arrested under the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR). The comedian's arrest under the ICCPR garnered widespread criticism and was seen by the public as the government's latest move to stifle freedom of speech in the guise of protecting religious harmony.²⁵

Similarly, 'Born Again' Christians are often mistaken for a small denomination of minority Christians outside the mainstream of the faith. Some 'Born Again' Christians faced allegations of having intervened with the Sri Lankan national cricket team, converting some players from Buddhism to become 'Born Again' Christians.²⁶ Politicians, members of the Buddhist clergy and the Sinhala mainstream media raised concerns about these conversions, which have been seen historically as a threat to the cultural security of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation.²⁷ Christian conversion and the spread of Christianity often tends to be linked to colonial missionary efforts in the Sri Lankan psyche, efforts which resulted in a significant number of Buddhists converting to

Christianity. This negative historical memory contributes to the fear and insecurity that demands the preservation of Sinhala-Buddhist culture in post-independence Sri Lanka.²⁸

Additionally, the past year saw tensions over contested religious sites in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The Tamil media documented attacks on Hindu temples and the construction of new Buddhist structures and shrines in the region, coinciding with activities by the Department of Archaeology in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka.²⁹ Tensions re-erupted over a sacred site in Kurunthormalai/Kurundimale when a discussion took place between President Wickremesinghe, a group of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) members of parliament and officials of the Department of Archaeology on the matter of acquisition of excess land by the department.³⁰ Subsequent to the discussion, on June 12, the Director General of the Department of Archaeology Anura Manatunga resigned from office.³¹ The Department of Archaeology's actions are perceived by the minority communities as part of an ongoing effort to promote Sinhala-Buddhist culture in these areas of the country.

Collectively, these incidents and events indicate two significant trends: state involvement in ethno-religious issues and a concern among the Sinhala Buddhist majority that Sinhala-Buddhist dominance is eroding due to perceived threats from minority communities and 'anti-Buddhist secularists'.

This report seeks to analyse the prevalence of religiously motivated violence, in the current socio-political context, against Christians, Muslims and Hindus from November 2022 to October 2023.

Chapter 1

Key Insights on Violence Against Christians

Violence Over the Years

Sri Lanka remains a country where Christians are vulnerable to religiously motivated violence. The parameters of this study are confined to the period from November 2022 to October 2023, but the findings of this study are compared against the trends and patterns of religious violence against Christians observed in past studies and build on the analytical framework laid out in previous research conducted by Verité Media of Verité Research. This section presents a comparative analysis of broader trends in violence against Christians over the past decade and offers an overview of how incidents of violence in 2023 compare with previous years (refer Exhibit 1).

A total of 63 incidents of violence targeting Christians were recorded during the period under review (November 2022 to October 2023) – a slight decrease from the 75 recorded incidents of violence analysed in the previous study covering the period from November 2021 to October 2022.

Exhibit 1 is a year-by-year comparison of the total number of violent incidents recorded each year (from January to December), except this year where the total number of recorded incidents is from January 2023 to October 2023. Exhibit 1 indicates a trend of religiously motivated violent incidents against Christians increasing over the last decade. However, a comparison between the number of incidents from January to October 2022 (65 incidents) and January to October 2023 (53 incidents) indicates a reduction in 2023 in the total number of violent incidents during the same time period.

Previous studies by Verité Media on religious violence categorised events or situations that resulted in reduced violence against Christians as disruptions or distractions.³²

Disruption is a term used in this report to mean the emergence of significant logistical obstacles that hinder potential offenders from participating in religiously motivated violence. For example, the COVID-19 lockdowns and temporary fuel shortages in 2022 were disruptions in the otherwise escalating pattern of violence against Christians.³³

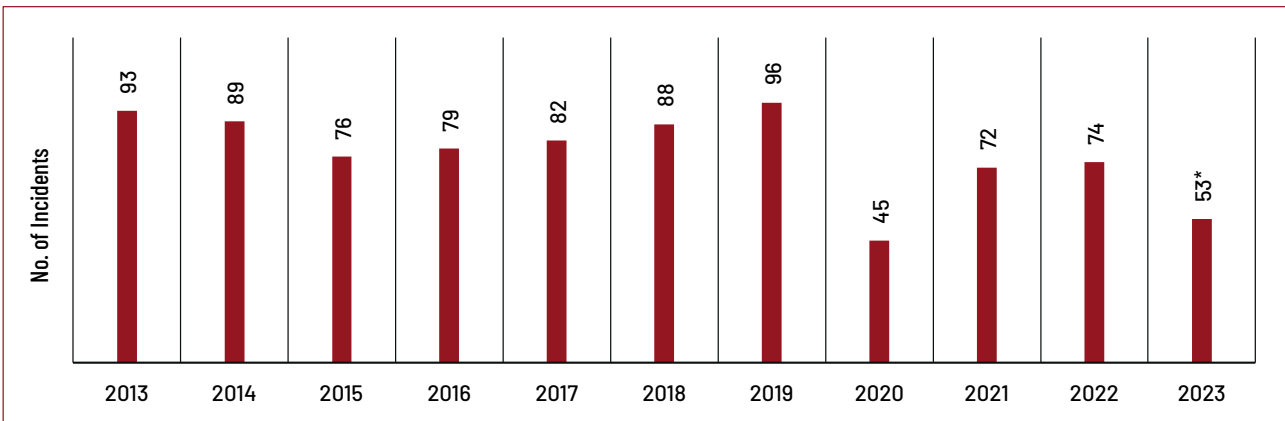
Distractions is a term used in this report to mean occurrences of events or situations that tend to have an extraordinary impact in diverting the attention of potential perpetrators from engaging in religiously motivated violence.³⁴ For example, the previous report found that the national convergence of the *aragalaya* and its focused concentration on changing the country's political leadership temporarily interrupted the increasing trend of violent incidents targeting Christians.³⁵

The current review period however did not include events or situations that could be characterised as either disruptions or distractions causing the potential reduction in violent incidents targeting Christians in 2023. Instead, the review period did include events and situations that gained national-level attention, which may have potentially influenced the patterns of violence against Christians.

Exhibit 2 shows the monthly count of incidents of violence for the current period under review, indicating that incidents of violence increased notably in February, reduced over the next two months, and thereafter intensified over a period of three months from May 2023. A qualitative analysis of these peak periods revealed that most incidents of violence against Christians in February involved less physical forms of violence such as discriminatory actions or practices. In contrast, during the three-month period from May to July, more severe forms of violence including physical attacks on congregants and physical damage to churches intensified.

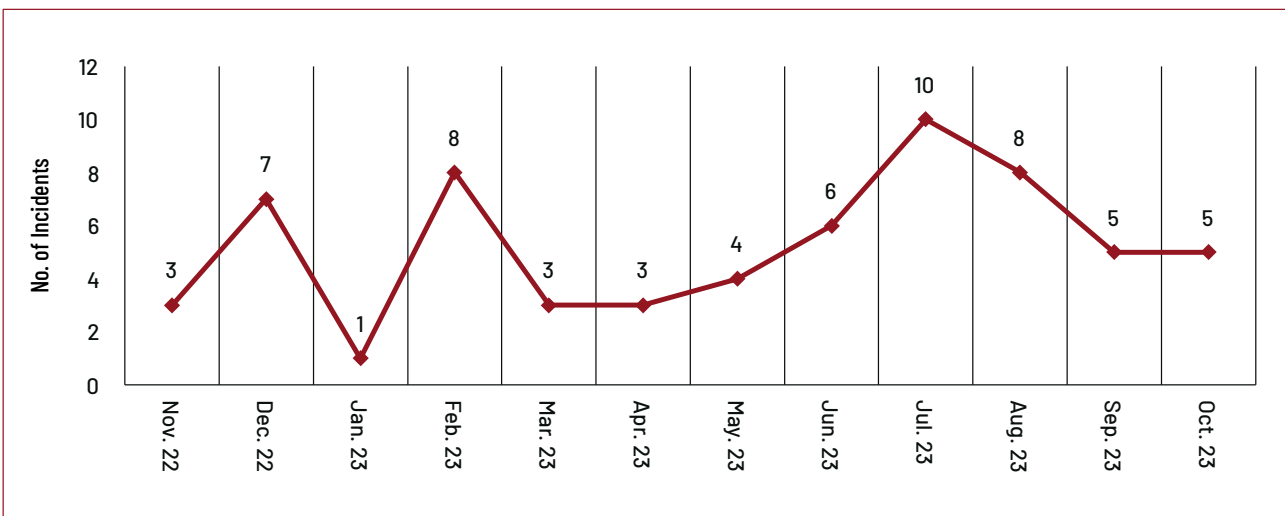
Notably, the months that registered an increased frequency of on-the-ground incidents of religiously motivated violence aligned with events that gained national-level attention bearing on religious freedom. These included the incidents involving YouTube content creator Sepal Amarasinghe, Pastor Jerome Fernando and Natasha Edirisooriya which are discussed in more detail in the Socio-political Context section of this report.

Exhibit 1: Total number of incidents of religious violence targeting Christians by year (2013 -2023)



**This exhibit is a year-by-year comparison. The data for 2023 is only up to October 2023.*

Exhibit 2: Total number of incidents of violence by month (November 2022 - October 2023)



**The incidents are recorded only up to October 2023*

Overview of Violence: Type of Harm, Key Perpetrators and Primary Targets (November 2022 to October 2023)

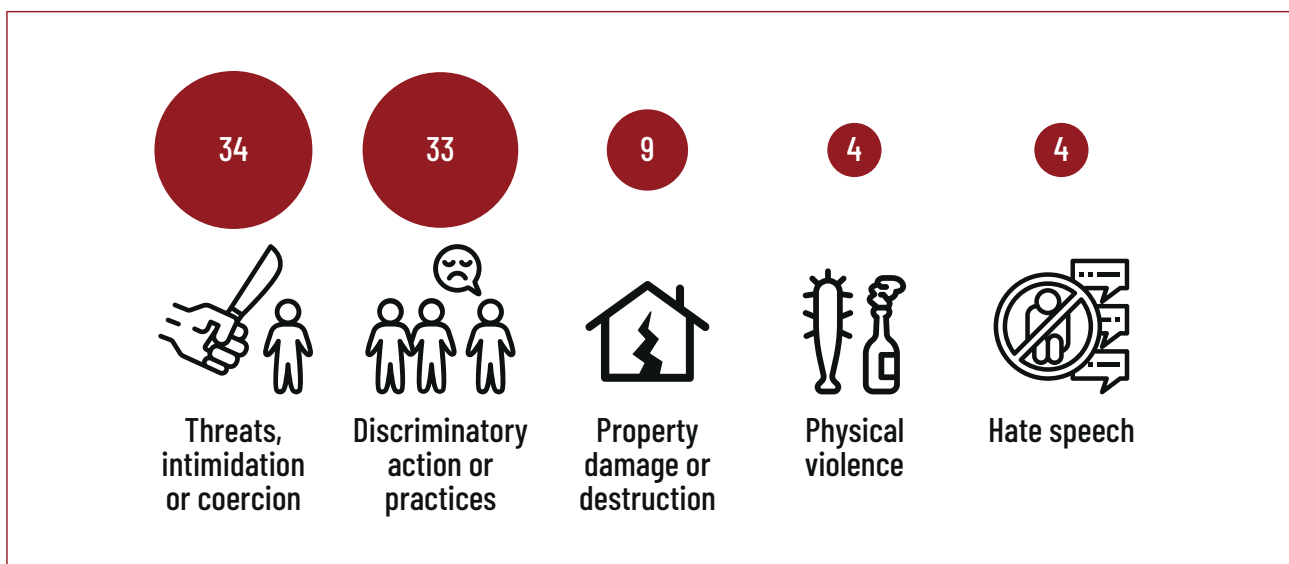
This report, similar to past research conducted by Verité Media in 2021, 2022 and 2023,³⁶ utilises identical classification systems to assess the nature of violence against Christians as outlined systematically in Exhibit 3 and elaborated in Annexure 1. Consistent with earlier findings, the report notes that each incident of violence could feature and involve multiple types of harm, perpetrators and primary targets. As a result, the aggregated data on the types of harm, perpetrator groups and primary targets surpass the total number of recorded incidents. This section will provide a brief overview of the violence against Christians that took place during the period under review.

Exhibit 3: Categorisation of severity of violence or harm

Severity of violence or harm	Description
Most severe forms of violence	Carrying out physical violence against persons
Severe forms of violence	Violence involving property damage
Borderline severe forms of violence	Includes threats, intimidation or coercion. This type of violence generally does not include physical violence or damage to property and is generally low in intensity. In extreme cases, this type of violence may lead to more severe forms of violence
Least severe forms of violence	Includes discriminatory actions or practices

Exhibit 4 indicates that the most frequently encountered forms of violence against Christians are those classified as borderline severe, such as threats, intimidation or coercion, which occurred in 34 instances recorded during the review period. There were 33 instances of least severe forms of violence recorded, which included discriminatory actions or practices.

Exhibit 4: Distribution of the types of harm (November 2022 - October 2023)



**A single incident may feature more than one type of harm. Therefore, the total amount calculated within each type of harm may exceed the total number of incidents.*

Exhibit 5 highlights a shift in the patterns of the types of harm observed in this study as compared to the two previous studies covering the periods of October 2020 to October 2021 and November 2021 to October 2022. In the previous two years, the most frequently encountered type of harm was discriminatory actions

or practices. However, in the present study harm has shifted and intensified to threats, intimidation or coercion. Specifically, there was a 54% increase in number of incidents involving threats, intimidation or coercion (from 22 to 34 incidents) during the current review period compared to the previous one (November 2021 to October 2022). Conversely, there was a significant 39% decrease in number of instances of discriminatory actions or practices (from 54 to 33 incidents). The frequency of property damage and physical violence remained largely unchanged.

Exhibit 5: Breakdown of the most common types of harm inflicted on Christians over the years

	Discriminatory actions	Threats, intimidation or coercion	Physical violence + Property damage
Sep. 2019 – Sep. 2020	70%	79%	29%
Oct. 2020 – Oct. 2021	65%	64%	13%
Nov. 2021 – Oct. 2022	72%	29%	13%
Nov. 2022 – Oct. 2023	52%	54%	21%

**A single incident may feature more than one type of harm*

As observed in Exhibit 6, over the years the key perpetrators of violence against Christians have been consistent. These key perpetrators could be categorised into two groups: the state and the people (inclusive of identifiable individuals from the local community and members of the Buddhist clergy). As illustrated in Exhibit 7, most incidents of violence were identified to have been committed by state officials (31), followed by identifiable individuals from local communities (14) and members of the Buddhist clergy (11).

Notably, over the years, the state’s involvement in perpetrating harm against Christians has decreased. The state involvement in incidents of violence against Christians has ranged between 49% and 68% since 2019. The involvement of identifiable individuals has increased over time ranging from 22% to 44% and the involvement of Buddhist clergy has ranged between 17% and 28%, with the exception of the current review period.

Exhibit 6: Involvement of key perpetrators in violence against Christians as a percentage

	State officials	Identifiable individuals	Buddhist clergy	Total no. of incidents
Sep. 2019 – Sep. 2020	65%	24%	22%	63
Oct. 2020 – Oct. 2021	68%	32%	24%	72
Nov. 2021 – Oct. 2022	56%	44%	28%	75
Nov. 2022 – Oct. 2023	49%	22%	17%	63

**A single incident may feature more than one key perpetrator*

Exhibit 7: Distribution of key perpetrators of violence against Christians (November 2022 – October 2023)

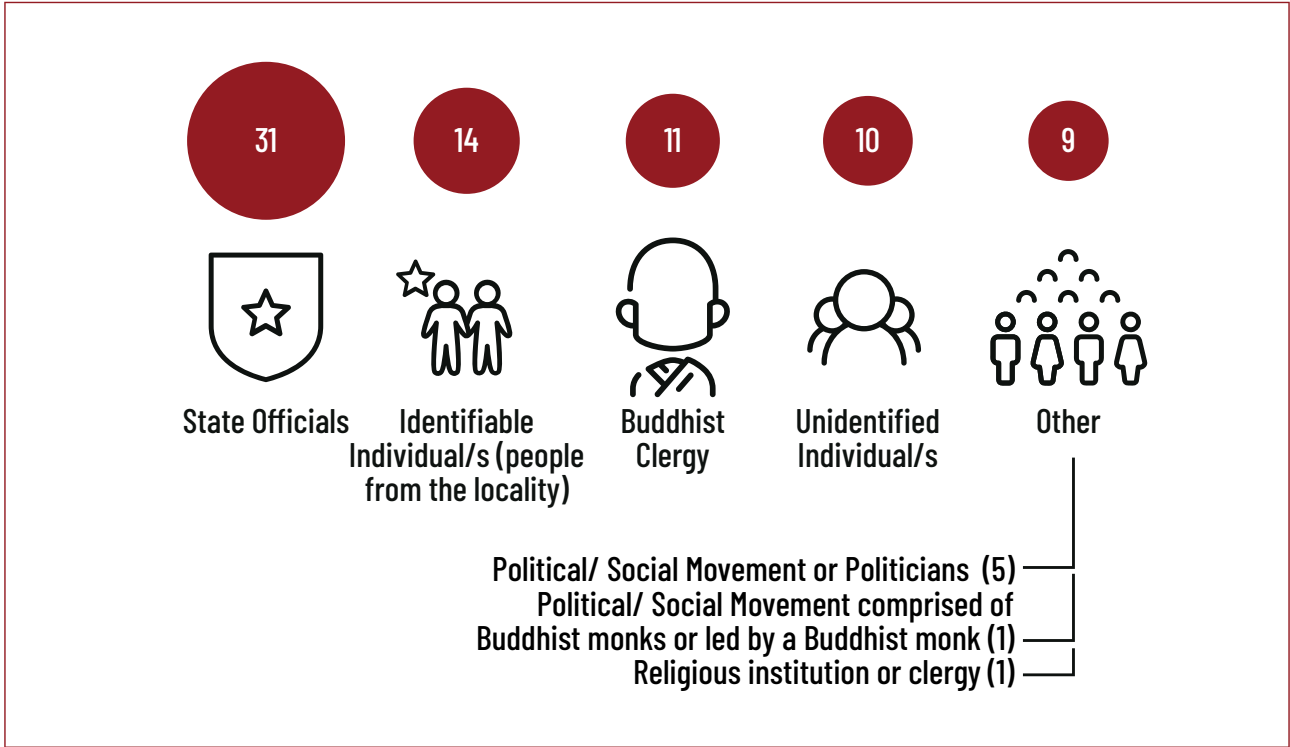
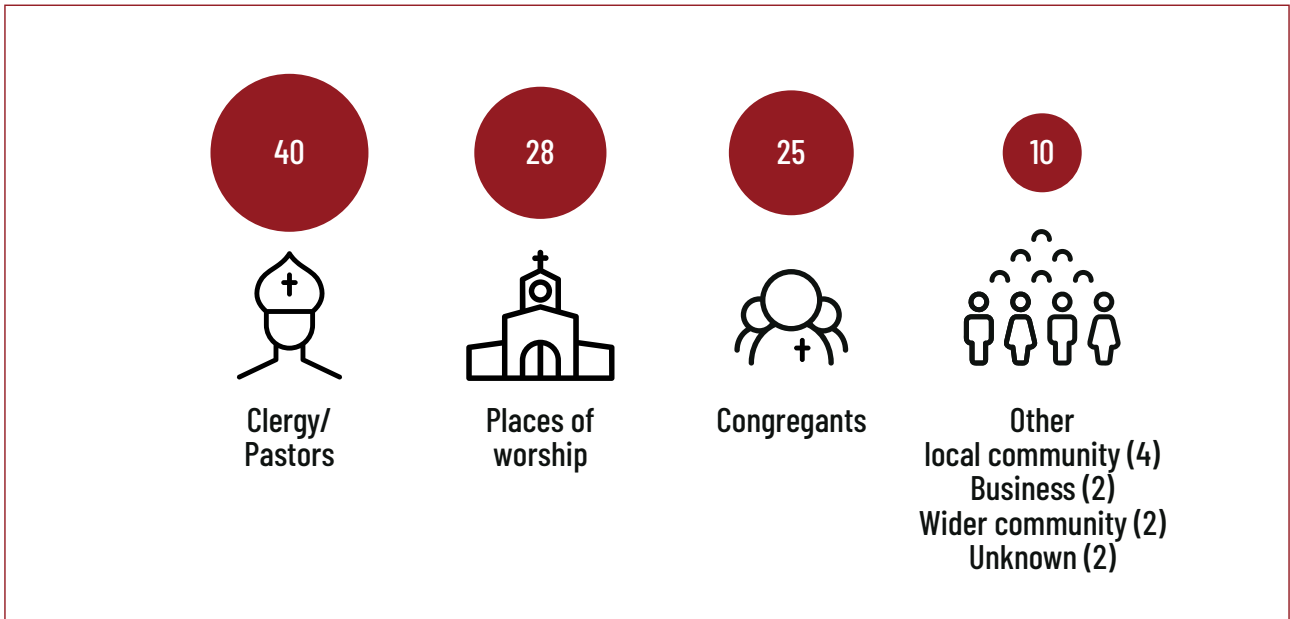


Exhibit 8 illustrates the fact that the primary targets in acts of violence against Christians from November 2022 to October 2023 were predominantly members of the Christian clergy (40), followed by Christian places of worship (28). These findings remain consistent with the findings of the previous studies conducted by Verité Research in 2021 and 2022.

Exhibit 8: Distribution of primary targets of violence against Christians (November 2022 – October 2023)



Gender and Incidents of Violence Against Christians

The previous study, analysing incidents of violence against Christians for the period November 2021 to October 2022, introduced the documentation of an additional data point in the classification of violent incidents which allowed further detailed analysis of incidents with regard to the gender of (1) the victims and (2) the perpetrators of violence against Christians.

The gender of the primary target (victim) was documented in 59.7% of recorded incidents. In the incidents that documented the gender of the primary target, 80% were male while 20% were female. A majority of the identified male primary targets were members of the Christian clergy. In contrast, identified female primary targets were mainly spouses of male pastors.

The gender of perpetrators of violent incidents was largely unknown or unspecified in the incident reports provided by NCEASL. There were only 16 incidents where the perpetrator's gender was identified—in each instance as male—among whom seven were Buddhist clergy.

Unfortunately, the inability to identify or document the gender of most primary targets and perpetrators restricted the ability to uncover any significant statistical relationship between gender and the incidence of religious violence against Christians.

Chapter 2

Social Dynamics of Violence Against Christians – Three Core Empirical Insights

Analysis of data concerning religiously motivated violence against Christians over the years has revealed three key empirical insights. These insights provide data-driven explanations of the factors driving violence against Christians, including the primary perpetrators of violent incidents, their main targets, and the nature of the violence.

Over the years, violence against Christians in Sri Lanka has been predominantly instigated by two main groups of perpetrators. The first group comprises state officials (hereafter referred to as ‘the state’), while the second group consists of identifiable individuals (hereafter referred to as ‘the people’).

This section is presented in three parts. The first part delves into the primary targets of violence against Christians. The data reveals a consistent pattern in the perpetrators’ preference for specific targets within the Christian community. The second part analyses the main perpetrators and the nature of harm they inflict on Christians, highlighting how different perpetrator groups tend to focus on different forms of violence towards the Christian community. The final part explores the dual role of the state – acting both as a protector of Christian citizens and, paradoxically, as a perpetrator of violence against them. The data points to a correlation between the state’s actions and a discernible prejudice or negative bias towards Christians. Additionally, this section examines the role of the police in exacerbating violence against Christians.

Each part aims to provide a clearer understanding of the social dynamics and complexities involved in violence against Christians.

Element One: Key Perpetrators and their Primary Targets – The State and the People Target Counterpart in Rank

Analysis of the data suggests a two-pronged approach in the violence against Christians. It indicates that state authorities as perpetrators of violence against Christians target religious leaders and symbols such as pastors and places of worship. By contrast, the people (identifiable individuals from the local community) are more often involved in incidents of violence targeting Christian congregants.

Exhibit 9 in the report is indicative of this pattern reflected in historical data on violence against Christians. Exhibit 10 and 11 show how each key perpetrator’s participation in violence over the years. The data highlights a tendency of state actors to target pastors and Christian places of worship (see Exhibit 10). In the current period of review, the involvement of state officials in perpetrating violence against pastors and places of worship has decreased when compared to previous years. The involvement of state officials in incidents of violence targeting places of worship showed a reduction of 16.4% from 2020–2021 and a 26.5% reduction from the 2021–2022 period (see Exhibit 10). State officials’ involvement in incidents of violence targeting the clergy had decreased by 29.3% from the 2020–2021 period and by 18.4% from the 2021–2022 period (see Exhibit 10). However, the reduced state involvement in incidents targeting the church and clergy during the current period of study is most likely due to the overall drop in state participation in incidents of violence targeting Christians. Nevertheless, the overall involvement of state officials in incidents of violence targeting pastors and places of worship has been relatively high over the years (see Exhibit 10).

As identified in previous reports, there appears to be an underlying assumption that undermining these central figures, such as pastors and leaders, and Christian places of worship might result in the reduction or even a halt in Christian practices within a specific area. This underlying assumption is corroborated by an analysis of qualitative data from NCEASL for the period under review.³⁷ The data documents instances where Christian clergy are interrogated regarding the legality of their places of worship (10 incidents) and face intimidation and coercion to discontinue worship activities in the region. Documented evidence suggests that discriminatory actions are predominantly executed against both visible, tangible symbols of Christianity, such as places of worship, and the principal figures of religious authority and leadership within the Christian community.

Identifiable individual perpetrators have predominantly targeted Christian congregants (see Exhibit 11). The involvement of identifiable individuals in incidents of violence targeting the congregants shows a reduction of 56.3% from the 2020–2021 period and a reduction of 64.7% from 2021–2022 (see Exhibit 11) – similar reductions were also seen in violence by state actions.

Exhibit 9: The targets of violence by groups of perpetrators (2022–2023)

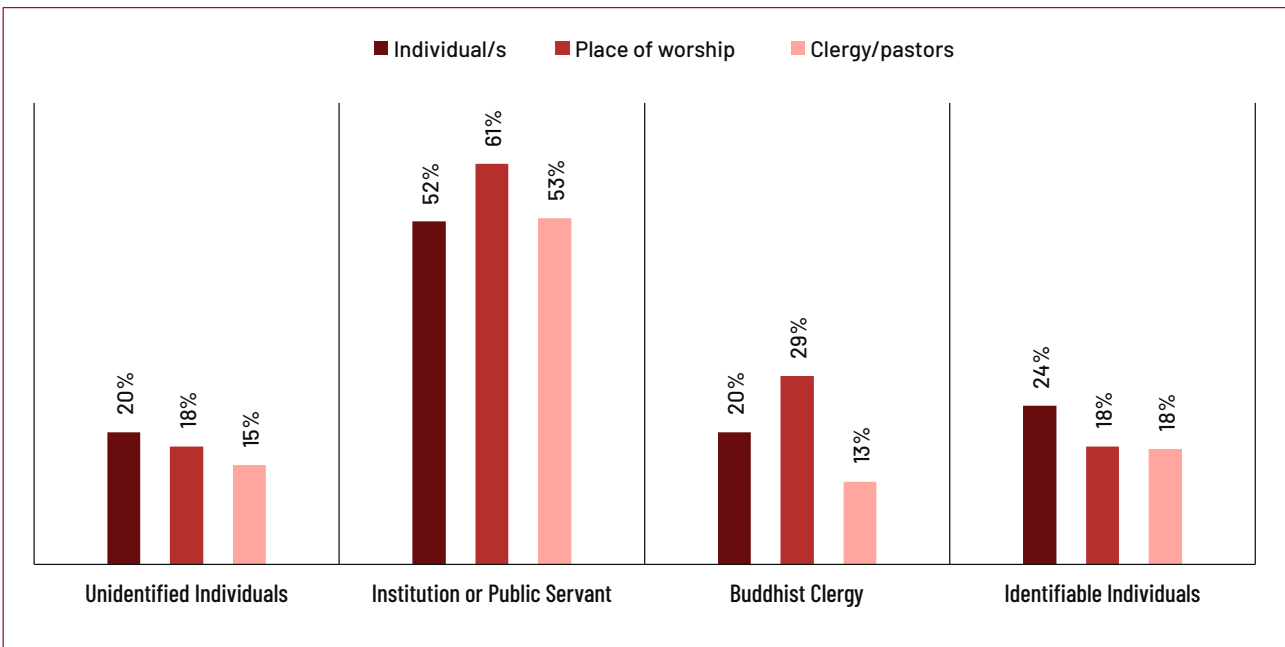


Exhibit 10: The targets of violence by state officials over the years

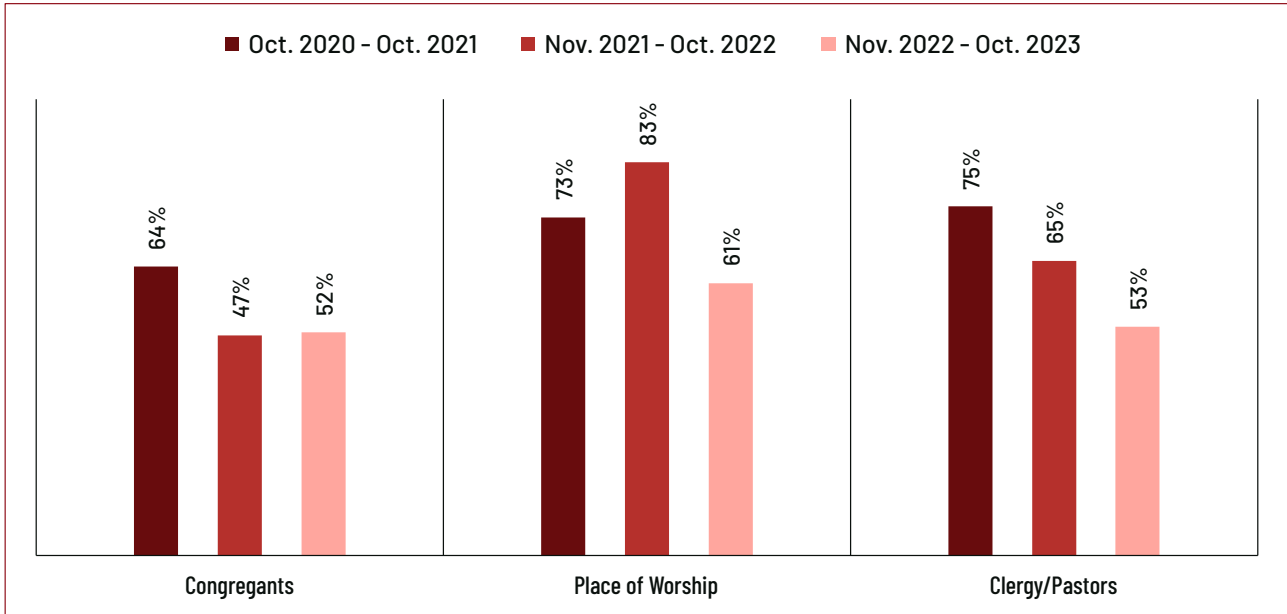
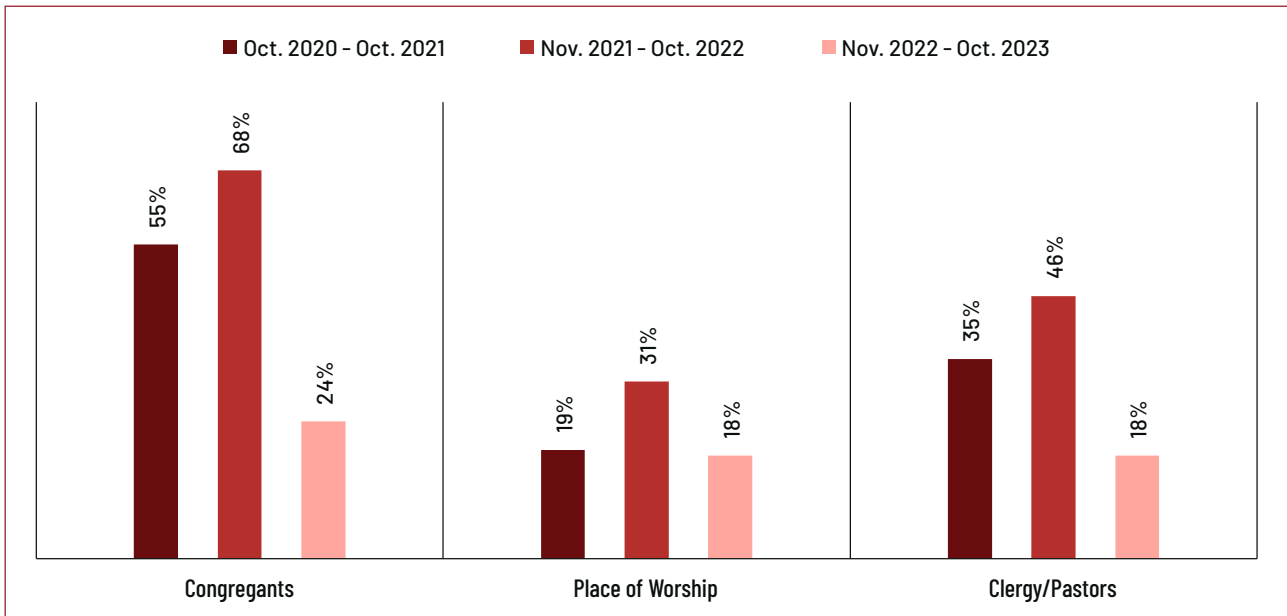


Exhibit 11: The targets of violence by identifiable individuals over the years



Element Two: Key Perpetrators and Type of Harm – The State Engages in Non-Physical Violence, the People Engage in Physical Violence

Analysis of data suggests that the state is more likely to perpetrate non-physical, structural or systemic violence, whereas non-state actors, identifiable individuals, are more likely to cause direct harm on Christians.

Exhibit 12 illustrates the distinction between each perpetrator group and the likelihood of them engaging in different forms of violence against Christians.

On the one hand, as indicated in Exhibits 12 and 13, the state is more frequently associated with perpetrating violence such as discriminatory actions or practices and threats, intimidation or coercion—rather than physical violence. During the 2020–2021 period, state officials were involved in 85% of discriminatory actions or practices (see Exhibit 13) and 78% of threats, intimidation or coercion (see Exhibit 14) against Christians. A similar pattern emerged in the 2022–2023 period, with state involvement observed in 88% of discriminatory actions or practices and 44% of threats, intimidation or coercion-based violence against Christians (see Exhibit 12). Examples of such forms of violence include instances where state officials employed discriminatory actions or practices by requesting church registration documentation or threatening to demolish a church building by claiming government ownership of the land (5 incidents).

On the other hand, non-state actors, identifiable individuals, are more prone to inflicting direct physical harm on Christians. Exhibit 12 indicates that 50% of physical violence against Christians during the current period under review was attributed to identifiable individuals. This direct, tangible threat, including physical violence and property damage, stands in sharp contrast to the state’s passive methods of violence: underscoring a distinct difference in the exertion of power and influence by these groups.

Exhibit 12: The different forms of violence employed by key perpetrator groups (2022–2023)

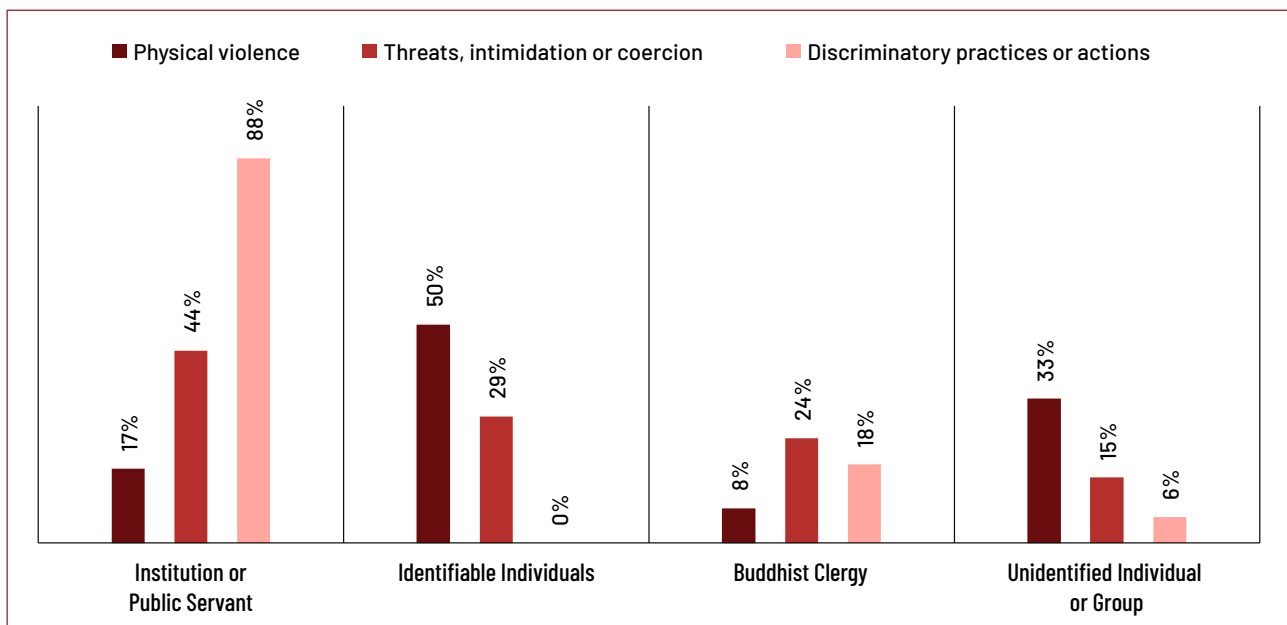


Exhibit 13: Involvement of key perpetrators using violence in the form of discriminatory practices or actions as a percentage over the years

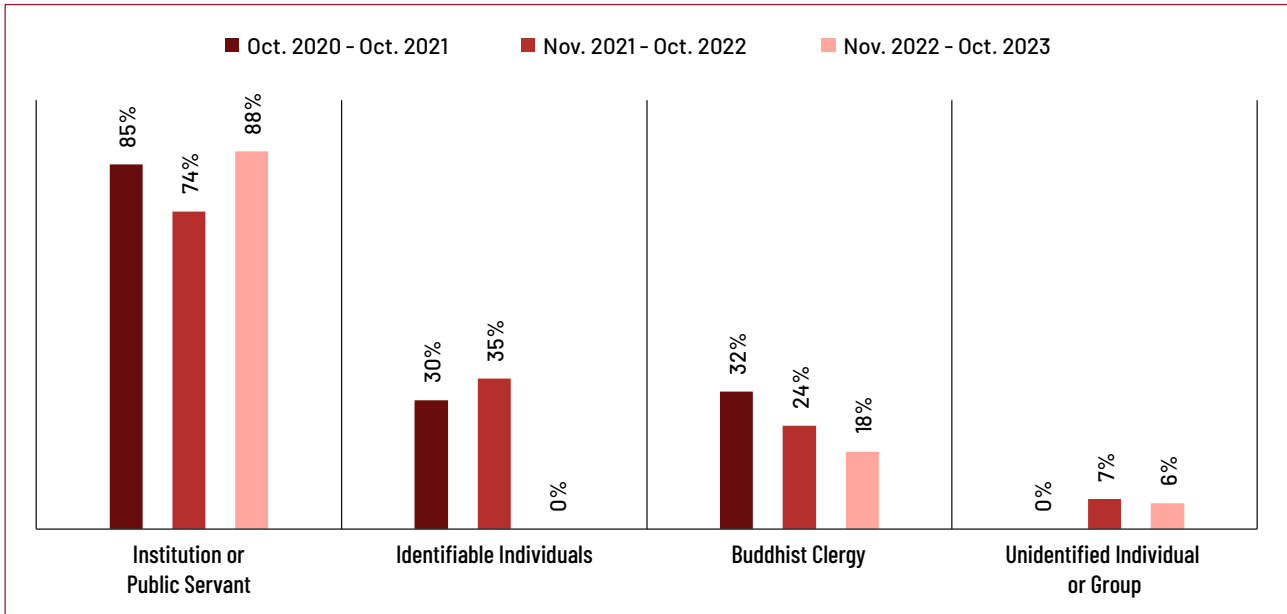
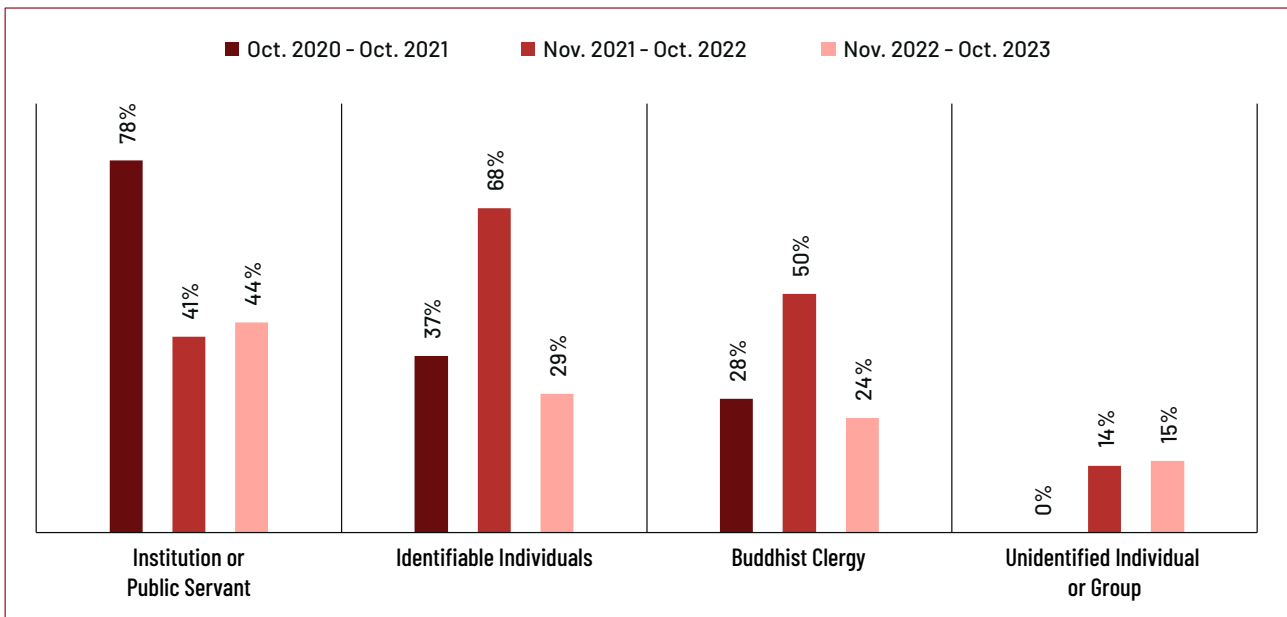


Exhibit 14: Involvement of key perpetrators using violence in the form of threats, intimidation or coercion as a percentage over the years



Element Three: The Role of the State – The Protector and the Perpetrator

In exploring the multifaceted role of the state in violence against Christians, the study encounters a paradoxical duality: the state as both the protector of its citizens (inclusive of Christians) and the perpetrator of violence against Christians.

The analysis is divided into two sections: the first part summarises a citizen’s legal rights and protections with regard to religious beliefs, and the second part examines the state’s role and culpability (including that of the police) in perpetrating violence against Christians.

The State as the Protector

The Sri Lankan government has the primary duty of protecting religious freedom and ensuring the safety of its diverse religious communities from religiously motivated violence. The Constitution of Sri Lanka, particularly Article 10, clearly enshrines the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In addition, Article 12 of the Constitution mandates equality before the law and prohibits discrimination, including on religious grounds. Article 14 (1)(e) of the Constitution further emphasises this, guaranteeing a citizen's right to public and private expression of religious beliefs.

On the global stage, Sri Lanka's commitment to religious freedom is reinforced as a signatory to international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Despite these legal protections and freedoms, Christians are subjected to religiously motivated violence perpetrated by the state.

The State as the Perpetrator

In line with earlier studies, it has become increasingly evident that state officials (including the police) are frequently involved in incidents of violence against Christians. The first section of the analysis examines the entrenched nature of the state's 'negative bias' towards Christians functioning in an environment free of violence. The second section focuses on the actions of law enforcement officers (the police) that further reinforce the state's negative bias towards Christians.

i. The entrenched nature of the state's negative bias

Consistent with previous review periods, the data from the current period reaffirms a troubling pattern – the frequent involvement of state officials in perpetrating acts of violence against Christians, supported by the police. This suggests a persistent issue of a 'negative bias' within the state apparatus towards the Christian community, under successive governments.

The past four studies—inclusive of the current study—show that the incidents of violence against Christians in which the state complicit is likely to account for over half of all such incidents within a given period of review, as is extrapolated from the data in Exhibit 6 included in Chapter 1.

As detailed in previous studies conducted by Verité Media the state's negative bias stems primarily from two main factors:

1. The state's unchecked authority, allowing it to act with impunity.
2. A deeply ingrained belief in protecting the majority Sinhala-Buddhist identity from perceived threats posed by minority groups.

ii. Police action as reinforcing negative state bias

Exhibits 15 and 16 present data on police action in relation to two main types of perpetrators of violence against Christians over three periods – state officials and identifiable individuals.

First, these exhibits demonstrate that, over the years, the police are more likely to be actively or tacitly supportive of the violence carried out by state officials in comparison to the violence carried out by identifiable individuals.

Second, there has been an increase in passive intervention rates (intervention after the event) since 2020 when the perpetrators were identifiable individuals. Exhibit 16 illustrates that the intervention rates increased from 4% to 18% and eventually to 43% in the 2020–2021, 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 periods respectively when the type of perpetrator was an identifiable individual.

Exhibit 15: Police response to institutions or public servants over the years

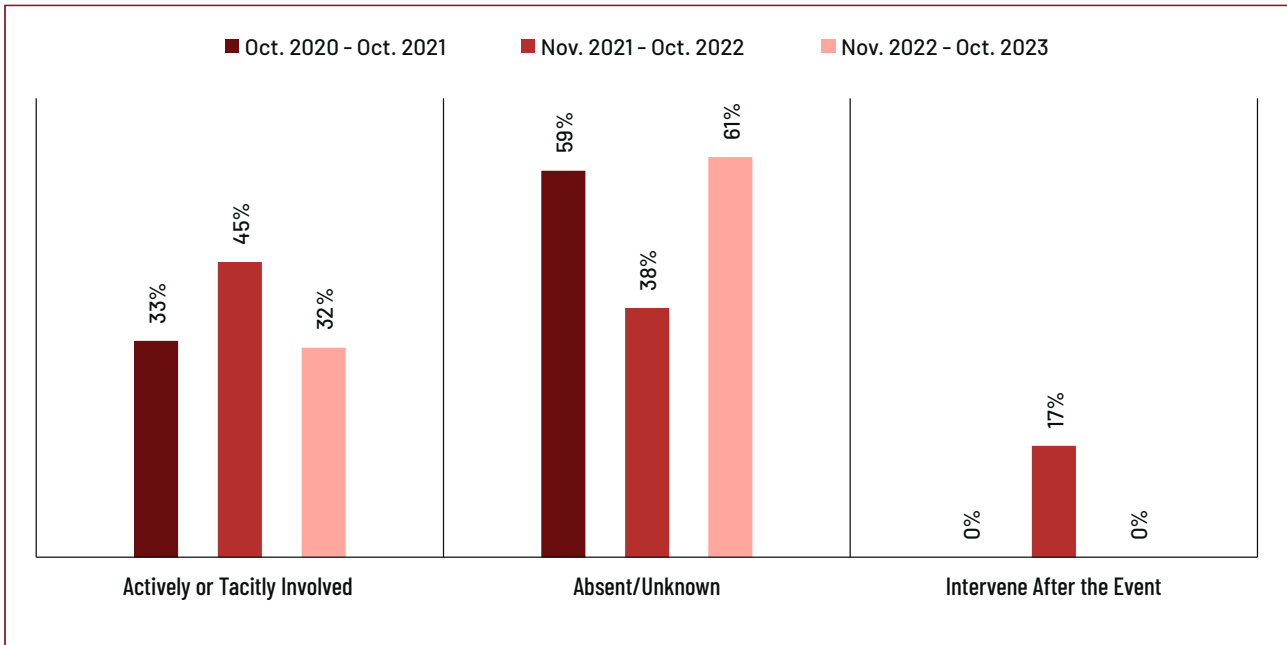
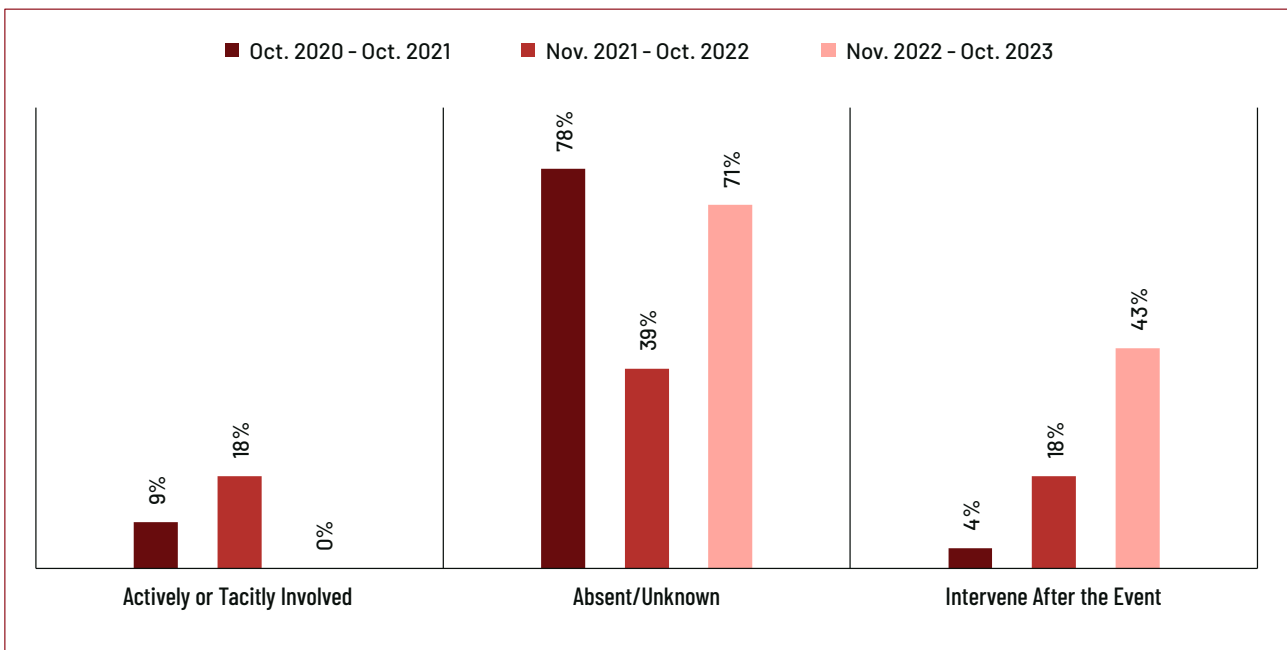


Exhibit 16: Police response to identifiable individuals over the years



Chapter 3

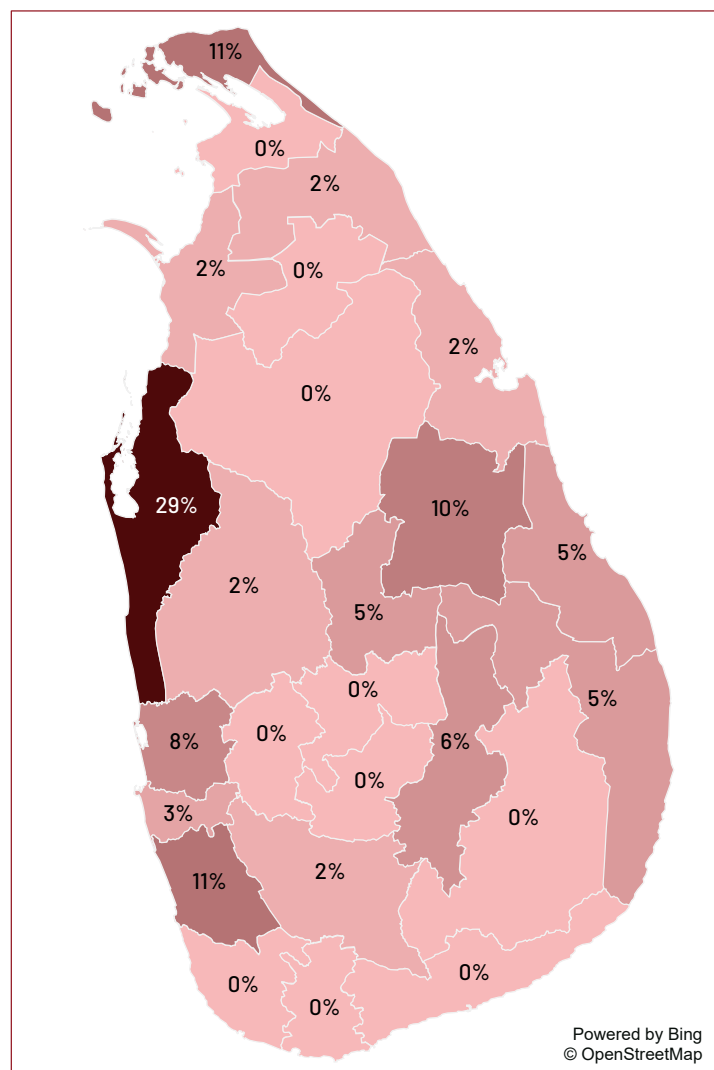
Geographic Distribution of Violence (District-level Breakdown)

Violence against Christians was documented in 15 of the 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka, indicating a marginal decrease from findings reported in the preceding analysis by Verité Research in 2022. This decrease can be attributed to the overall reduction in the number of incidents of violence against Christians recorded in the period under review. The previous period recorded violence against Christians in 17 of the 25 administrative districts, with Kalutara recording the highest number of incidents (13), followed by Anuradhapura (10) and Mannar (seven).

In the current period under review, the districts of Puttalam (18) and Kalutara (seven)—both situated in the West and Jaffna (seven) in the North of Sri Lanka featured the highest number of incidents of violence against Christians (see Figure 17).

The recorded incidents in the Kalutara District have decreased compared to the previous reporting period. Kalutara was one of the two districts with the highest number of incidents, reporting 10 incidents in 2020, 20 incidents in 2021 and 13 incidents in 2022. In contrast, Puttalam has not been among the top two districts with the highest incidence of violence since 2015. It was last reported in the top two districts with the highest incidence of violence during the 2010–2014 period, recording 28 incidents.³⁸ Similarly, Jaffna has recorded a lower number of incidents (less than 5) of violence against Christians since 2010.

Exhibit 17: District-level breakdown of incidents of violence targeting Christians (2022–2023)



Demographic Characteristics of Puttalam, Kalutara and Jaffna

This section draws demographic comparisons and contrasts between the districts of Puttalam and Kalutara.

According to the latest available data from the Department of Census and Statistics (as per the last census held in 2012), the district of Puttalam is predominantly Buddhist, making up 43% of the population. Followers of Hinduism and Islam represent 3.7% and 19.7% of the population respectively. In terms of Christian demographics, Roman Catholic Christians (identified as Roman Catholic in the census) and non-Roman Catholic Christians (identified simply as Christian in the census) constitute 31.5% and 1.5% of the population respectively.³⁹

Kalutara District is comprised of a majority Buddhist population (83%), with Hindu and Muslim populations of 3% and 9% respectively and Roman Catholic Christian and non-Roman Catholic Christian populations of 3% and 0.7% respectively – significantly lower percentages than in the Puttalam District (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012).⁴⁰

Jaffna District is comprised of a majority Hindu population (83%), with Muslim and Buddhist populations of 0.4% and 0.37% respectively. In terms of Christian demographics, similar to Puttalam district, a significant portion of the population identifies as either Catholic Christians (12.9%) or non-Catholic Christians (3.5%).⁴¹

NCEASL documented 22 incidents of violence where the religious identities of the perpetrators were captured (one incident featured perpetrators from multiple religions). Of the 22 incidents where the information on the religious identity of the perpetrator was available, 15 of the incidents recorded the religious identity of the perpetrator as Buddhist, seven incidents recorded the perpetrator as Hindu and in one incident the perpetrator was recorded as Christian – allegedly a priest.

Of the 22 incidents, six incidents in Puttalam, four incidents in Kalutara and five incidents in Jaffna recorded the religious identity of the perpetrator. In all nine instances in Puttalam and Kalutara were recorded as being Buddhist and all five instances in Jaffna were recorded as being Hindu.

Previous studies by Verité Research observed that in certain circumstances identifying the offender or perpetrator as a member of the majority community might suggest a higher propensity for members of the majority community in that geographical region to engage in acts of violence against minority groups.⁴² However, Puttalam and Jaffna present interesting cases. In Puttalam, despite the majority Buddhist influence being only marginal similar patterns of violence against Christians could be seen. In Jaffna, despite the majority being Hindu, a higher number of incidents of violence against Christians could be observed.

Patterns of Violence in Puttalam, Kalutara and Jaffna

Certain parallels emerged in the analyses of the types of harm inflicted on Christians in two of the districts where the highest number of violent incidents occurred during the current review period – namely, Puttalam and Kalutara. In both regions, Christians primarily faced discrimination, threats, intimidation or coercion. Specifically, Kalutara reported four incidents of discrimination and four incidents of threats, intimidation or coercion. Puttalam reported 12 incidents of discriminatory actions or practices and nine incidents of threats, intimidation or coercion. In Puttalam, a notable observation was the reporting of three incidents of religiously motivated property damage or destruction constituting one-third of all reported instances of property damage. In Jaffna, the harm inflicted upon Christians varied. There were two cases of religiously motivated property damage or destruction, three instances of discriminatory practices and actions, and two situations involving threats, intimidation, and coercion.

In most incidents in Puttalam and Kalutara, the key perpetrators were state officials (nine and four instances, respectively). In Jaffna, in most incidents the key perpetrator was a social or political movement. The data indicated differing patterns in the two districts as to the primary target of the violence. In Puttalam (in 14 out of 18) and in Jaffna (in three out of seven), the Christian clergy/pastors could be identified as the primary targets, whereas in Kalutara in six out of seven instances, the place of worship was the primary target.

Chapter 4

Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms

Online platforms have been implicated in the amplifying of harmful speech that directly contributes to religious violence. For instance, Facebook is reported as playing a significant role in the spread of harmful speech against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar.⁴³ In another instance, Facebook apologised for its role in the riots in Digana in early 2018. An investigation found that hate speech and rumours spread on Facebook may have led to violence against Muslims.⁴⁴ Hence, the harm is not just the result or aftermath but is embedded in the very utterance, making harmful speech a form of violence in itself.⁴⁵

Harmful speech encompasses a wide spectrum of often overlapping and intersecting phenomena that include a variety of types of speech that cause different types of harm (Faris et al, 2016).⁴⁶ The most familiar type is hate speech.

The information on incidents related to the freedom of religious beliefs on online platforms, including the data, methodology and definitions, was provided by Hashtag Generation through NCEASL. Please see Annexure 3 for a comprehensive explanation of the methodology. Verité Media analysed the data provided by Hashtag Generation.

Overview of Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms

The observations about harmful online speech against prominent religions in Sri Lanka presented here are derived from data gathered by an organisation named Hashtag Generation. This data was categorised into four main types of harmful speech: hate speech, harassment, disinformation and organised advocacy of violence.

The study analysed 470 posts of harmful speech against prominent religions in Sri Lanka found on online platforms from November 2022 to October 2023. Of these posts, 85% were Sinhala language posts and 11% were Tamil language posts (see Exhibit 18).

As seen in Exhibit 19, a significant concentration of this content was found on Facebook, accounting for 86% of the total, followed by 9% on TikTok and 5% on YouTube. The finding that the majority of the content is found on Facebook could be attributable to the fact that the majority of social media users are on Facebook (Datareportal, February 2023).⁴⁷ Notably, 69% of the harmful content manifested in the form of visual media, particularly pictures, including memes and posts (Exhibit 20). For examples of such harmful content, please see Posts 1–5.

Exhibit 18: Language composition of online posts of violence

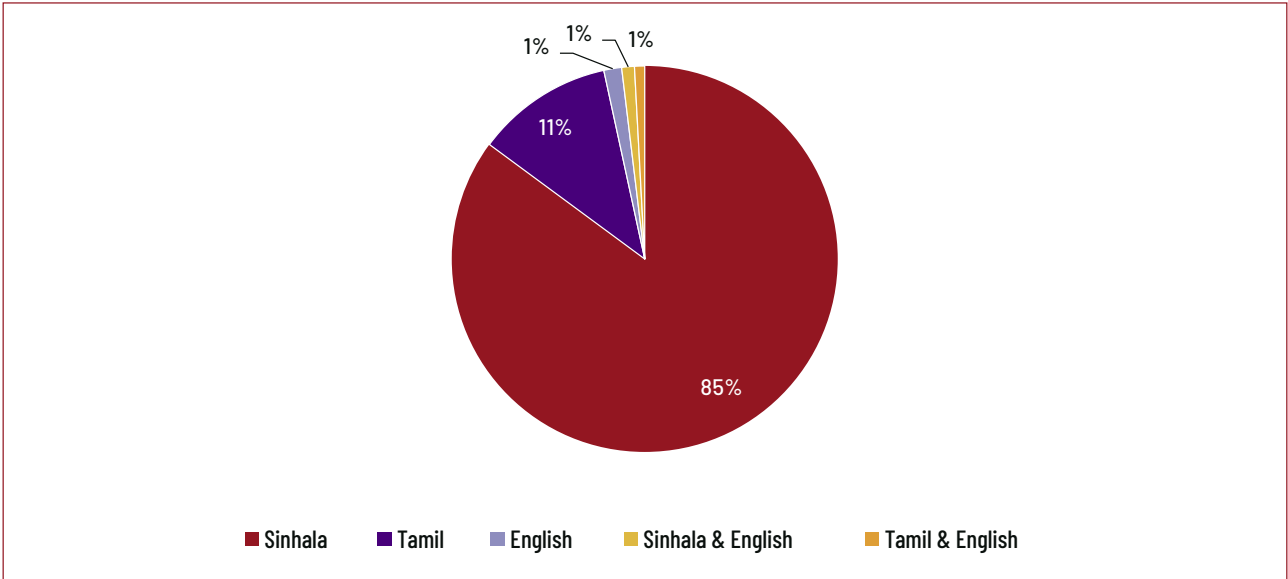


Exhibit 19: Online platforms in which the harmful content was generated

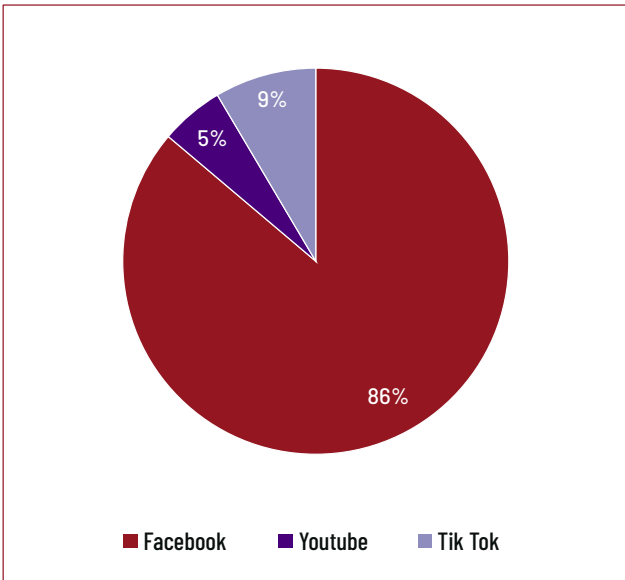
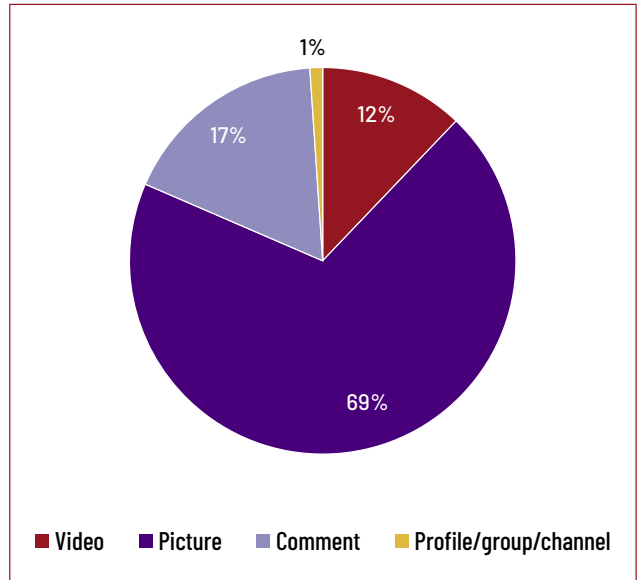


Exhibit 20: Form of content generated

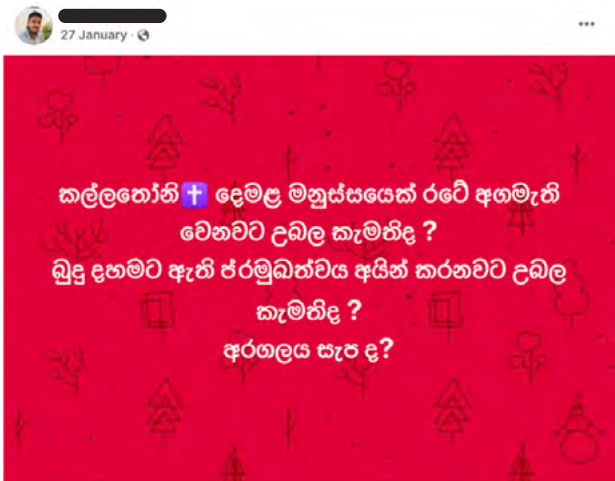


Post 1:



“Even if there is no punishment for people like this, karma will get back at them. Wonder why he’s silent now.”

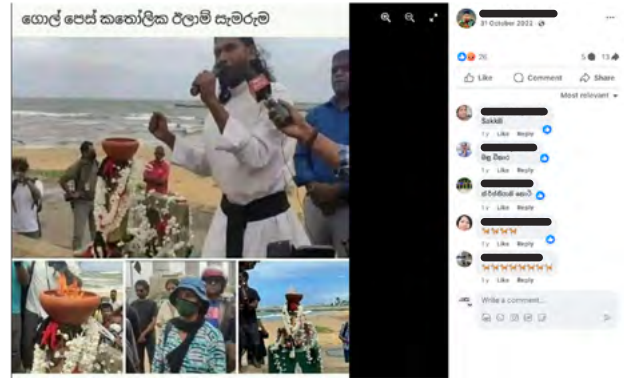
Post 2:



“Are y’all okay with a Christian Tamil person becoming the prime minister of the country?

“Would y’all like for the prominence given to Buddhism to be taken away? Is the aragalaya (struggle) giving you comfort?”

Post 3:



Galle Face Catholic Eelam celebration

Comment 1 – Uncivilised people

Comment 2 – Nonsense

Comment 3 – Christian Tigers (LTTE)

Post 4:



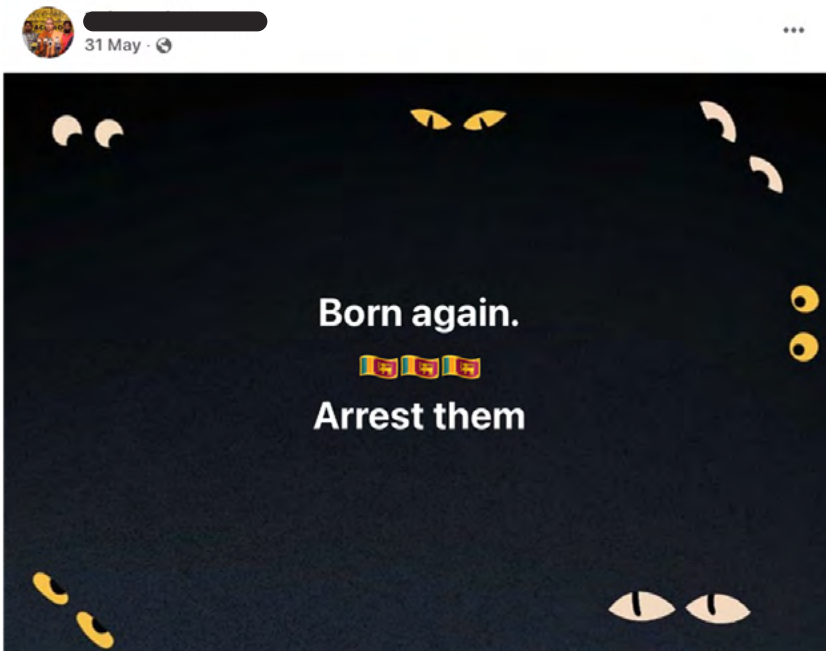
“As the racists are attempting to instigate a conflict again, everyone who can, please join hands for this cause. May the Noble Triple Gem bless you!”

Poster – Kurundi is in danger once again

Extremists are attempting to convert the statue chamber of the Kurundi image house into a Hindu kovil on August 18.

Everyone who is patriotic and devoted to the sasana (Buddhist order), please come to Kurundi on that day together with Buddhist monks.

Post 5:



The data indicates that individual users were responsible for generating 50% of the posts sharing harmful speech, amounting to 233 posts. Additionally, 163 posts representing 35% of the total were attributed to content produced by fake accounts (Exhibit 21).

Analysis of the targets of this harmful speech content revealed that the overwhelming majority (60%) of the content was aimed at Christians. This was followed by content targeting Muslims (29%), Hindus (8%) and Buddhists (3%). The data revealed a clear pattern of religiously motivated violence against minority groups (Exhibit 22).

Exhibit 21: Origins of harmful content

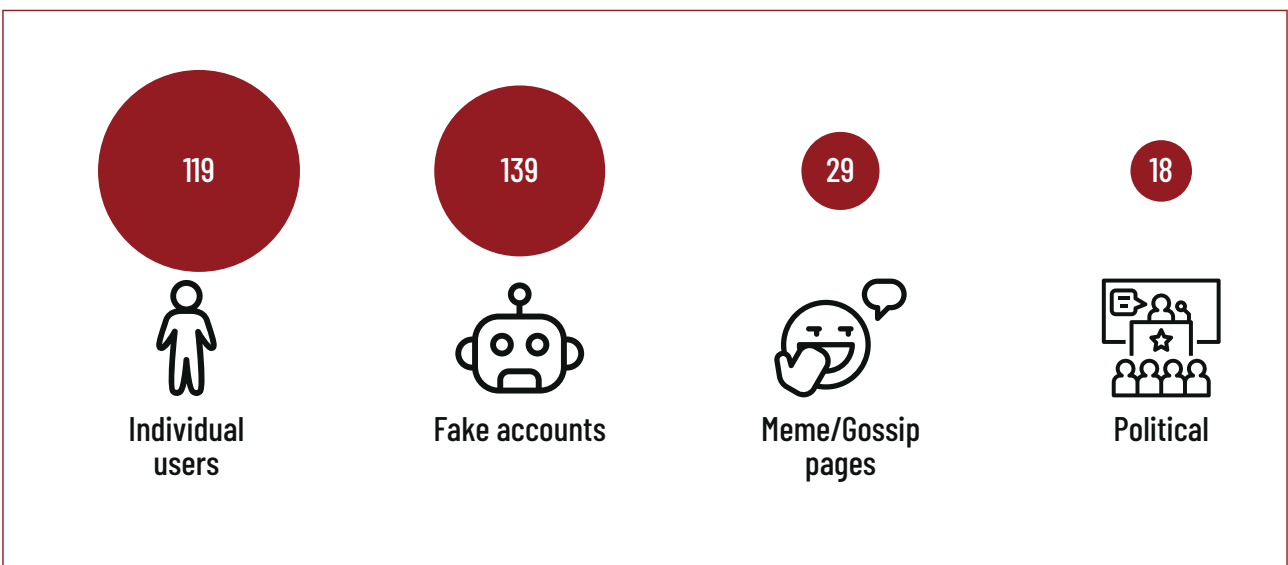
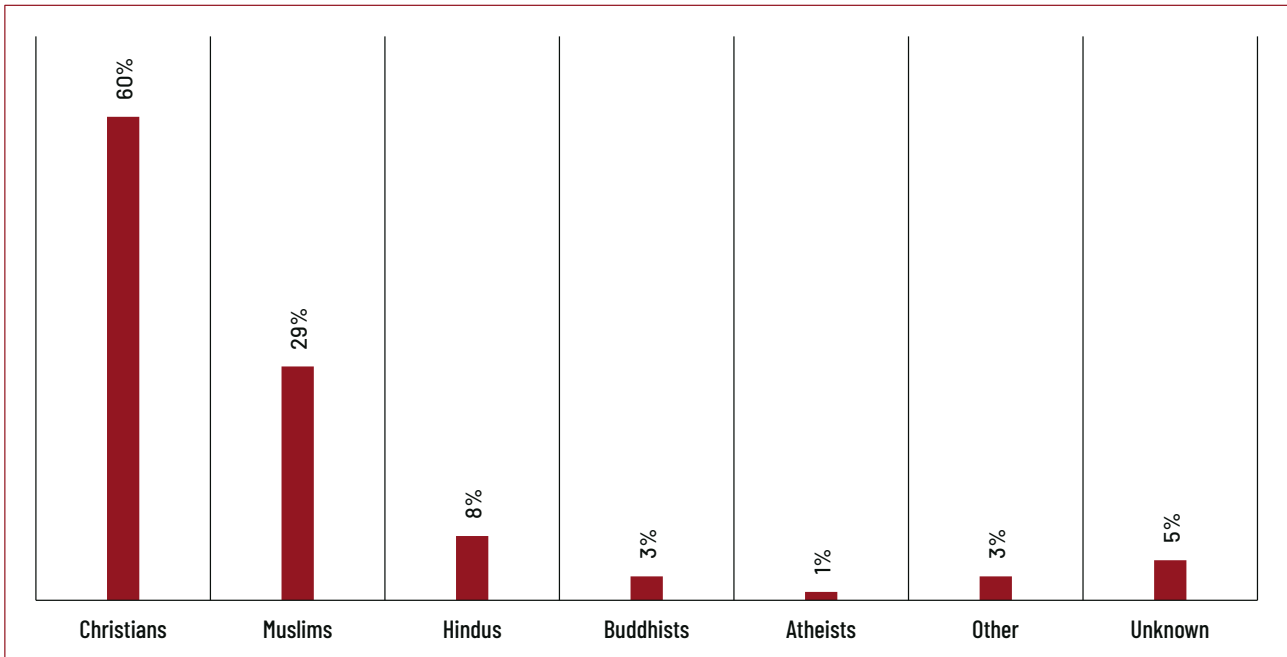


Exhibit 22: Targets of harmful content by religion



**Unknown - Content targeting only ethnic groups*

Uncovering the Harmful Speech Content on Online Platforms

Data provided by Hashtag Generation categorised online harmful speech as hate speech, harassment, disinformation and organised advocacy of violence. The data, as seen in Exhibit 23, revealed that a majority—amounting to 76% of the total posts examined—fell under the category of hate speech, while 15% of the posts were categorised as harassment and organised advocacy of violence by Hashtag Generation.

Notably, 15% of the posts were associated with organised advocacy of violence. Lastly, disinformation represented a smaller, yet notable, segment of the dataset at 5%.

Definitions of categories of harmful speech provided by Hashtag Generation

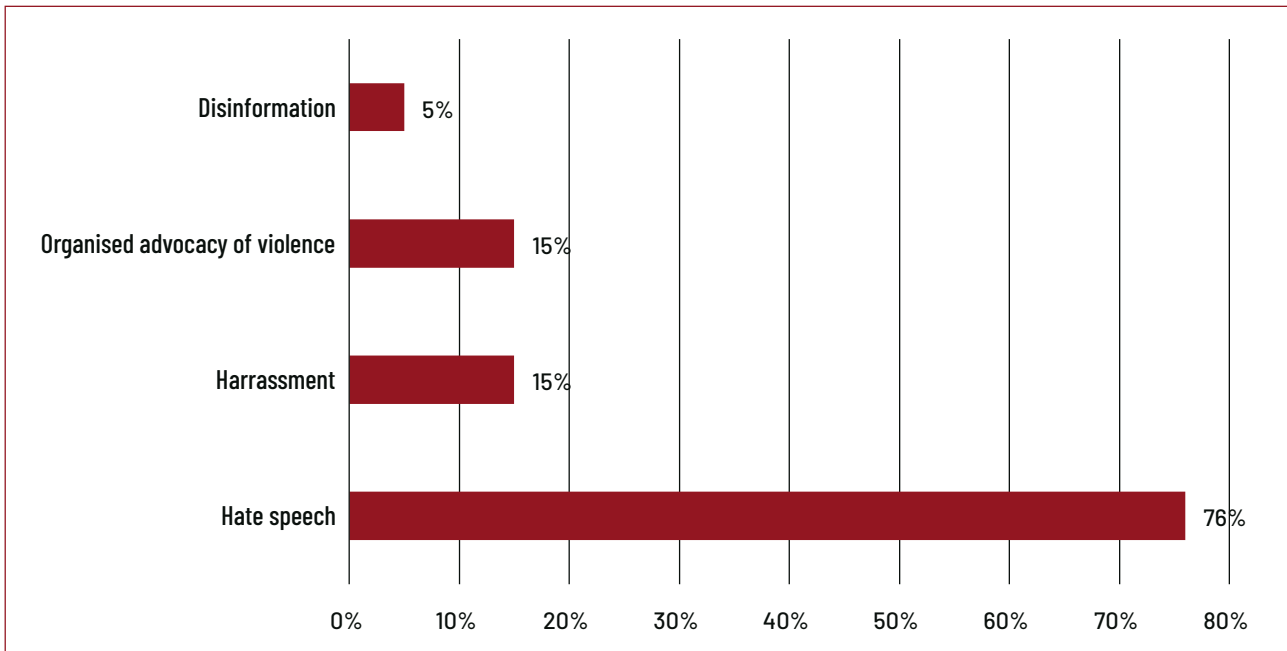
Hate speech – Any kind of communication on social media that uses pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or a group based on their identity such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or caste is considered hate speech. This also includes dehumanising speech, statements of inferiority and calls for exclusion.

Harassment – Any content that is directed at an individual based on causing discomfort or harm. This could include repeatedly and maliciously targeting someone, cyberbullying, threats, sexual harassment or violations of privacy.

Disinformation – All forms of false information that is disseminated online with the intent of causing harm to an individual, group, group identity or organisation are considered disinformation.

Organised advocacy of violence – All forms of messages found on social media that promote the use of physical violence, incite or call for violence and glorify violence. This includes propaganda for terrorism.

Exhibit 23: Composition of harmful content on online platforms



The harmful content was further segmented by Hashtag Generation based on its key message. The key messages were: (1) identity-based attacks or stereotyping; (2) threats of violence; (3) calls for exclusion or boycott.

Exhibit 24: Descriptions of key messages

Key message	Description
Identity-based attacks or stereotyping	When a piece of content targets a person/group based on their protected characteristics or other identity factors
Threats of violence or incitement to violence	When a piece of content calls for direct/indirect violence on a person/group based on their protected characteristics or other identity factors
Calls for exclusion or boycott	When a piece of content directly/indirectly calls for exclusion of a person/group based on their protected characteristics or other identity factors

The most frequently observed key message in hate speech content was an identity-based attack or stereotyping. 380 posts were observed to have identity-based attacks or stereotyping. This suggests that a considerable portion of harmful speech is directed towards maligning individuals or groups based on their identity, whether it be race, religion, gender or other characteristics.

Of the 359 posts (76% – see Exhibit 23) which were categorised as hate speech, 328 of the posts were identity-based attacks or stereotyping.

The analysis of targets of harmful speech content unveiled a nuanced and troubling landscape of religious intolerance particularly towards Christians, where the data indicated that Christians were more likely to be targeted than Hindus or Muslims.

Observations Related to the Targets of Harmful Speech Content

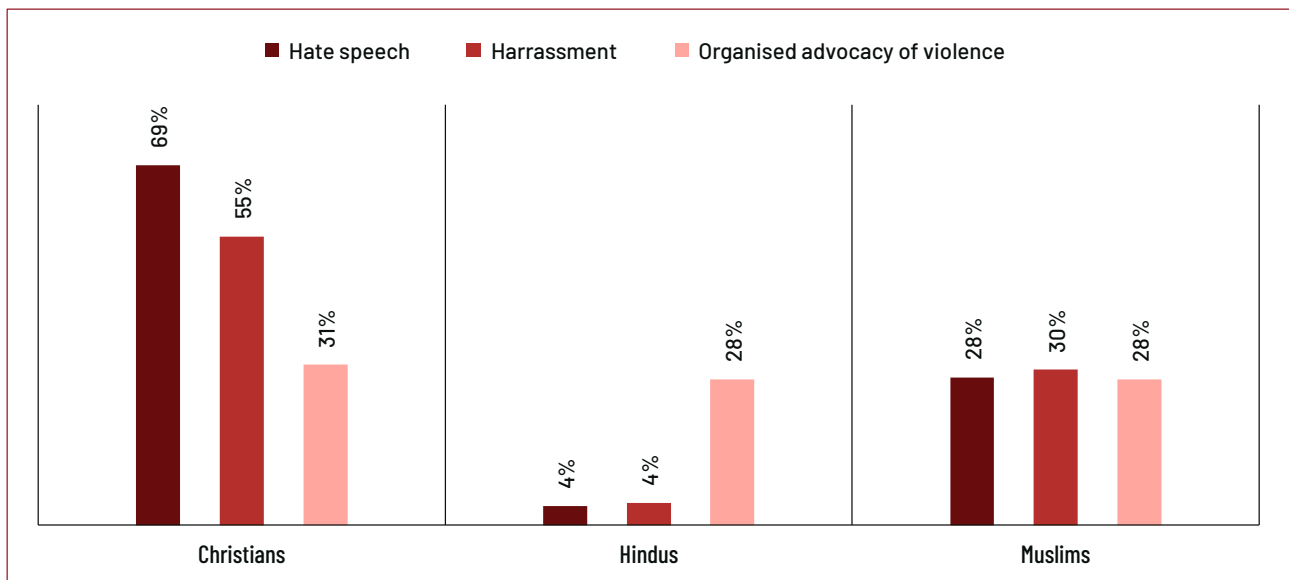
Hate speech – As revealed in Exhibit 25, a predominant proportion (69%) of recorded hate speech specifically targeted Christians, demonstrating a significant prejudice towards this group.

Organised advocacy of violence – When considering organised advocacy of violence, Hindus face a distinctly higher likelihood of being targets of organised advocacy of violence. This suggests a level of premeditation and coordination in the violence directed at this group, which may be indicative of deeper-seated ethno-religious conflicts between the Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu communities. Contestations over religious sites, for instance, have heightened ethno-religious conflicts between Sinhala Buddhist communities and Tamil Hindu communities (refer Annexure 2), and 16 out of 20 posts where Hindus were targets of organised advocacy of violence online were in fact in relation to contested religious sites. Hence, online platforms mirror similar patterns of on-ground violence of religious discrimination of Hindus.

Harassment – Similar to hate speech, a disproportionate focus on Christians was also evident in instances of harassment, where they constituted the majority of the victims, accounting 55% of such posts.

Analysis of posts categorised as harassment also revealed Muslims being targeted more frequently. This trend may indicate societal or cultural biases that make this group more prone to frequent harassment online, though less vulnerable to more structured forms of hostility. Most of these posts of online harassment concerned women. As observed in previous studies, Muslim women in particular have been targets of religious discrimination due to their dress code/attire.⁴⁸ This type of harassment is thought to be compelled by the perspective of Muslim ‘cultural peculiarities’ that exists within certain sections of society. This viewpoint reinforces the belief that specific Islamic customs, laws and practices are “at odds with the customs of the Sinhala Buddhists” (Siddiqui, 2019). A similar basis for violence/harmful speech against Muslims could be observed on online platforms as well.

Exhibit 25: Targets of harmful speech content



Conclusion

This study sought to identify key trends and patterns concerning religiously motivated violence directed at Christians, Muslims and Hindus. The report examined violence against Christians over the years, with a particular focus on the period between November 2022 and October 2023. In total, the study examined 63 incidents of violence directed at Christians during the period under review. The findings of this present study reinforce trends and patterns that have been identified in previous studies conducted by Verité Research.

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of violence against Christians over the years and the different types of harm that have persisted.

Chapter 2 examines three empirical insights into the dynamics of violence against Christians. These insights provide data-driven explanations of the factors of violence against Christians, including the primary perpetrators, their main targets and the nature of the violence. The first empirical insight is in relation to key perpetrators and their primary targets. It was observed that while the state authorities primarily perpetrate violence against Christian religious leaders and symbols such as pastors and places of worship, the people (inclusive of identifiable individuals from the local community) are more often involved in incidents of violence targeting Christian congregants. The second empirical insight is in relation to key perpetrators and the type of harm that is inflicted on Christians. On the one hand, the state is more frequently associated with perpetrating non-physical, systemic violence such as discriminatory actions or practices and threats, intimidation or coercion. On the other hand, non-state actors—referred to as the people (identifiable individuals) are more prone to inflicting direct physical harm on Christians. The third empirical insight is in relation to the role of the state in violence against Christians. The state plays the dual role of the protector of its citizens (inclusive of Christians) and the perpetrator of violence against Christians.

Chapter 3 examines the geographical distribution of violence by mapping out the district-level breakdown of the violence directed at Christians. During the period under review, Puttalam (18 incidents), Kalutara (seven incidents) and Jaffna (seven incidents) were identified as the two districts with the highest number of incidents of violence against Christians.

Chapter 4 examines harmful speech content generated on online platforms. Of the analysed posts, generated harmful speech was predominantly in Sinhala (85%) and the majority of the harmful content was found on Facebook (86%). The data was categorised into hate speech, harassment, disinformation and organised advocacy of violence by Hashtag Generation. Hate speech was predominant, accounting for 76% of posts, primarily targeting Christians. In content propagating organised advocacy of violence, Hindus face a distinctly higher likelihood of being targets of organised advocacy of violence. The data revealed most harassment-based posts targeted Christians. Additionally, Muslims were more likely to be targeted by harassment posts.

Annexures

Annexure 1: Violence against Christians – Methodology

The methodology used in this study was created by Verité Research in 2013 and has since undergone slight revisions. The methodology is set out below.

Definitions and parameters of the study

The study adopted a broad definition of violence that includes physical violence (physical assault and property damage), non-physical violence (threats, coercion, intimidation and hate speech) and systemic violence (discriminatory actions or practices).⁴⁹ Verité's previous study also classified these types of violence into severe forms of violence and non-severe forms of violence.

Similarly, the study broadly focused on 'ethno-religious' violence as opposed to 'religious' violence by considering the specific features that are unique to the Sri Lankan context. Distinctions between ethnicity and religion are often blurred in Sri Lanka as these identity categories tend to often overlap. Thus, examining ethno-religious violence, which captures both identity categories, offers richer insights into the entrenched nature of violence aimed at minority groups.

The study undertook a primarily quantitative analysis of incidents of violence targeting Christians based on the data compiled by NCEASL. Each incident documented by NCEASL was based on the details provided by primary sources and then verified through NCEASL's networks and/or its regional offices (where applicable). The incident reports compiled by NCEASL may not be an exhaustive list that reflects the total number of incidents during the period under review. In line with Verité's previous studies on religious violence, Verité undertook data coding and cleaning. Verité did not verify NCEASL's primary data through third-party sources.

NCEASL adopted the same measures to document episodes of violence against Muslims and Hindus. Similar to the data on violence against Christians, the incidents of violence against Muslims and Hindus may not reflect the total number of incidents against these groups. The study noted a significantly lesser number of documented incidents of violence against Muslims and Hindus in comparison to the higher degree of violence against Christians documented by NCEASL. Thus, owing to limitations in documented data, the report provides a brief description of the violence documented against Muslims and Hindus in Annexure 2.

Data coding- Incident and incident ID

The current study maintained the previous study's reference to each event as an 'incident'. Each individual incident was given a unique ID based on the date mentioned in the incident reports provided by NCEASL.

An incident is a single data point. For a religiously motivated act of violence to qualify as an ‘incident’, the data should be sufficient to ascertain that the type of harm falls under one of the categories listed below. In some instances, NCEASL’s incident reports documented a series of related incidents occurring at different times in the same area. These incidents were classified as separate incidents provided that each incident constituted a different type of harm.

Type of harm

Definitions for the types of harm are listed below. An incident that did not fit any of the five types of harm was not classified as an ‘incident’. A single incident may have more than one type of harm or violence associated with it, and is documented accordingly.

1. *Property damage or destruction* – unlawful forced entry (unlawful forced entry that does not result in property damage will be classified under threats, intimidation or coercion), vandalism or any other form of attack on the property of an individual, institution or group.
2. *Physical violence* – violence against person/s of any form including but not limited to forcible restraint, assault, rape, abduction and murder.
3. *Hate speech* – hate speech broadly encompasses any kind of communication that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to the protected characteristics of a person or a group.⁵⁰ In the context of this report, hate speech includes any printed material, meeting, rally or media campaign which expresses messages to attack or incites negative feelings against a religion, religious practices, religious symbolism, places of worship, religious community or followers of a religion based on their religious affiliation.
4. *Threats, intimidation or coercion* – includes any verbal threats, phone calls or direct encounters that do not result in violent acts against persons or property but where there is a threat of force or a forcing of person/s to perform any action against their will. This type of harm includes threatening or coercing Christians to cease worship activities. This type of harm may also encompass incidents involving surveillance or monitoring of the primary target/s in a manner that is aimed to intimidate the primary target/s.
5. *Discriminatory actions or practices* – any form of discrimination on religious grounds, including but not limited to denying or limiting services, denying or limiting access through differential treatment in an isolated case or a sustained policy/practice of differential treatment. Actions in this category are not limited to state actors but apply to any of the key perpetrator categories listed.

Verité Research’s studies have, on occasion, used alternative classification systems to analyse the above forms of harm. The current study uses two classifications to refer to the above types of harm. The first classification system is based on the intensity of violence. Incidents involving high intensity include physical violence and property damage. Incidents involving low intensity include threats, intimidation, coercion, discriminatory actions or practices and other incidents involving non-severe forms of violence. The second classification system is based on the severity of harm or violence. There are four sub-categories to assess the severity of violence: the most severe forms of violence (physical violence); severe forms of violence (property damage); borderline severe forms of violence (threats, coercion or intimidation); least severe forms of violence (discriminatory actions or practices).

Key perpetrators

Perpetrators were classified from the given list of primary actors as identified in NCEASL incident reports. A single incident may have more than one type of perpetrator.

1. *Political/Social movement or politicians* – refers to all groups that identify themselves by a name or political figures who are not holding any government office at the time of being involved in an event.
2. *Political/Social movement comprising Buddhist clergy or led by a Buddhist clergyman.*

3. *Unidentified individual or group* – when the affiliations of perpetrators are unclear or unstated.
4. *Institution or public servant (state officials)* – only used when the institution or person in question has a legal affiliation to the state, including elected individuals holding public office (e.g. state-run school, government administrator, minister).
5. *Religious institution or clergy (individuals from other faith groups linked to religious institutions)* – refers to a member of a religious order, a place of worship or a religious institution (e.g. religious education institute, welfare institution affiliated to a religion), but excludes clergy formally associated with a social/political movement, which is captured above. This category also excludes members of the Buddhist clergy as they are documented in a separate category.
6. *Buddhist clergyman* – refers to a member of the Buddhist clergy. Violence perpetrated by members of the Buddhist clergy are coded separately due to two reasons: (i) several incidents of religiously motivated violence against minority faith groups, especially post-war, have been perpetrated by certain members of the Buddhist clergy; (ii) NCEASL's incident reports have documented many episodes involving Buddhist clergymen. Past reports for NCEASL such as *Silent Suppression: Restrictions on Religious Freedoms of Christians 1994–2014* and *Inaction and Impunity: Incidents of Religious Violence Targeting Christians, Muslims and Hindus 2015–2019* have thus included a separate analysis of Buddhist clergymen's involvement in incidents of violence.

Commercial interest group or private sector firm – refers to a formally registered private commercial entity (e.g. a company registered under the Companies Act of Sri Lanka), business association or any other entity involved in any form of commercial activity or acts as a space for promoting commercial activity.

Identifiable individual/s or group in the locality – this includes identifiable individuals or groups including but not limited to residents and workers in the locality, excluding state officials, members of the clergy and political figures.

Perpetrators' religious affiliation

This category was used if the group or individual either self-identified or had an un-ambiguously identifiable religious affiliation, otherwise classified as 'unknown'.

Perpetrators' ethnic affiliation

This category was used if the group or individual either self-identified or had an un-ambiguously identifiable ethnic affiliation, otherwise classified as 'unknown'.

Primary targets

This section refers to the main target in the recorded incident. The six choice categories represent the broader classifications of potential targets and more than one may be entered for a given event.

Individual/s (church members/congregants) – may include an individual or a group of individuals not specified in any of the other categories for primary targets, e.g. a Christian church worker or the church congregation (not inclusive of Christian clergy, who are documented separately). Attacks on an individual's property (not used for worship activities) are also documented under this category.

Local community – may include, for example, all the Christian households in the village or a sect of Christians who are targeted.

Place of worship – may be a church or the location/house where prayer meetings are held.

Business – may be a Christian-owned enterprise.

Wider community – may be used particularly in events when many or all categories are targeted en masse, or

Christians targeted at a national level.

Institutions, clergy, officials or public figures – may be a pastor, a Christian organisation or any other Christian public figure. In the current report, this category only included Christian religious leaders. As such, all references to Christian religious leaders, pastors and Christian clergy are relevant to this category.

Police action in relation to the incident

1. *Actively/tacitly involved* – if the police play any active or tacit role in perpetrating the incident. This type of active or tacit involvement can include direct involvement; supporting perpetrators by endorsing their actions; refusing to engage in official duties when notified after an incident has occurred. This type of police action is also referred to as actively negative.
2. *Present and inactive* – if the police are present and allow the religious persecution to continue without intervention. This type of police action is also referred to as passively negative.
3. *Present and intervene* – if the police are present and intervene in the defence of the primary target/s. This type of police action is also referred to as actively positive.
4. *Absent/unknown* – if there is no mention of police action during the incident or if the action is not discernible in the incident report.
5. *Intervene after the incident* – if the police are called or approached after the incident and if some follow-up action is taken. This type of police action is also referred to as passively positive.

Government officials' action in relation to the incident

A government official could be any employee of the state excluding the police, e.g. an official from the divisional secretariat, grama niladhari etc.

1. *Actively/tacitly involved* – if a government official plays any active or tacit role in perpetrating the incident. This type of active or tacit involvement can include: direct involvement; supporting perpetrators by endorsing their actions; refusing to engage in official duties when notified after an incident has occurred.
2. *Present and inactive* – if a government official is present and allows the religious persecution to continue without intervening.
3. *Present and intervene* – if a government official is present and intervenes in the defence of the primary target/s.
4. *Absent/unknown* – if there is no mention of a government official's actions at an event or if the action is not discernible in the incident report.
5. *Intervene after the incident* – if a government official is called or approached after the event and some follow-up action is taken.

Legality of place of worship

The question of the legality of a place of worship was classified for all events occurring after the Ministry of Buddha Sasana issued a circular in 2008 calling for such places to be registered.

1. *Legality questioned without reference to legislation or circular* – legality of place of worship is questioned without reference to legislation or circular.
2. *Legality questioned with reference to legislation or circular* – legality of place of worship is questioned with reference to legislation or circular.

3. *Clarification sought* – if the legality of the place of worship is questioned and if asked to show proof of authorisation. Generally, the circular is not referenced when proof of authorisation is requested.
4. *Deemed illegal/unauthorised* – a place of worship is deemed illegal if a public official, e.g. a policeman, claims that the pastor cannot continue his worship services at a church or prayer meeting without the necessary documentation from the Ministry of Buddha Sasana.

Gender

This component was added to analyse the gender of the perpetrators as well as the primary targets of the incidents of violence.

1. *Male* – the perpetrator or primary target was identified in the incident as ‘he’. In the incidents where the perpetrator was identified as a Buddhist clergyman, the gender was denoted as he.
2. *Female* – the perpetrator or primary target was identified in the incident as ‘she’.
3. *Other* – the perpetrator or primary target was identified to be transgendered or gender neutral.
4. *Absent/unknown* – if there was no mention of the gender identity of the primary target or perpetrator in the incident.

Annexure 2: Incidents of violence and intimidation against Muslims and Hindus

This segment of the research provides an examination of the instances of violence directed towards the Muslim and Hindu communities from November 2022 to October 2023.

Incidents of violence and intimidation against Muslims

NCEASL has employed the same methodology and data collection techniques in monitoring the violence against these religious communities. However, it is important to note that the expansion of NCEASL's networks to monitor such violence against Muslims and Hindus more comprehensively is still an ongoing process. Consequently, the volume of data gathered on these two communities is considerably lower compared to the data on documented violence against Christians. This discrepancy suggests that the current dataset may not fully encapsulate the breadth and depth of the violence perpetrated against the Muslim and Hindu communities.

During the period from November 2022 to October 2023, NCEASL recorded 12 instances of violence targeting the Muslim community. These incidents are succinctly detailed in Exhibits 26-29 as per the descriptions found in NCEASL's incident reports. In instances where it was pertinent and feasible, Verité Research has contributed an analysis of the prevailing narratives that are often employed to rationalise acts of violence against Muslims. Additionally, Verité Research has offered critical insights into specific incidents where such perspectives were deemed relevant and applicable.

'Cultural peculiarities': An underlying narrative used to justify the targeting of Muslims

Previous studies by Verité Research have analysed the narrative of 'cultural peculiarities' in the context of Muslim communities vis-à-vis Sinhala Buddhists, underscoring deep societal divides.⁵¹ Framing Islamic customs as contrasting with local norms, it fosters a sense of otherness. In the past, this perception has led to an increased scrutiny of Muslim attire and practices, and discriminatory policies like the face veil ban. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these issues, with Muslim burial rites becoming contentious. This narrative—beyond highlighting cultural differences—serves as justification for discrimination, underscoring the need for more inclusive cultural understanding.

The following incidents documented by NCEASL suggest that the narrative regarding Muslim 'cultural peculiarities' continues to persist and acts as a basis to justify violence against Muslims.

Exhibit 26: Underlying narrative – Muslim 'cultural peculiarities'

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
1	29 May 2023, Badulla	Muslim students ordered to remove the hijab during exams: In Badulla Madhya Maha Vidyalaya, exam supervisors ordered Muslim female students to remove their hijabs. General Secretary of the Up-Country Muslim Council addressed a letter to President Ranil Wickremesinghe on 30 May 2023 highlighting this issue. The General Secretary reported similar incidents during the Information Technology General Exam on 18 March 2023 and the 2022 Advanced Level exam, citing directives from the Badulla zonal director of education under the Uva Provincial Council's jurisdiction.

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
2	31 May – 16 June 2023, Batticaloa	<p>Muslim student barred from sitting exams and attending lectures due to his beard:</p> <p>A Muslim student at Eastern University’s Faculty of Healthcare Science, was barred from taking an exam and attending lectures due to his beard. On 1 June, the student filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission in Batticaloa. An inquiry held at the Batticaloa Regional Office of the Human Rights Commission on 13 June led to a recommendation that the student be allowed to take the exam while sporting a beard. However, the university responded that they could only provide a response after a decision was reached during the faculty meeting.</p> <p>On 15 June, the student filed a writ petition at the Court of Appeal concerning his exam scheduled for 19 June. The case was heard on 16 June, during which the university announced the postponement of the faculty exam. The Court of Appeal instructed the university to delay the exam until a hearing on 4 July, pending further review.</p>
3	30 September 2023, Colombo	<p>Muslim students asked to remove hijab during examination:</p> <p>The Entrance Examination for Sri Lanka Law College was held on 30th September 2023 at Royal College, Colombo. A complaint was lodged with the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission on 12th October 2023, alleging that officials at the examination centre compelled female Muslim students taking the exam to remove their hijabs. The complaint was recorded under the number HRC/HO/4033/23.</p> <p>The Law Students’ Muslim Majlis filed a complaint against the Department of Examinations on behalf of the affected students. Simultaneously, the Law Students’ Muslim Majlis sent a letter dated 3rd October 2023 to the principal urging a thorough investigation into the incident.</p> <p>Furthermore, the officials reportedly photographed the admission numbers and national identity cards of Muslim students, and some supervisors allegedly used inappropriate language towards the students. In response to the incident, the Department of Examinations summoned about 30 Muslim students involved and initiated investigations. Students were informed that their actions were considered a violation of examination regulations, prompting an investigation by the examination department’s investigative unit.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
	7 March - 23 May 2023, Trincomalee	<p>Update on the case relating to a teacher who was assaulted in school:</p> <p>In February 2022, a Muslim teacher of Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College was assaulted. Although the teacher was appointed to this school in 2018, she was denied permission to work at the school because she wore an abhaya, a garment worn by Muslim women.</p> <p>The case against the College Principal was heard in the Trincomalee Magistrate's Court on 7 March 2023. The dispute centred on the teacher's right to wear an abhaya at school, with allegations of discrimination and defamation.</p> <p>On 17 March 2023, Trincomalee Police filed two cases related to the incident. One case was filed regarding the alleged assault of the principal by Fahmidha, while the other case related to the alleged assault of Fahmidha on the day of the incident.</p> <p>On 22 May 2023, the case concluded amicably based on an agreed-upon settlement. The principal of Shanmuga College accepted that any future Muslim teacher, would be allowed to wear the abhaya, a full-body dress of Islamic culture. It was also acknowledged that the abhaya is a cultural right for Muslim women.</p> <p>On 23 May 2023, the teacher visited Shanmuga College with her lawyers. During this visit the Principal signed the necessary documents confirming Fahmidha's promotion and salary increase, in accordance with the agreed-upon settlement.</p>

Land acquisition and/or encroachment: An underlying narrative used to justify the targeting of Muslims

Land disputes between the Sinhala and Muslim communities are often framed by the belief that Muslims frequently acquire or encroach upon lands traditionally owned and inhabited by Sinhala Buddhists. However, this viewpoint is not exclusive to conflicts between these two ethno-religious groups. As illustrated below, similar perceptions exist among other ethno-religious communities as well.

Exhibit 27: Underlying narrative – Land acquisition and/or encroachment

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
4	1 April 2023, Trincomalee	<p>An attempt made to install a Buddhist statue on land owned by Tamils and Muslims:</p> <p>A group led by Buddhist monk, which included Department of Archaeology officials and Ministerial Security Division (MSD) officers, faced local protests while trying to install a Buddha statue on land owned by Tamils and Muslims. The situation escalated when a Buddhist monk's driver damaged a local farmer's fence, leading to a heated confrontation. An MSD officer exacerbated tensions by threatening protesters with a gun. The monk, actively involved in promoting Buddhism in the Tamil-speaking Arisimalai region. Fearing further attempts to install the statue, locals organised a demonstration on 10 April 2023 against the land grab in Ponmalaikuda.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
5	28 June 2023, Matale	<p>Dispute over Muslim school land:</p> <p>On 28 June 2023, to find a mutually agreeable solution, a discussion was chaired by the chief of secretary of the Central Province at the Matale District Secretariat, who proposed the merger of the two schools into a trilingual institution as the only viable solution. The discussion involved the participation of various officials including district secretary of Matale, regional directors of education and the principals of both the Sinhala and the Muslim school in the area. The land dispute has persisted for decades, originating from attempts by Mahinda Rajapaksa Navodaya Vidyalaya, located adjacent to the Muslim school, to encroach upon a portion of the Muslim school's land. However, the local community and the Muslim school strongly oppose any such encroachment.</p>
6	22 September 2023, Trincomalee	<p>Land owned by Muslims encroached by Buddhist monk:</p> <p>A group led by the Chief Sanganayaka of Thankaduve North and East and the Chief Incumbant of the Arisimalai Aranyasena Vihara, Pulmoddai encroached on agricultural land belonging to six Muslim families in Pulmoddai Village 01 Grama Niladhari Division in the Pulmoddai Arisimalai area of the Trincomalee District. The Buddhist monk and a group of people had occupied the land and levelled it using bulldozers. A verbal argument ensued between the group and the Muslim families who owned the land. During the altercation, the monk claimed that the land belonged to the Pulmoddai Vihara and had been declared as such in a government gazette. However, the Muslim families countered it, claiming they possessed proper land deeds, and had been farming the land for a long period. Despite this, the monk and his group continued to occupy the land.</p> <p>During the confrontation, women from the families that own the land protested by standing in front of the bulldozer. The bulldozer driver threatened the women stating that the bulldozer could collide with them. One woman, who sustained injuries, was subsequently admitted to Pulmoddai Hospital for treatment.</p>

Contestation over religious sites: An underlying narrative used to justify the targeting of Muslims

Disputes surrounding religious sites frequently revolve around conflicting assertions about their historical identity and ownership. As explored in prior studies by Verité Research, such conflicts are commonly perceived by ethnic minority groups as intentional demonstrations of 'majority dominance'.⁵² In these instances, the majority group is seen as using its predominant status to assert control over the contested religious sites.

Exhibit 28: Underlying narrative – Contestation over religious sites

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
7	22 April 2023, Hambantota	<p>Monks attempt to seize part of a Muslim burial ground claiming that it belongs to a vihara:</p> <p>On Ramadan festival day, Chief Incumbent of the Kirinda Vihara led an effort to annex 30 perches of the Kirinda Jumma Masjid’s burial ground. Utilising a backhoe, the group confronted local Muslims, asserting the land’s ownership by the Buddhist vihara. This action prompted a complaint by area Muslims at the Tissamaharama Police Station. The mosque’s secretary and former assistant director of education, recounted previous objections to burials in this ground. On the festival day, the Muslim community successfully resisted the bulldozing of the burial site, leading to police intervention and subsequent discussions mediated by the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in Tissamaharama. Both religious groups were summoned, and the police cautioned against violence, threatening arrest and remand for any involved.</p>
8	24 April 2023, Hambantota	<p>Monks attempt to seize part of a Muslim burial ground claiming that it belongs to a vihara continued:</p> <p>The thera returned with a backhoe to clear the burial ground, causing uproar. The mosque management’s loudspeaker announcement mobilised the community to protest. Police demanded land claim evidence, halting operations after seeing a British map presented by Muslims.</p>

Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Muslims

Exhibit 29: Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Muslims

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
9	6 February 2023, Batticaloa	<p>People protest against attempt to establish a Terrorism Investigation Department (TID) in a mosque:</p> <p>On 6 February, the plan of the Sri Lanka Police to convert the Dharul Athar Jumma Mosque in New Kattankudy into a TID office met with strong local opposition. This move, following the closure of the mosque post-Easter Sunday attacks by the Ministry of Defence, sparked a hartal, disrupting local commerce and daily routines. The community's protest demanded the mosque's restoration for public worship. Key figures who played roles in this advocacy, emphasised the mosque's funding through public contributions and its Waqf board recognition. These concerted efforts led to assurances from a police officer against the takeover.</p>
10	10 February 2023, Batticaloa	<p>Member of Parliament makes statement stirring controversy:</p> <p>The Batticaloa District MP claimed at a media conference that protests were underway demanding the release of a mosque linked to Zahran Hashim. He speculated about the possibility of a future statue in Zahran's honour. In response, the Federation of Kattankudy Mosques and Muslim Institutions issued a statement refuting these claims and emphasising the risk of creating divisions between the Tamil and Muslim communities.</p>
11	18 February 2023, Mannar	<p>Anti-conversion leaflets distributed:</p> <p>The Rudra Sena distributed leaflets on anti-conversion-implicating the involvement of Christians and Muslims in the activity-to people at the Mannar Thiruketheeswaram Temple on Maha Sivarathri day.</p>
12	14 July 2023, Ratnapura	<p>A Muslim-owned shop destroyed:</p> <p>A shop owned by a Muslim near Dafthar Jeilani Mosque in Balangoda was destroyed. Reportedly, this act was carried out by volunteers from Kuragala Vihara. A thera has been vocal against Muslims conducting business in the area. Another businessman in the area, who has been operating a shop there since 1972, highlighted the growing tensions since the viharas construction, including walls that have been limiting access to Muslim-owned shops.</p> <p>Around 20 Sinhala youths, wearing yellow shirts, serve as volunteers and routinely patrol the area and frequently discourage Sinhalese individuals from purchasing goods from Muslim shops. On 14th July 2023, individuals wearing these yellow shirts reportedly hurled large wooden blocks onto the shops, resulting in the demolition of the shop constructed with wood and tin. The owner of this particular shop had vacated it several months earlier due to threats from the thera. The incident was not reported to the police.</p> <p>The businessman also mentioned that the thero had once stated that Sinhala people who visit the Vihara should not engage in business with Muslims.</p>

Incidents of violence and intimidation against Hindus

Between November 2022 and October 2023, NCEASL recorded 23 cases of violence targeting Hindus. The fundamental themes driving this anti-Hindu violence remained consistent with those in the previous report.

Contestation over religious sites

Contestation over religious sites typically revolves around conflicting claims concerning their historical identity and ownership. During the period in question, a significant dispute arose over Kurunthormalai, a site revered by both Buddhists and Hindus. Such events are frequently perceived by ethnic minorities as overt displays of ‘majority dominance’, where the dominant group uses the opportunity to reinforce its majority position to control contested religious sites. The subsequent incidents, documented by NCEASL, illustrate how this perspective is embodied in acts of violence directed towards the Hindu community.

Exhibit 30: Contestation over religious sites

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
1	1 February 2023, Jaffna	<p>Bo tree within a Hindu temple declared as an ancient monument:</p> <p>A sacred tree at Paralai Murugan Temple, Jaffna was declared an ancient monument by Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs as per Gazette No. 2317/57. Named “Sangamitta Bodhiya”, this tree symbolises cultural and religious significance.</p> <p>Following this, on 5 August 2023, the Jaffna University Students’ Union led a protest march demanding the gazette’s withdrawal. Participants included students, religious leaders and civil groups.</p> <p>On 15 March 2022 a group of Buddhist monks visited the temple and attempted to recite prayers, resulting in a tense situation.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
2	23 February – 31 August 2023, Mullaitivu	<p>Construction work at Kurunthormalai continues despite court order:</p> <p>Construction of a Buddhist vihara at Kurunthormalai continued despite a Mullaitivu Court order. On 23 February, a complaint (CIB II 334/125) was filed against this violation, naming the director of archaeology, two monks and a police officer. The construction is nearly complete, ignoring court suspension orders.</p> <p>On 2 March, a motion filed in the Mullaitivu Court cited illegal construction of a Buddhist vihara at Kurunthormalai. Former Northern Provincial Council members filed the motion in case AR/673/18, providing photographic evidence. The Mullaitivu Court had previously ordered a halt to construction on 19 July 2022, maintaining the status quo as of 12 June 2022.</p> <p>On 14 July, during pongal worship at Kurunthormalai, Archaeology Department officials restricted setting fire inside the archaeological area, allowing worship under specific conditions. However, about 40 people and 10 monks disrupted the worship, leading to a confrontation. The police reportedly used force against the devotees but not against the disruptors. Activists then lodged a police complaint that night alleging infringement of Hindu rights to worship.</p> <p>On 17 July, a complaint (HRC/VAV/116/2023) was filed with the Vavuniya regional office of the Human Rights Commission regarding this infringement. Subsequently, on 20 July, a hearing (case AR/673) took place in the Mullaitivu Magistrate’s Court. Representatives for the temple presented evidence of the pongal worship disruption, including photographs, and filed complaints. The police, in their defence, claimed they intervened to prevent a breach of peace.</p> <p>The court required further investigation and information from the Archaeology Department, which was requested to report on the events of 14 July. The hearing was then scheduled for 8 August. On this date, the case resumed with the presence of the Vavuniya regional director of the Archaeology Department. The department assured court it would not obstruct future pongal celebrations at the site and would not take adverse actions at such events.</p> <p>The case was adjourned to 31 August 2023. On 31 August 2023, it was held by Saravanarajah J., that the abovementioned incidents indicate that the orders made by him on 14 July 2022, 19 July 2022 and 24 November 2022 were violated.</p>
3	24 February 2023, Jaffna	<p>Buddha statue placed at a historical site:</p> <p>On 25 February 2023, Valikamam East Pradeshiya Sabha’s Chairperson and Vice Chairperson visited the Nilavarai Bottomless Well, an ancient site in Puttur, Jaffna. They found a Buddha statue and a wooden enclosure, with over 20 police and army personnel present. The statue placed on 24 February 2023 sparked a protest, leading to its removal by the army. An army major reported that a soldier had placed the statue following a dream. On his visit, the chairperson also observed that the ‘vel’ (spear) of Lord Muruga, typically placed at the well’s entrance, was missing.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
4	21 March - 17 May 2023, Vavuniya	<p>Place of worship destroyed:</p> <p>In early 2018, the Department of Archaeology claimed ownership of the Vedukunarimalai Adilingeswarar Temple in Vavuniya North's Olumadu area, leading to worship restrictions. Despite surveillance, the temple's statues were damaged between 21 and 26 March 2023. Subsequently, the temple was renamed Waddamana Parwatha Viharaya on Google Maps, indicating it as a Buddhist site.</p> <p>A police complaint and a Human Rights Commission report (HRC/VAV/61/2023) were filed regarding the vandalism. On 30 March, a protest rally involving various community members and leaders was held against this destruction. The Nedunkerni Police took legal action on 1 April 2023. On 24 April the magistrate ordered officials not to hinder worship at the site.</p> <p>The Vavuniya Magistrate's Court, on 27 April, permitted the reinstallation of the temple's idols. The police, who had secured the damaged statues, were ordered to return them to the temple council. Following this, on 28 April the temple administration restored the statues and resumed worship.</p> <p>On 17 May, the Vavuniya Court instructed the temple to conduct simple worship practices, preserving the archaeological site. The police were directed to act against those responsible for the damage. The case was adjourned to 10 August 2023 for further proceedings.</p>
5	April 2023, Trincomalee	<p>Buddhist temple built on land owned by Malaiyadi Pillayar Temple:</p> <p>On 6th April 2023, it was reported in the Tamil Guardian that, "A Buddhist temple is being constructed around the land that belongs to the Malaiyadi Pillaiyar Temple, in Muttur, Trincomalee, which is currently being occupied with a statue of the Buddha. The Buddhist temple, Kottiyarama Shri Badra Thaathu Raja Maha Viharaya is being constructed with the assistance of the Sri Lankan army and naval forces.</p> <p>In December 2021, a group of Buddhist monks placed and consecrated a Buddha statue surreptitiously at night. The following day, locals in the vicinity of the Pillaiyar temple protested the consecration of the statue, which led the Muttur Police department to remove the statue the very same day of the protest.</p> <p>Despite the ongoing protests, another Buddha statue was once again erected in the vicinity of the Pillaiyar temple, with the assistance of the army, navy, and the police. Following this incident, the construction of a Buddhist temple atop one of the surrounding mountains began. Construction has been conducted day and night by the Army and the Navy, and is approaching its completion.</p> <p>Additionally, lands surrounding the Pillaiyar temple that belong to the Muslim and Tamil community have also been occupied for the use of the Buddhist temple with the assistance of the Survey Department. Locals continue to protest the construction and occupation by the Buddhist temple. The Malaiyadi Pillaiyar Temple has been a site of worship for Hindus living around the area, and also is frequently used by the public that travel through the Trincomalee-Batticaloa highway."</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
6	11 May 2023, Vavuniya	Police arrest a priest and a member of the administration of the temple: On 10 May 2023, a priest and a temple official from the Vedukunarimalai Adilingeswarar Temple were summoned by the Nedunkerni Police following a complaint by the Archaeology Department. They were arrested on 11 May but released after appearing in the Vavuniya Court along with the temple's president and secretary.
7	14 May 2023, Trincomalee	A Buddhist worship ceremony held on a Hindu temple land: From 13-14 May 2023, the Tamil Makkal Peravai held a vigil against installing a Buddha statue on Villuntri Kandaswamy Temple's land in Trincomalee. Post-protest, tension arose on 14 May as Buddhist monks and followers held ceremonies at the temple site, placing flags under a peepal tree. A MP from Trincomalee alerted the president about Thai monks planning a Kandy pilgrimage after worshipping at the disputed site. Despite presidential and district government agent assurances against the statue's installation, ceremonies proceeded. The Thai monks, arriving in Trincomalee by ship, began their Kandy pilgrimage from there.
8	13 July 2023, Mullaitivu	Police file a motion requesting court to stop pongal worship activities: The Mullaitivu Police filed a motion related to Kurunthormalai under case number AR/673, and requested the court to stop the pongal worship activities to take place in Kurunthormalai on 14 July. However, the court had rejected the request of the police. While the Mullaitivu Police sought an injunction in the Mullaitivu Court to stop the pongal worship, the Mullaitivu Court had informed the parties that placing statues, religious symbols or constructions in the Kurunthormalai archaeological area would amount to contempt of court as such acts violated the court order.
9	23-24 July 2023, Mullaitivu	Buddhist statue installed in violation of court order: On 23 July, at Thanimurippu, Kurunthormalai, a group including a Buddhist monk installed a Buddha statue and engaged in worship activities in violation of the court order. On 24 July, a complaint bearing number CIB I 166/147 was lodged against the Buddhist monk by former Northern Provincial Council member and several social activists at the Mullaitivu Police Station regarding the violation of the court order. The complaint alleged that a group led by the monk performed worship activities on 23 July 2023 and that the Buddha statue was brought installed while the police and the army were on security duty.
10	16 August 2023, Mullaitivu	Case filed by Archaeological Department against Hindu religious ceremony: The Mullaitivu and Mannar Archaeology Department filed a case (AR/1028/2023) to halt pongal worship at Kurunthormalai. Police warned of potential religious clashes. However, the Mullaitivu Magistrate's Court denied the stay order, affirming the local community's right to conduct their ceremony without damaging archaeological monuments. An order was also given stating that the thera or other groups had no authority to stop the Pongal worship.

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
11	18 August – 19 October 2023, Mullaitivu	<p>Attempts made to disrupt a Hindu religious ceremony:</p> <p>The plow machine carrying pongal items for pongal worship was initially intercepted by the police and prevented from entering the Kurunthormalai area. However, with the intervention of some individuals they were able to bring the pongal items to the site and performed pongal prayers. During the ceremony, a monk disrupted proceedings but was evicted by police. The event proceeded with about 500 attendees including several MPs and former council members. Concurrently, around 300 people and 29 monks led by the thera worshipped at a nearby vihara.</p> <p>In a letter dated 23 September 2023, Mullaitivu Magistrate T. Saravanarajah resigned due to life threats and stress, subsequently leaving the country. His resignation was submitted to the Judicial Service Commission. Recent controversial rulings on a disputed religious site in Kurundormalai and a remembrance event attracted criticism from some MPs and individuals.</p>
	25 May 2023, Vavuniya	<p>Vedukunarimalai Adilingeswarar Temple case (2084/2019):</p> <p>In Olumadu Village, near Nedunkeni Town, a mountain with ancient Brahmi inscriptions has a water channel to protect the characters from erosion. Villagers placed statues of Vinayakar, Amman, Vairavar, and a dragon god on the hill. Since 2018, the Department of Archaeology has tried to acquire the Vedukunarimalai Adilingeswarar Temple, leading to conflicts with the temple administration and Hindu devotees.</p> <p>The temple faced multiple interventions from the Nedunkeni police and the Department of Archaeology, particularly regarding the reconstruction of an old collapsing ladder and the installation of a tube well, both crucial for temple access and facilities. Despite these challenges, the temple administration managed to make partial modifications, installing ladder for the annual temple feast in September 2019, but only in the parts permitted by the Department of Archaeology.</p> <p>Legal disputes ensued with the Department of Archaeology and the police filing a case against the temple’s priest, president, and secretary, accusing them of violating official orders. Although the police temporarily lifted restrictions on worship activities, they continued to prohibit construction or significant modifications within the temple premises.</p> <p>The magistrate of Vavuniya Magistrate Court released the three individuals from the case bearing number 2084/2019. The decision was based on the lack of concrete proof presented by the police substantiating the charged offences against these individuals. The court’s decision to release the three temple officials from the case highlighted the lack of substantial evidence against them, marking a significant moment in the ongoing conflict between local religious practices and government regulatory efforts.</p>

Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Hindus

Exhibit 31: Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Hindus

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
12	14 December 2022	<p>Temple flag removed and construction material for the temple damaged by construction vehicle:</p> <p>Unidentified persons (suppliers of road construction material) removed the 'Nandi' flag at the Mutur 64th Mile Pillaiyar Temple and a construction vehicle engaging on construction damaged the foundation stone and material purposed for construction work on the temple property. Moreover, a large pit was dug next to it.</p> <p>Several members of the Mutur Hindu Gurukkal Sangam gathered at the temple on 14th December 2022 to inspect the place and decide how to proceed. On 15th December 2022, they filed a complaint with the Mutur Police Station (I.B Reference: CIB II 212/119). Subsequently, they met with the Divisional Secretary of Mutur to discuss this issue. They condemned the act of the perpetrators who insulted a religious flag by throwing it on the street and urged the authorities to take measures to prevent ethnic and religious tensions in the area.</p> <p>A kurukkal in the area commented that these activities were orchestrated by a local monk to create tension between ethnic and religious groups.</p>
13	12 February 2023 Jaffna	<p>Hindu temple converted into a Buddhist temple:</p> <p>Following a visit by a field officer on 12th February 2023, it was reported that attempts have been made to convert the Narasinga Vairavar Hindu Temple in Jaffna to a Buddhist temple by the army.</p> <p>The soolam was broken, Moolavar had been removed and images of the Buddha were painted on the walls. Also, a moonstone was embedded, and Buddhist flags were tied to the tree.</p>
14	February 2023. Mullaitivu	<p>Hindu temple site renamed as Buddhist temples on Google maps:</p> <p>Between 20th and 28th February 2023, the Archaeology Department had visited the temple sites and decided to rename the Hindu temples as Buddhist Viharas, including Akkaraweli Viharaya, Wannammaduwa Viharaya, and Mahapitiya Viharaya.</p>
15	23-24 February 2023, Batticaloa	<p>A temple's pillar was damaged by unidentified persons:</p> <p>Selva Vinayakar Temple's pillar was damaged by unidentified persons. This was reported to the temple administration, and a complaint (CIB 3 65/199) was filed at the Valaichchenai Police Station. No elephants, known to roam the area, were spotted near the temple on the day of the incident or after.</p> <p>The local residents held a protest in response to the incident. Police Scene of Crime Officers (SOCO) also visited the temple. The local community comprises Tamil and Muslim residents, who have had conflicts in the past. In 2018, the statue of the temple went missing, and a police complaint was lodged.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
16	9-10 March 2023, Vavuniya	<p>Place of worship damaged in Vavuniya:</p> <p>Despite local protests, a permit for black stone extraction from a Hindu worship hill was granted. On 9 March 2023, the hill's Pillaiyar statue was damaged and the sulagam was bent.</p> <p>Vavuniya divisional secretary and the former chairman of the Pradeshiya Sabha visited the disputed site, met local representatives and pledged to inform the relevant authorities. A complaint was filed with the Nedunkerni Police, who then surveyed the area.</p>
17	15 April 2023. Batticaloa	<p>Place of worship vandalised:</p> <p>The madapalli was damaged and the Shiva lingam statue of the Mayana Lingeswarar Temple was removed and placed near the temple fence by unidentified persons.</p>
18	14 April - 16 May 2023, Jaffna	<p>Police attempt to remove Amman statue:</p> <p>On 15 April, a case was filed in the Jaffna Magistrate's Court by Jaffna Police Headquarters chief inspector regarding the alleged illegal placement of Nagapooshani Amman's idol. The police sought its removal arguing it could disrupt religious harmony. Magistrate ordered that anyone with a claim regarding the installation of the statue to appear in Jaffna Magistrate Court on 18 April 2023 and that if no one claims the statue, action will be taken to remove the statue.</p> <p>Rudra Sena members, linked to the statue's installation, were interrogated at the Jaffna Police Station. They had performed a palabhishekam ceremony on 14 April. On 18 April, attorneys represented Nallur Adheenam and All Ceylon Hindu Mahasabha in court. They contested the authority of the police to remove the statue, citing the Naming of Streets and The Control of the Erection of Monuments Law (No. 4 of 1975). The magistrate inquired about the complaint's origin, learning it hadn't been formally filed.</p> <p>No interim or final orders for the statue's removal were issued. The magistrate requested a written statement from Nallur Adheenam and All Ceylon Hindu Mahasabha by 4 May detailing legal provisions for the statue's placement.</p> <p>On 16 May, the Jaffna Magistrate dismissed the case (BR/484/PC/2023) against the Amman statue, ruling that the court couldn't fulfil the request of the police for its removal and that the police lacked authority over the matter.</p>
19	18 April 2023, Jaffna	<p>Idol at a Hindu temple vandalized:</p> <p>The idol of the main deity at the Kottadi Pilliyar temple was vandalised and broken by unknown persons.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
20	1 June 2023, Vavuniya	<p>The Department of Archaeology stops restoration work and bans worship at a Hindu temple:</p> <p>Villagers restoring the Pattaraipirindakulam Amman Temple faced intervention from Archaeology Department officers and police who removed idols and banned construction and worship citing suspicions of it being an archaeological site.</p> <p>For a considerable time, the villagers had been worshipping in a small Hindu temple, which had no formal records. There are no Buddhist temples in this area; however, a new Sinhalese settlement named Kalaphokaswewa is being established 14 kilometres away from this location.</p>
21	10 August - 1 October 2023, Trincomalee	<p>Community members protest construction of Buddhist temple in area where majority of residents are Tamil:</p> <p>On 10 August 2023, the Eastern Province Governor ordered the Poralukanda Rajamaha Vihara's Chief Incumbent to temporarily stop construction and clearing activities at the temple. By 3 September 2023, a protest emerged, led by civil society, political figures, activists, human rights defenders, and villagers, against building a Buddhist vihara where majority of residents are Tamil.</p> <p>The Nilaveli Police's application to the Trincomalee Magistrate's Court resulted in restraining orders for 14 individuals, including protesters and vihara supporters, from demonstrating near the Boralukanda Vihara.</p> <p>The Tamil-speaking protesters shifted their demonstration, questioning if the Department of Archaeology's focus on Buddhist archaeology was leading to heritage preservation biases. On 30 September 2023, construction resumed with army support. The next day, locals organized a peaceful protest. Trincomalee Magistrate's Court issued an order restraining eight individuals from assembling and from engaging in protests near the Boralukanda Vihara and Nilaweli Police Division on or about 1 October 2023. It is also been stated in the said order that it is applicable to the followers who engage in the acts referred to in it. People from neighbouring villages also joined the protest to voice their solidarity. The eight people who were restrained did not participate in the protest. During the protest, the police prevented protesters from speaking to the media.</p>
22	13-17 August 2023 Mullaitivu	<p>Posters put up requesting people to oppose Hindus celebrating pongal at the Kurunthormalai temple:</p> <p>Posters stating "Buddhists arise! Let us save the Kurundi sacred site. Come to Kurundi on 18th August" were affixed in the Thannimurippu area near Kurunthormalai to oppose the Saivite community's pongal worship scheduled to take place in Kurunthormalai on 18 August 2023.</p> <p>Also, a post stating "Kurundi is in danger again. On 18th August 2023, extremists are getting ready to convert the Kurundi idol house into a kovil. Nationalists devoted to the sasana come to Kurundi with the maha sangha (Buddhist monks)" was shared on social media.</p>

Incident no.	Date and location	Description
23	28 October 2023, Jaffna	<p>Police requests the discontinuation of a loudspeaker broadcasting devotional songs at a Hindu temple:</p> <p>Following a complaint made by the Viharathipathi of Tissa Rajamaha Vihara, the police asked Hindu devotees to stop a loudspeaker that was broadcasting devotional songs at the Thaiyitti Nagathambiran Temple on Poya day, stating that the sound was interfering with the recitation of pirith at the illegally constructed Tissa Rajamaha Vihara nearby. A senior lawyer and Hindu devotees intervened and argued, as the police did not take any action against the Vihara. Following this, the loudspeaker of the Hindu temple and the sound of recitation from the Vihara stopped, and the situation was stabilised. Such incidents have been recurring during each Poya day, primarily because both Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking individuals visit these two religious sites to perform Poya day worship activities.</p>

Annexure 3: Harmful content on online platforms – Methodology

The methodology used in this study was created by Hashtag Generation in 2023. Hashtag Generation operates a Social Media Newsroom that continuously monitors and analyses harmful content on social media. The newsroom actively monitors Facebook, TikTok and YouTube. To facilitate the monitoring process, monitors use the social monitoring tool CrowdTangle and social listening tool SentiOne. The monitoring exercise consists of two methods. The team uses manual keyword searches to identify harmful content by using a lexicon of preidentified keywords. The other method is through manual monitoring of performing content through identified actors of concern. This includes a list of Facebook pages, Facebook public groups, TikTok accounts and YouTube channels that have been preidentified. The analysts manually code the posts. The analysts use intent to harm in categorising the intensity of the content.

Definitions and parameters of the study

The study adopted a broad definition of harmful speech that includes hate speech, disinformation, harassment, and organised advocacy of violence.

The study undertook a primarily quantitative analysis of cases of harmful speech targeting religions based on the data compiled by Hashtag Generation. The cases compiled by Hashtag Generation may not be an exhaustive list that reflects the total number of cases during the period under review. Verité did not verify Hashtag Generation's primary data nor verify the definitions.

Data coding

Post ID

The online harmful speech content data provided by Hashtag Generation classified each incident as a 'post'. Each post was given a unique ID.

Definitions and categorisations of harmful speech

Definitions for harmful speech are listed below, provided by Hashtag Generation. A single post may have more than one type of harmful speech or violence.

1. *Hate speech* – Any kind of communication on social media that uses pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or a group based on their identity such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or caste is considered hate speech. This also includes dehumanising speech, statements of inferiority and calls for exclusion.
2. *Harassment* – Any content that is directed at an individual based on causing discomfort or harm. This could include repeatedly and maliciously targeting someone, cyberbullying, threats, sexual harassment or violations of privacy.
3. *Disinformation* – All forms of false information that is disseminated online with the intent of causing harm to an individual, group, group identity or organisation are considered disinformation.
4. *Organised advocacy of violence* – All forms of messages found on social media that promote the use of physical violence, incite or call for violence and glorify violence. This includes propaganda for terrorism.

Key messages

The recording of key messages in harmful speech content is an attempt to disaggregate and deconstruct the forms of such content. The forms are laid out as:

1. Identitybased attacks/stereotyping – When a piece of content would target a person/group based on

their protected characteristics and other identity factors.

2. Threats of violence/incitement to violence - When a piece of content calls for direct/indirect violence on a person/group based on their protected characteristics or other identity factors.
3. Calls for exclusion/boycott - When a piece of content would directly/indirectly calls exclusion of a person/group based on their protected characteristics or other identity factors

Language

The language of the content was recorded as Sinhala, Tamil or English. If the post was in more than one language, all languages were recorded.

Form of content

The content was derived from Facebook, YouTube and TikTok online platforms. The form of the content was characterised as:

1. Picture
2. Video
3. Comment
4. Profile/page

Engagement/interaction

The actual engagement with the post was recorded at the time of data collection. The actual engagement is the total number of interactions (such as likes, shares and comments) with the post.

Target groups

This section refers to the main target in the recorded post. The four choice categories represent the broader classifications of potential targets and more than one may be entered for a given event.

1. *Ethnicity* - Ethnic groups may be the target of harmful speech. These could be Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burghers, Muslim or any other group.
2. *Religion* - Religious groups may be the target of harmful speech. These could be Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, other religions or atheists.
3. *Other protected groups* - Diseased persons or persons with disabilities, minors, LGBTQI+ people and others would be considered to fall in this category.
4. *Other local targets* - State actors, politicians, activists, civil society organisations, religious actors, journalists, celebrities and others would be considered to fall in this category.

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