

A GROWING RIGHTS CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On January 8, 2021, authorities bulldozed a memorial at Jaffna university that commemorated Tamil civilian victims of the civil war. Photo: [Twitter/@AngajanR](https://twitter.com/AngajanR)

Indian leaders have committed to supporting the rights of minority Tamils in Sri Lanka to “live with equity, equality, justice, peace and dignity”. In pledges to the United Nations, the Indian government has also vowed to uphold global human rights.

These commitments have become crucial. The human rights situation in Sri Lanka has worsened since Gotabaya Rajapaksa became President in 2019. At its next session starting February 22, the UN Human Rights Council ([UNHRC](#)) will face a crucial test in taking action for protecting vulnerable Sri Lankans and upholding international law. India, as a council member, will have a key role.

Rajapaksa was the defence secretary in the government led by his brother Mahinda from 2005 to 2015, a period marked by particularly egregious human rights abuses. Critics of the government were murdered, tortured, and forcibly made to disappear. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed in the civil war which ended in 2009 between government forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), with both sides responsible for numerous war crimes. In the final months of the war, the armed forces indiscriminately shelled civilians and summarily executed suspected LTTE fighters.

When Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the 2015 presidential election, there was hope for change. There was greater freedom of expression. The repressive and heavily militarised situation in Tamil-majority areas began to improve. The new government supported a consensus resolution at the Human Rights Council that offered victims of abuses and their families truth, justice, and reconciliation.

But now, fear has returned. Tamil communities in the north and the east fear increasing abuses. Since last year, singing the national anthem in Tamil has been dropped from Independence Day celebrations. The religious rights of minorities are under attack, including interference with Hindu temples.

In January, the authorities [bulldozed a memorial at Jaffna university](#) that commemorated Tamil civilian victims of the civil war. People who participated in a protest march in February are now facing criminal investigation.

The Rajapaksa government, in 2020, [renounced its commitments](#) under the [2015 Human Rights Council resolution](#) and is threatening victims' families and activists who supported it. A presidential commission set up to investigate supposed “political victimisation” of officials by the previous government has recommended the exoneration of those implicated in cases of abuse. Numerous people who were involved in war crimes have been appointed to senior roles.

The Rajapaksa government has shown outright disdain for accountability. In September last year, Sri Lanka told the Human Rights Council that allegations against senior military officers are “unacceptable” and without “substantive evidence”.

Last March, Rajapaksa [pardoned former army sergeant Sunil Ratnayake](#), who killed eight Tamil

civilians, including children. In October, the government amended the Constitution to remove constraints on political interference in Sri Lanka's courts.

Since 2012, the Human Rights Council has sought to work with Sri Lanka to promote reconciliation and accountability, efforts that India has backed. Sri Lanka is now rejecting that endeavour, instead proposing a new domestic commission that UN experts have dismissed as lacking credibility or independence.

The UNHRC should recognise the government's actions for what they are — an effort to impede justice. A new resolution is urgently needed to protect vulnerable minority communities in Sri Lanka, by upholding the principle of accountability for the worst crimes. India should join other member states in supporting a resolution to reduce the growing risk of future atrocities.

The author is South Asia director at Human Rights Watch

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