



Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon until 1972, is a constitutional democracy in South Asia with relatively high levels of development. It is strategically located in the Indian Ocean off the southeastern tip of India's Deccan Peninsula.

Historical Setting

The island nation was settled by successive waves of migration from India beginning in the 5th century BC. Indo-Aryans from northern India established Sinhalese Buddhist kingdoms in the central part of the island. Tamil Hindus from southern India also settled in northeastern coastal areas and established a kingdom on the Jaffna Peninsula. Beginning in the 16th century, Sri Lanka was colonized in succession by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English.

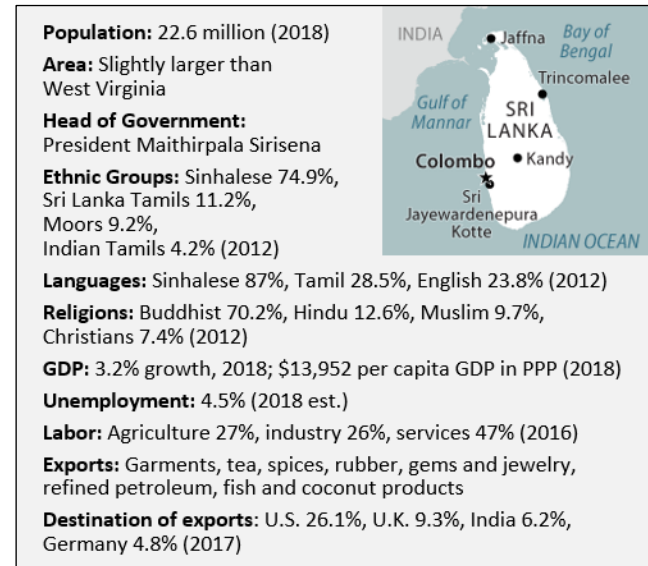
Although Ceylon gained its independence from Britain peacefully in 1948, succeeding decades were marred by ethnic conflict between the country's Sinhalese majority, clustered in the densely populated South and West, and a largely Hindu Tamil minority living in the North and East. Following independence, the Tamils—who had attained educational and civil service positions under the British—increasingly faced discrimination from the Sinhalese-dominated government, which made Sinhala the sole official language and gave preferences to Sinhalese in university admissions and government jobs. The Sinhalese, who had deeply resented British favoritism toward the Tamils, saw themselves not only as the majority, but also as a minority in a larger regional context that includes over 60 million Tamils across the Palk Strait in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in India.

Civil War

For 25 years, from 1983 to 2009, political, social, and economic development was constrained by ethnic conflict and war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers. The war cost an estimated 70,000-130,000 lives. The LTTE rebels sought to establish a separate state or internal self-rule in the Tamil-dominated areas.

After a violent end to the civil war in May 2009, when the military crushed LTTE forces and precipitated a humanitarian emergency in Sri Lanka's Tamil-dominated north, attention turned to whether the government had the ability and intention to build a stable peace in Sri Lanka. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, elected in 2005, faced criticism for an allegedly insufficient response to reported war crimes, a nepotistic and ethnically biased government, increasing restrictions on media, and uneven economic development. In the January 2015 presidential election he was defeated by President Maithripala Sirisena. This result was affirmed in parliamentary elections later in 2015 that led to the formation of a unity government supportive of Sirisena's reform agenda, including efforts to reduce the authority of the executive presidency.

Figure 1. Sri Lanka In Brief



Political Crisis and Forthcoming Elections

The governing coalition began to fracture after it performed poorly in the February 2018 local elections, losing out to the newly-formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party which capitalized on rising Sinhalese ethnic nationalism. A political crisis emerged in late 2018 when President Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) tried unsuccessfully to dismiss Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP) and replace him with Mahinda Rajapaksa of the SLPP. The next presidential election is to be held on November 16, 2019, and some observers believe a SLPP candidate may win. The new president will subsequently be able to dissolve parliament after February 2020. The constitution stipulates that the president cannot dissolve parliament until after four and a half years of its term have passed. Observers predict that the SLPP will do well in the 2020 parliamentary election.

Some observers say rising Sinhalese nationalism is a threat to lasting reconciliation between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority, which is represented primarily by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in parliament. Supporters of former President Rajapaksa, who is widely viewed as a Sinhalese nationalist, formed the SLPP to challenge Sirisena's reform coalition in 2016. Gotobahaya Rajapaksa, brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and a former Defense Secretary, is expected to be the SLPP presidential candidate in the November 16, 2019, presidential election. While a frontrunner, there is some controversy over his candidacy; some activists have alleged that he is a U.S. citizen. Sri Lanka doesn't allow dual or non-citizens to contest elections. Gotobhaya has claimed he has renounced his U.S. citizenship and is eligible to run for office. Gotobhaya would reportedly restore ties with China,

strained under Sirisena due to allegations of corruption and overpricing in Chinese-backed investment projects, should he be elected. There were reports in September 2019 that the SLPP was seeking SLFP support for Gotobhaya in the election. Sajith Premadasa will run for president for the UNP and he too is reportedly seeking SLFP support.

Easter Bombings

A series of Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 claimed over 250 lives and left over 500 injured. At least 38 of the dead were foreigners, including 4 Americans. The bombings targeted churches in the capital Colombo, as well as in Negombo and Batticaloa. The Shangri-la, Cinnamon Grand, and Kingsbury Hotels in Colombo were also targeted. A planned attack on a fourth hotel failed and reportedly helped police identify the perpetrators. The attacks were carried out by nine Sri Lankan suicide bombers and are the worst violence to strike Sri Lanka since the end of its civil war. Sri Lankan officials declared that the attacks were carried out by the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ), a little-known Sri Lankan Islamist terrorist group. The scale, coordination, and targets of the attack have led observers (and Colombo) to suggest possible linkages with the Islamic State (IS).

U.S.-Sri Lanka Relations

The White House issued the following statement following the 2019 Easter bombings. "The United States condemns in the strongest terms the outrageous terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka that have claimed so many precious lives on this Easter Sunday." Secretary of State Pompeo declared, "We stand with the Sri Lankan government and people as they confront violent extremism and have offered our assistance as they work to bring the perpetrators to justice." The Department of State issued a travel advisory warning that,

Terrorist groups continue plotting possible attacks in Sri Lanka. Terrorists may attack with little or no warning, targeting tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, local government facilities, hotels, clubs, restaurants, places of worship....

Following the attacks, U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Alaina Teplitz told reporters that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and the military are supporting the investigation into the bombings. The United States and Sri Lanka also halted a series of Cooperation Afloat and Readiness Training (CARAT) exercises that were underway off the coast of Hambantota prior to the Easter attack.

Through its foreign aid and diplomacy the United States has supported initiatives intended to strengthen governance, democratic reform, the rule of law, and human rights in Sri Lanka. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has maintained a presence in Sri Lanka since 1948. The United States is Sri Lanka's single largest market, accounting for approximately 25% of Sri Lankan exports. Sri Lanka's largest exports are garments, tea, spices, rubber, gems and jewelry, refined petroleum, fish, and coconuts/coconut products.

The United Nations, Sri Lanka, and Human Rights

Sri Lanka co-sponsored a U.N. Human Rights Council resolution on accountability for human rights abuses during the Sri Lanka civil war that was adopted by the Council in

October 2015. The resolution followed the September 2015 publication of the Report of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka and was viewed by many at the time as a positive step to advance justice in Sri Lanka. Since the adoption of the resolution, however, President Sirisena has backed away from supporting any significant involvement of international judges in a special judicial mechanism to prosecute war crimes. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, noted steps taken by Sri Lanka but also called for a transitional justice mechanism to deal with past human rights abuses. An Office of Missing Persons has been established, and a Right to Information law was passed. Tensions between Sinhalese and Muslim groups led to a wave of violence and a state of emergency in the Kandy District in March 2018. Human rights issues include unlawful killings, torture, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention, and violence against LGBTI persons.

Strategic Setting

Sri Lanka is situated near strategically important sea lanes that transit the Indian Ocean. These sea lanes link the energy-rich Persian Gulf with the economies of Asia. To some observers, maritime trade is increasingly integrating the Indian and Pacific Oceans' littoral regions into a more unified strategic arena. Sri Lanka and India share close, longstanding historical, cultural, and religious ties. India became entangled in the counter-insurgency war against the LTTE following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement of 1987. Between 1987 and 1990, India lost over 1,200 soldiers in this conflict, and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991. The Sri Lanka-India relationship was strengthened by President Sirisena's February 2015 visit to India, his first foreign visit as president, and also by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's March 2015 return visit to Colombo, the first by an Indian prime minister in 29 years. During his visit, Modi articulated his government's desire that the Tamil community in Sri Lanka have a just and dignified life in a unified Sri Lanka. India's native Tamil populations feel kinship with Sri Lanka's Tamils. India, along with the United States, has been an active voice for reconciliation and fair elections. India has also played host to a large number of Tamil refugees, 100,000 by some estimates, both during and after the Sri Lankan civil war.

China-Sri Lanka Relations

Some analysts have expressed concern over Sri Lanka's deepening relationship with China, including Chinese submarine visits to Sri Lanka. Beijing has invested significantly in Sri Lanka's infrastructure. In 2017, Sri Lanka leased port facilities at Hambantota to China for 99 years for an estimated \$1.1 billion to help Sri Lanka reduce its debt. China considers its activities in Sri Lanka to be part of its Belt and Road Initiative aimed in part at gaining access to ports in the Indian Ocean to help secure China's interests along vital sea lanes. China's presence in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean is causing increasing concern among some strategic analysts and policymakers in New Delhi and the United States.

Bruce Vaughn, bvaughn@crs.loc.gov, 7-3144