



# **PATTERNS AND RISKS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS**

(October 2020 - October 2021)

Cover image taken after the 2018 Digana riots courtesy of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL).

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# Acknowledgements

The study is based on data collected by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL).

NCEASL works actively in three broad areas – mission and theology; religious liberty and human rights; relief and development. NCEASL is affiliated to the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), a worldwide network of over 620 million Christians in 129 countries. NCEASL is led by renowned social transformation, religious liberty and human rights activist Deshamanya Godfrey Yogarajah.

For over two decades, the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) of NCEASL has monitored and documented incidents of violence, intimidation and discrimination against Sri Lanka's Christian community. The aim of the RLC however is to advance religious liberty for all Sri Lankans through advocacy and lobbying, research and documentation and training and education.

This study was compiled by Verité Media of Verité Research. Stephanie Nicolle was the lead researcher and author of the study. Rochel Canagasabay facilitated and managed the study. Ashvin Perera generated the quantitative insights. Data was tabulated by Shihara Ferdinando. The report was edited by Suresh Yogasundram. Overall research supervision was provided by Deepanjali Abeywardana and Nishan de Mel. Infographics were provided by Nilangika Fernando. Formatting was provided by Dinuk Senapatiratne. The author is deeply indebted and grateful to the aforementioned individuals for their time in reviewing drafts and ideas and for their feedback.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Religiously motivated violence against Christians and other religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims has persisted in Sri Lanka's post-war context. This study analyses key trends of religiously motivated violence against Christians from October 2020 to October 2021 – the first year of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led government's tenure and the second year of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's tenure. A total of 72 incidents of violence against Christians were analysed based on the data collected by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). The study also includes a brief description of the incidents of violence against Muslims and Hindus and the underlying narratives driving violence against these groups (see Annexure 2).

The analysis on anti-Christian violence is presented in two parts—a macro-level and micro-level analysis of trends of religious violence. The macro-level analysis provides insight into trends of religious violence from 2010 to October 2021. The micro-level analysis provides insight into (a) the role and response of state officials and (b) district-level violence against Christians from October 2020 to October 2021.

There were **three** key observations that emerged from the data evaluated.

1. An evaluation of incidents of anti-Christian violence from 2010 showed a pattern relating to the **frequency of violence**. Incidents of violence appear to have gathered momentum over time. However, this pattern of upward momentum tends to be disrupted by national elections; there was a decrease in incidents of anti-Christian violence during election periods. The data suggests a risk of anti-Christian violence regaining momentum after elections have been conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic generated a similar effect in terms of disrupting the pattern of increasing momentum. The strict enforcement of COVID-19 related regulations seemed to have restricted perpetrators' movements, thus affecting their ability to engage in violence. Anti-Christian violence appeared to regain momentum when COVID-19 regulations related to travel were not strictly enforced.

The data seems to suggest that preventing or reducing ground-level anti-Christian violence in the long term requires sustained periods of disruption that prevent incidents of violence from regaining momentum.

2. The analysis on the role of the state suggested a concerning pattern regarding the **state's negative bias in dealing with acts of violence against**

**Christians.** Since 2015, state officials (including the police) have been responsible for most incidents of anti-Christian violence documented by NCEASL. An assessment of these incidents showed that state officials tended to engage in acts of violence that were relatively less severe (such as discrimination or threats). The findings of the study also showed that the police actively or tacitly supported acts of violence committed by fellow state officials (57% of incidents) and Buddhist monks (65%). The police seemed to intervene on behalf of victims of violence when the perpetrators did not command a high level of authority.

3. An evaluation of district-level violence showed that 2 districts in the Western Province—Kalutara (20)

and Colombo (17)—recorded the highest number of incidents of violence. Buddhists are the religious majority in both districts, while Christians are less than 10%. Several incidents of violence against Christians in Kalutara and Colombo were mainly led by members of the Buddhist community. This trend suggests that the **religious majority in a given region may have greater agency to carry out acts of violence.**

Overall, the macro-level and micro-level analyses presented in the study provide an understanding of the nature of anti-Christian violence. The in-depth insights provided in the study may be beneficial towards evaluating ways of addressing and curbing acts of violence in the future.

# INTRODUCTION

Episodes of ethno-religious violence continue to persist in Sri Lanka's polarised post-war context. Tensions and violence have persisted irrespective of changes to the country's political leadership. Perpetrators of religiously motivated violence have also tended to act with impunity, either with the direct or tacit support of state officials.

This study builds on previous trend analyses of religious violence conducted by Verité Research. It evaluates incidents of violence documented by NCEASL with respect to the targeting of Christians from October 2020 to October 2021. The findings of the study are presented in two parts or chapters and are located within the specific socio-political context of the period under review. Where relevant and applicable, the study highlights long-term trends that Verité Research has noted in previous reports pertaining to religious violence.

Chapter 1 features macro-level insights by examining notable trends in the frequency of anti-Christian violence from 2010. It also features a general overview of violence in the period under review (October 2020 to

October 2021). Chapter 2 comprises two sections on micro-level insights relating to anti-Christian violence. The first section focuses on the role of state officials in episodes of anti-Christian violence, while the second section features a breakdown of district-level violence. The study concludes by noting key observations on the patterns of violence against Christians.

Chapters 1 and 2 use a classification system developed by Verité Research to identify the primary targets, key perpetrators, types of harm and state responses to incidents of anti-Christian violence. Each incident of violence has been documented and verified by NCEASL (see Annexure 1 for the detailed methodology used in this study).

In contrast to previous studies, the current study does not feature a separate analysis on media coverage pertaining to violence and discrimination against Muslim and Hindu minorities. Owing to limitations in the data documented by NCEASL, only a brief description of violence targeting these groups is provided in Annexure 2.

# SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT (OCTOBER 2020 – OCTOBER 2021)

At the August 2020 general election, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the party that nominated President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, secured a near two-thirds majority in parliament. The electoral campaigns of President Rajapaksa and the SLPP were widely viewed as prioritising the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority over the collective interests of Sri Lankans, including those of the country's ethno-religious minorities (Verité Research 2019; 2020a).<sup>1</sup>

Between October 2020 and October 2021, the government presented several policies that appeared to appease some segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency. Some of these policies and measures of the government included: the creation of the Presidential Task Force for One Country, One Law headed by Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera ("President appoints", 2021); introduction of the Prevention of Terrorism (de-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulations No. 01 of 2021 (Perera, 2021); proposals to ban cattle slaughter – a move widely perceived as affecting Muslim butchers ("Sri Lanka cabinet", 2021); renewed discussions on the anti-conversion bill ("Mahinda raises", 2021); allegations of the state leasing Tamil and Muslim owned lands in the Eastern Province to Buddhist organisations (The Oakland Institute, 2021); and the ban on face veils

including the burqa (Srinivasan, 2021).<sup>2</sup> The government was also accused of leveraging COVID-19 regulations to prevent memorialisation events held by ethno-religious minorities ("Sri Lanka places areas", 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Concerns also emerged over the government's willingness to deliver justice to the victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election manifesto outlined measures to identify and hold the perpetrators of the attacks to account (Vistas of Prosperity, 2019).<sup>4</sup> However, perceptions of limited government action resulted in protests by the Catholic church, such as 'the Black Sunday' protest ("Easter Sunday", 2021).<sup>5</sup> State officials also came under criticism for the 'harassment of Catholic priests' ("Silent protests", 2021).<sup>6</sup> This line of criticism mainly emerged following the complaint lodged by Director of the State Intelligence Service Major General Suresh Salley against Rev. Fr. Cyril Gamini Fernando. The complaint was with respect to Fr. Fernando's statement that the country's intelligence units had aided the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday attacks ("Colombo Archdiocese", 2021).<sup>7</sup>

In light of these developments, several civil society organisations, minority rights groups and international organisations have raised concerns over the entrenchment of Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism and threats



to the security and freedom of ethno-religious minorities. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2021) claimed that 'the [Sri Lankan] government has repeatedly adopted policies that alienate Sri Lanka's beleaguered minority communities.<sup>8</sup> It is in this socio-political context that the study analyses the prevalence of anti-Christian violence from October 2020 to October 2021.

# 1

## MACRO-LEVEL INSIGHTS AND TRENDS

Christians continue to be targeted in incidents of religiously motivated violence in Sri Lanka. Past studies by Verité Research (2020b; 2021a) have highlighted a concerning pattern of anti-Christian violence that ranged from extremely severe forms of violence to the least severe forms of violence.<sup>9</sup> This

chapter introduces a macro-level analysis that allows for a comparative assessment of anti-Christian violence from 2010 to October 2021. It also presents an overview of the specific incidents of violence aimed at Christians during the period October 2020 – October 2021.

### 1.1. VIOLENCE OVER THE YEARS: MOMENTUM AND DISRUPTIONS

This section presents a comparative assessment of the macro-level trends of anti-Christian violence from 2010 to October 2021. It offers an overall picture of how

incidents of violence in 2021 (until October) compared with past years (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 |** Number of Incidents of Violence Against Christians (2010 - October 2021)

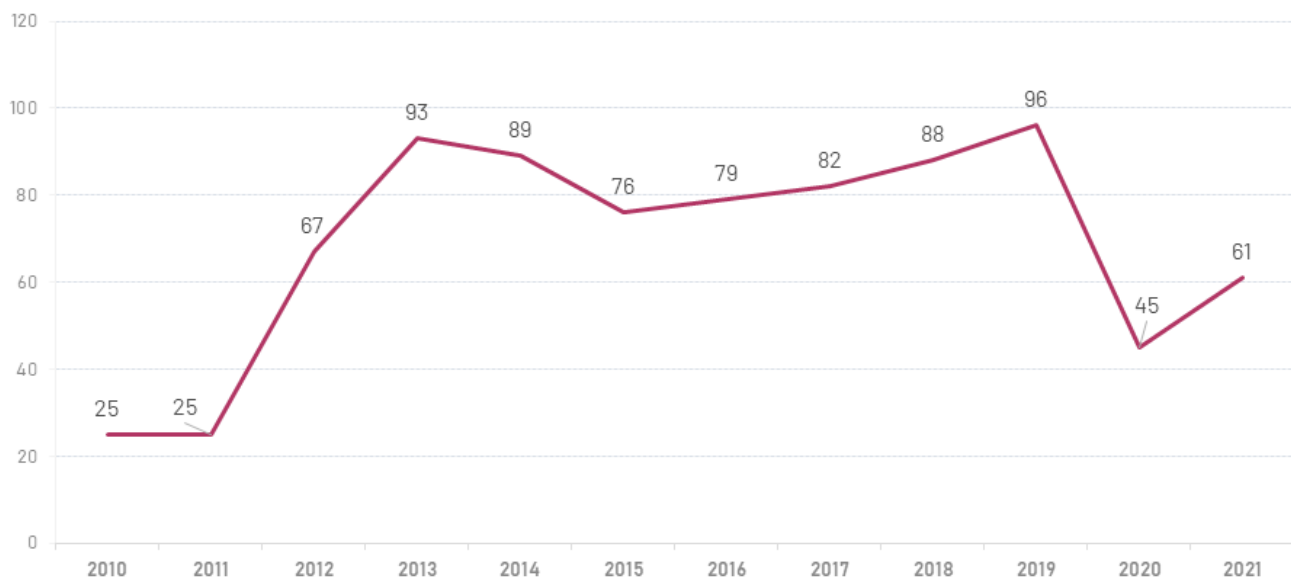


Figure 1 demonstrates a pattern of **increasing or upward momentum** pertaining to the number of religiously motivated incidents against Christians from January 2010 to October 2021. This pattern of upward momentum appears to undergo disruptions that bring about a decrease in the overall number of incidents. The disruptions to the pattern of increasing violence appear to occur around national elections. The data suggests that there is a risk of violence regaining momentum after national elections are conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have generated a similar effect in terms of disrupting the pattern of increasing momentum. The pattern of increasing or upward momentum and disruptions to this pattern are further explored in the next section.

#### **i. Correlation between anti-Christian violence and national elections**

Figure 1 appears to suggest a correlation between national elections and a reduction in ground-level anti-Christian violence. This correlation may be seen when comparing the pre-2015 data with the 2015 data. Following the presidential election in 2010, there was an uptick in the number of incidents until 2014/2015. A possible reason for the decrease in the number of incidents in 2014/2015 may be due to the presidential and general elections that were conducted. The 2015 presidential election was held in January, with postal voting commencing in December 2014. Sri Lanka also held its general election in August 2015 to elect members of parliament. The data shows an uptick in the number of incidents after the 2015 election cycles.

The correlation between less ground-level anti-Christian violence and national elections may also be seen to some degree in other election years, such as in 2019 and 2020. Incidents of anti-Christian violence were high in 2019, with the Easter Sunday attacks occurring in the same year. However, incidents of violence significantly decreased during the November presidential election

(only 2 incidents). In October 2019, one month before the presidential election, there was a comparatively higher number of incidents; 9 incidents in October as opposed to 2 in November (Verité Research 2021a).<sup>10</sup> Following the presidential election, incidents of violence increased to 11 in December 2019 (Verité Research 2021a).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, incidents of violence were low during the general election in August 2020. However, the August election coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that the pandemic may have had a greater bearing on the significant decrease in incidents of violence. Moreover, Verité Research has previously observed fluctuations in the number of incidents on a monthly basis. Further data from an election cycle without COVID-19 related restrictions may offer better insights on whether there is a consistent pattern between less ground-level violence aimed at Christians and national elections. An analysis on the monthly number of incidents of violence would also provide better insight into a possible drop in anti-Christian violence during election months.

#### **ii. Correlation between anti-Christian violence and COVID-19**

Figure 1 also suggests a correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions to the regular pattern of increasing ground-level violence. In contrast to national elections that tend to be conducted regularly, COVID-19 presented an unprecedented challenge for people and governments across the world. In Sri Lanka, COVID-19 appears to have brought about a significant decrease in the number of incidents of anti-Christian violence. The total number of incidents sharply reduced from 96 in 2019 to 45 in 2020, when the first locally transmitted case of COVID-19 was discovered.

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought about restrictions to mobility and the prioritisation of personal health and safety. Sri Lanka's 'first wave' of COVID-19 was marked by

stringent police curfews, the isolation of several areas and travel restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus. State and media messaging also played a critical role in discouraging public movement in general (instead of only restricting inter-district and inter-provincial travel). Past studies by Verité Research (2020b) have observed that violence against Christians is generally 'localised' or perpetrated by individuals/groups residing in the same area/nearby area as Christian targets.<sup>12</sup> Thus, **mobility is a necessary condition to carry out acts of religious violence on the ground.** The restrictions in movement brought about by COVID-19 related regulations and concerns appear to have curbed perpetrators' potential to regularly carry out incidents of religiously motivated violence. Violence appears to regain momentum in 2021 when travel restrictions were

relatively less and/or not strictly enforced; incidents of violence increased from 45 in 2020 to 61 in 2021 (until October).

The findings derived from Figure 1 may provide insight into the measures that can be adopted to address and curb ground-level anti-Christian violence. Figure 1 demonstrates a pattern where violence tends to gather momentum and increases with time. While there are disruptions to this pattern, there is a risk of the momentum building up once again as the disruptions are temporary. The reduction and prevention of religious violence in the long term may require sustained periods of disruption to prevent acts of violence from regaining momentum.

## 1.2. OVERVIEW OF VIOLENCE (OCTOBER 2020 - OCTOBER 2021)

This section presents an overview of the data on religiously motivated violence against Christians for the specific period under review (October 2020 - October 2021). A total of 72 incidents of anti-Christian violence were identified in the period under review. This is a slight increase from the 63 incidents of violence that were analysed in the previous period under review (September 2019 - September 2020).

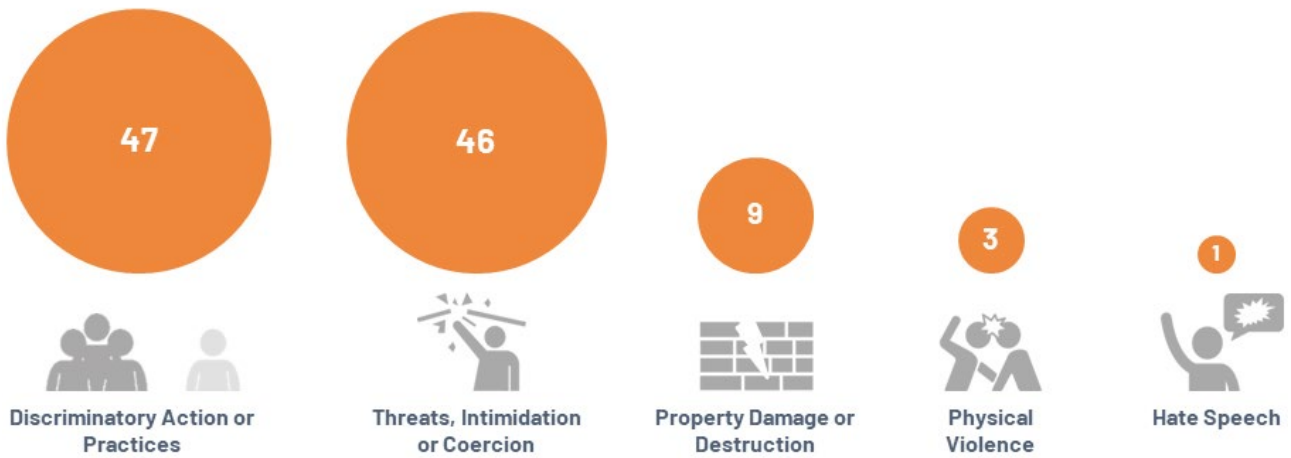
Similar to past studies conducted by Verité Research (2020b; 2021a), each incident of violence documented in the current period can feature more than one type of harm, perpetrator and primary target.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the summation by types of harm, perpetrator groups and primary targets is more than the total number of incidents. The study uses various classification systems to evaluate the nature of violence (see table below. Refer to Annexure 1 for a detailed description).

Severity of violence or harm	Description
<b>Most severe form of violence</b>	Carrying out physical violence against persons
<b>Severe form of violence</b>	Violence involving property damage
<b>Borderline severe forms of violence</b>	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
<b>Least severe forms of violence</b>	Includes discriminatory action or practices

As illustrated by Figure 2, the most frequent types of violence were less severe. They included the least severe forms of violence (discriminatory action or practices) and borderline severe forms of violence (threats, intimidation or coercion). Incidents involving property damage and physical violence were low.

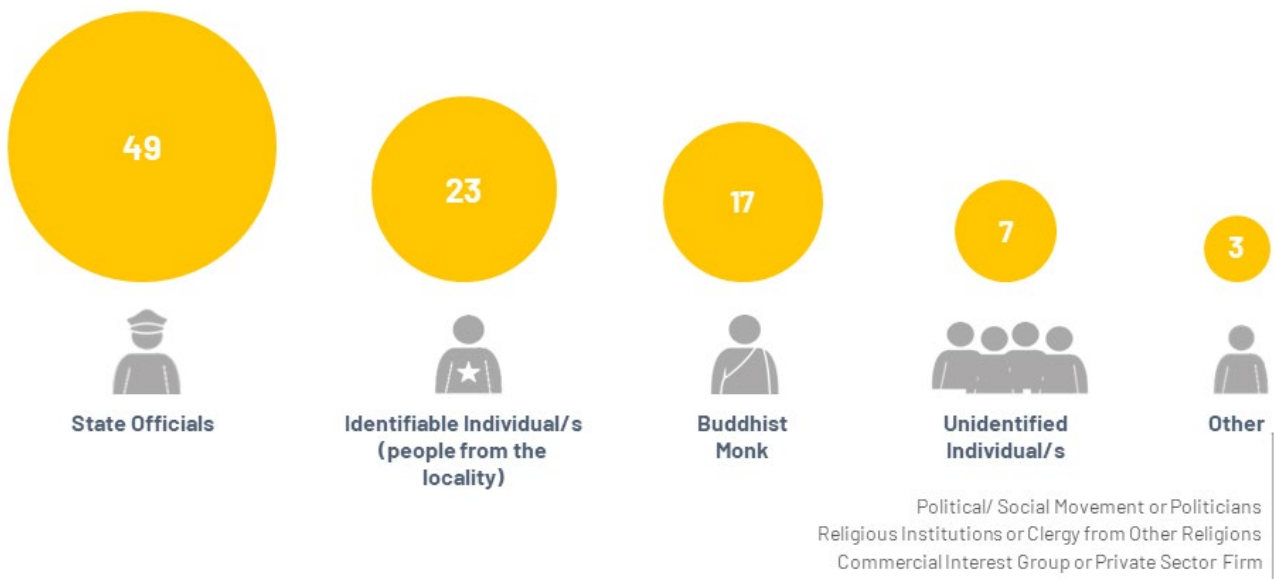
According to Figure 3, most incidents of violence were led by state officials, followed by identifiable individuals from within a respective locality, and members of the Buddhist clergy. Similar to the last study conducted by Verité Research (2021a), this study noted that most incidents of violence were aimed at Christian clergy (Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 2 | Types of Harm**



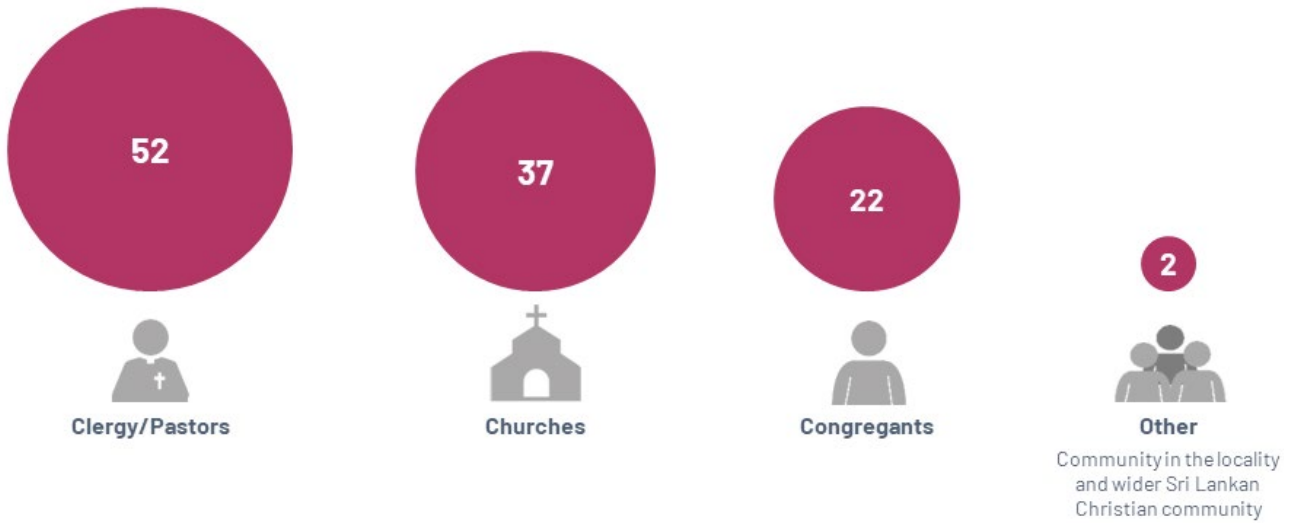
\*A single incident could feature more than one type of harm. Therefore, the total amount calculated within each type of harm may exceed the total number of incidents.

**Figure 3 | Key Perpetrators**



\*A single incident could feature more than one key perpetrator.

**Figure 4 | Primary Targets**



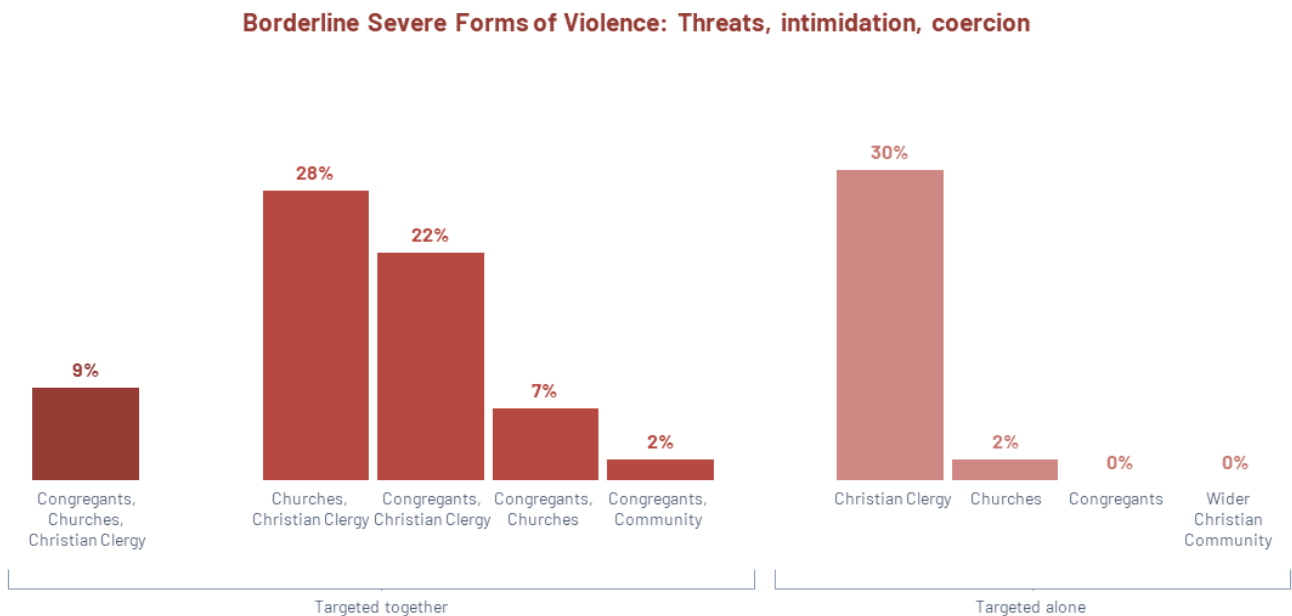
\*A single incident could feature more than one primary target.

Verité Research conducted an analysis to **identify the primary targets that tended to feature in the most frequent types of violence** (borderline severe and the least severe forms of violence) in the period under review. The findings of this analysis revealed that members of the **Christian clergy** were primarily targeted under the most frequent types of violence (borderline severe and the least severe forms of violence). They

were either targeted alone or together with churches and congregants/members of the church. A breakdown of this analysis is provided in Figures 5 and 6.

**Christian clergy targeted in incidents involving borderline severe forms of violence:** According to Figure 5, Christian clergy were individually targeted in 30% of incidents involving borderline severe forms of violence.

**Figure 5 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: Who was Targeted in Incidents Involving Borderline Severe Forms of Violence?**



They were targeted together with churches in 28% of such incidents. They were also targeted together with church congregants in 22% of such incidents.

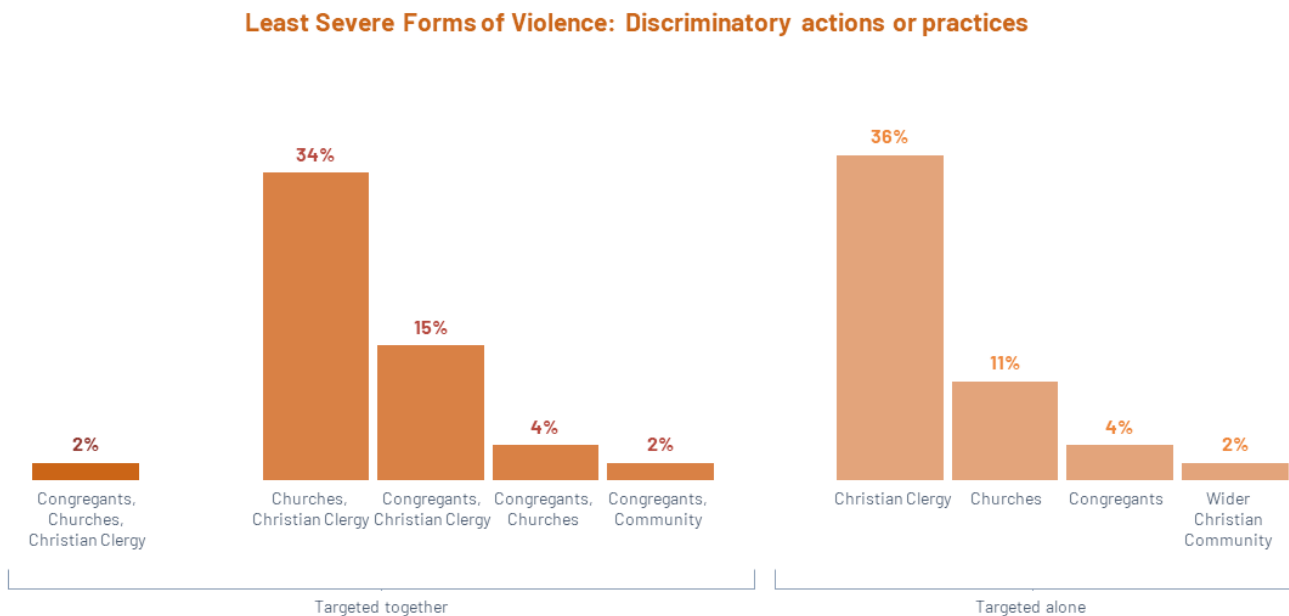
The data suggests that threats, intimidation or coercion tend to generally be directed at Christian leaders who are viewed as the representative authority of the Christian faith in a given locality. **There seems to be an underlying assumption that targeting the main representative authority may bring about a decrease or even a cessation of Christian activity in a given locality.** This underlying assumption is supported by an assessment of the qualitative data provided by NCEASL. On many occasions, Christian clergy were intimidated or coerced into ceasing worship activities.

**Christian clergy targeted in incidents involving the least severe forms of violence:** According to Figure 6, Christian clergy featured in several incidents where they were either targeted separately or together with churches and congregants.

In many instances, Christian clergy were questioned about the legality of their place of worship and the permission received to make renovations to or construct buildings connected to the church. There was also direct opposition to churches in the form of protests or petitions. Incidents relating to the targeting of places of worship were largely accompanied by demands to cease worship activities. The data appears to suggest that **acts of discrimination are generally carried out against the visible and tangible symbols of Christian presence (places of worship) in addition to the main representative authority (Christian clergy).**

In addition to the above, as observed in a previous study by Verité Research (2021a), there were some instances where officials claiming to be attached to the Special Task Force (STF) and state intelligence questioned and/or requested the clergy to furnish certain information regarding the church and the congregants. Some of this information included the denomination of the congregants, the GPS location of the church and the number of non-Christian converts who attended the church services.

**Figure 6 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: Who was Targeted in the Incidents Involving the Least Severe Forms of Violence?**



# 2

## MICRO-LEVEL INSIGHTS AND TRENDS

This chapter provides key insights from the micro-level analysis conducted with respect to the incidents of anti-Christian violence from October 2020 to October 2021. It specifically provides insight into: (1) the role of the state in incidents of religiously motivated violence against Christians and (2) the

geographic distribution of violence against Christians among districts. While the analysis focuses on micro-level insights during the specific period under review, it also notes patterns and trends—where relevant and applicable—that were observed in previous studies conducted by Verité Research.

### 2.1. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The Sri Lankan government has a primary duty to uphold religious freedom and protect the country's diverse faith groups from being targeted on religious grounds. At a national level, Sri Lanka has constitutional safeguards concerning religious freedom. The country's legal framework also affords broad legal powers to the state to ensure that the perpetrators of violence are held accountable. At an international level, Sri Lanka is a signatory to several international treaties that uphold religious freedom, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

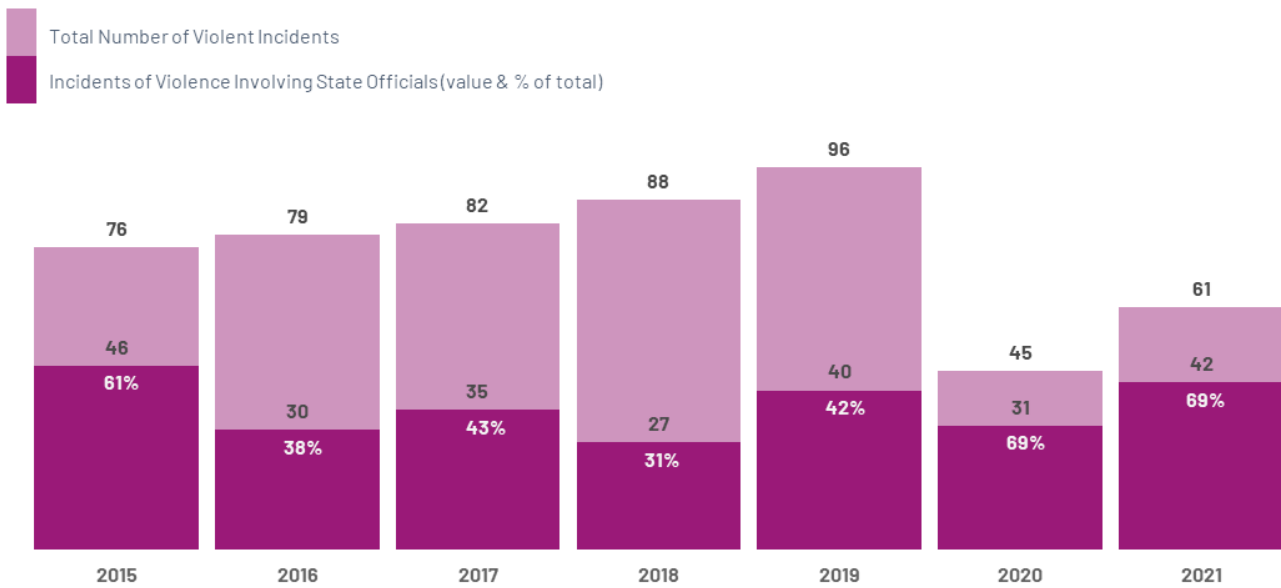
#### 2.1.1. Negative state bias: The systemic nature of violence?

Verité Research conducted a comparative assessment to evaluate the nature and degree of violence perpetrated by state officials over the years. The findings of

this analysis suggest an **entrenched pattern** regarding the involvement of state officials (including the police) in incidents of violence from 2015 (see Figure 7). The proportion of state officials' involvement in incidents of violence appears to be significantly high in the last two years (nearly 70%). However, an evaluation of the total number of incidents involving state officials suggests that their involvement did not drastically fluctuate over the years. They were generally involved in 30 or 40 incidents per year, with slight changes in some years.

The assessed data (2015 - October 2021) appears to suggest that violence involving state officials persists irrespective of changes to the country's political leadership. Nevertheless, the high number of incidents involving state officials raises concerns over their ability to restrain other perpetrator groups, especially when they themselves engage in the perpetration of violence.



**Figure 7 | State Officials' Involvement in Violent Incidents**

A previous study conducted by Verité Research (2021a) delved further into the incidents of violence led by state officials. The findings of that study suggested a negative state bias towards permitting Christians to function in an environment free of violence. **This negative bias was explored through two interconnected strands.**<sup>15</sup> The first strand related to state officials being empowered with broad powers to act with impunity in their targeting of Christians. The actions of most state officials also appeared to be driven by an entrenched view regarding the protection of the 'Sinhala-Buddhist state' from perceived threats. The second strand related to negative police action; the police directly engaged in acts of violence and safeguarded state officials (including fellow police officers) from being held accountable. The type of violence perpetrated by state officials (including the police) was generally less severe.

The current study observed similar trends in terms of the **state's negative bias towards permitting Christians to function in an environment free of violence.** The continuation of this trend may suggest a deeper and more serious concern over the **systemic nature of violence against Christians.**

### 2.1.1.1. Negative state bias: The state as perpetrator

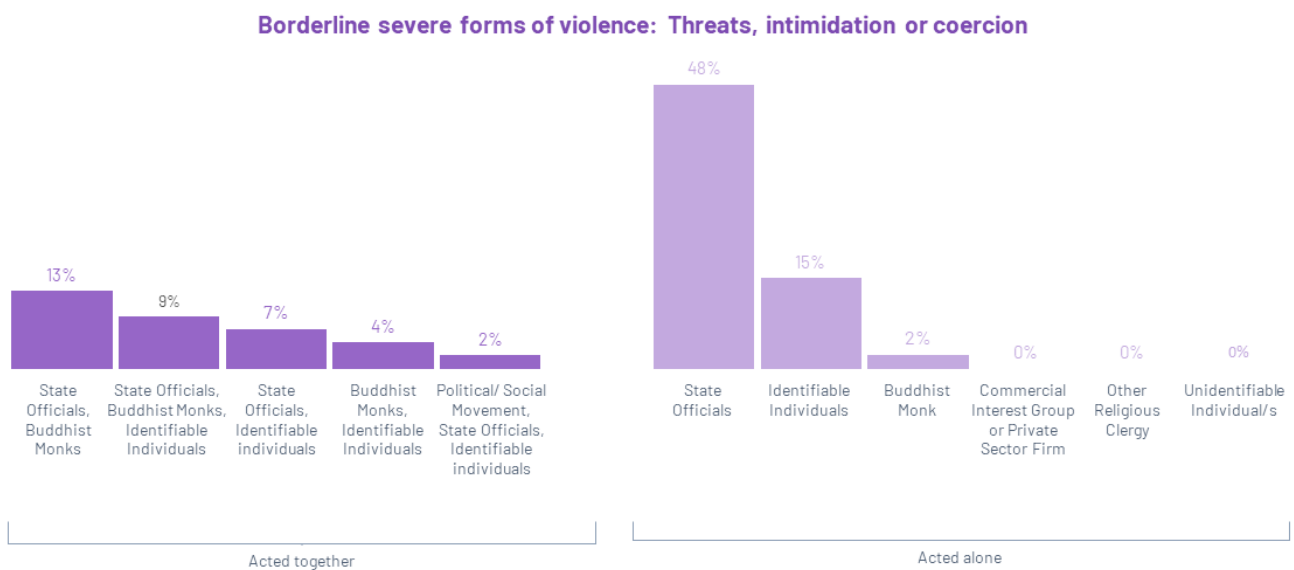
A closer examination of the key perpetrators responsible for borderline severe forms of violence and the least severe forms of violence revealed that **state officials (including the police) were primarily responsible for both types of violence.** The findings of this analysis are provided in Figures 8 and 9. Overall, the data available on the conduct of state officials suggests a **worrying trend of the state's continued negative bias** against enabling Christians to operate in an environment free of violence. It also raises concerns over the state's role and responsibilities in respecting and upholding the religious freedom of minority faith groups in Sri Lanka.

According to Figure 8, the total proportion of borderline severe incidents that state officials carried out alone or together with other perpetrators was 77%. Meanwhile, Figure 9 demonstrates that 86% of incidents involving the least severe forms of violence were carried out by state officials, who either acted alone or together with other perpetrators. When state officials acted alone in carrying out incidents of violence, they were responsible for nearly 50% of incidents featuring borderline

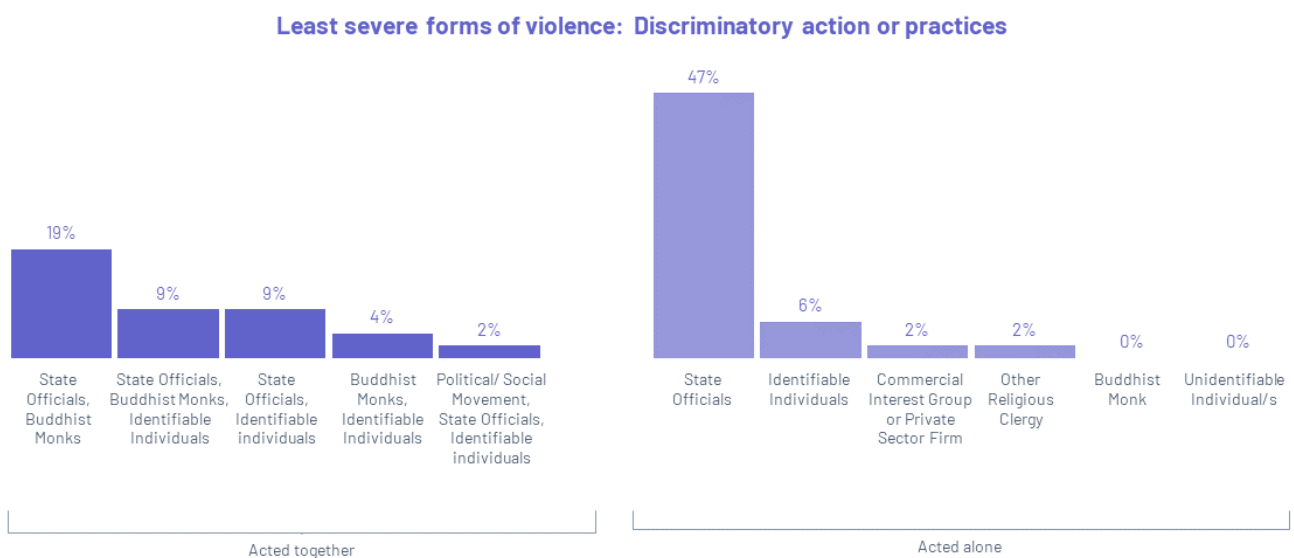
severe forms of violence (Figure 8) and the least severe forms of violence (Figure 9). Figures 8 and 9 also demonstrate a tendency among state officials to join members of the Buddhist clergy in carrying out borderline severe and the least severe forms of violence (13% and 19% respectively).

Some incidents of borderline severe and the least severe forms of violence led by state officials included: falsely accusing a pastor of not being a registered member of the Christian clergy and refusing to accept the pastor's credentials even when the relevant documents of proof were produced (certified documents such as

**Figure 8 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: Who were the Perpetrators in Incidents Involving Borderline Severe Forms of Violence?**



**Figure 9 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: Who were the Perpetrators in Incidents Involving the Least Severe Forms of Violence?**



the church appointment letter and degree certificate), joining Buddhist monks in opposing Christian religious activities and admonishing pastors and attempting to cease Christian activities by citing COVID-19 regulations even when informed that such regulations were being followed. In an extreme case, non-physical violence turned into physical violence when a group of approximately 75 individuals (including a grama niladhari, a pradeshiya sabha member and Buddhist monks) subjected a pastor, his wife and other Christians to death threats and assaulted them; the pastor’s driver was beaten with sticks.

### 2.1.1.2. Negative state bias: Negative police action

The current study also examined the **responses of the police** in relation to: (A) the most frequent types of violence; (B) the three main primary targets identified in the period under review; (C) the three main perpetrator groups identified in the period under review. The nature of police action is assessed using the following system of categorisation (also see Annexure 1).

Nature of police action	Description
<b>Actively negative</b>	The police actively or tacitly displayed support towards/were involved in the perpetration of violence against Christians
<b>Tacitly negative</b>	The police were present during an incident of violence and did not act on behalf of the victim/s
<b>Actively positive</b>	The police were present during an incident of violence and acted on behalf of the victim/s
<b>Passively positive</b>	The police took follow-up action after an incident of violence had occurred
<b>Absent/ unknown</b>	The nature of police action was not documented or not available at the time of conducting the study

The data available on the nature of police action **adds to the observations on the state’s continued negative bias** towards permitting Christians to function in an environment free of violence. It gives rise to concerns over the state’s ability to protect Christians from experiencing harm, especially when the police actively or tacitly enable acts of violence.

#### (A) Most frequent types of violence: How did the police respond?

**Key takeaways:** There is a concerning pattern of active/ tacit police support in incidents of violence. They were generally supportive of incidents of violence that were less severe (such as threats, intimidation, coercion and discriminatory action or practices).

This assessment set out to examine the nature of police action in the most frequent types of violence documented in the period under review (Figures 10 and 11). The most frequent types of violence were less severe: borderline severe forms of violence (threats, intimidation or coercion) and the least severe forms of violence (discriminatory action or practices). The police were actively or tacitly supportive of most incidents involving borderline severe forms of violence (54% as seen in Figure 10). Their active/tacit support in the least severe forms of violence was also relatively high (45% as seen in Figure 11). Under both types of violence, their response was actively positive (present and intervene) in less than 10% of the incidents documented (Figures 10 and 11).

#### (B) Main primary targets: How did the police respond?

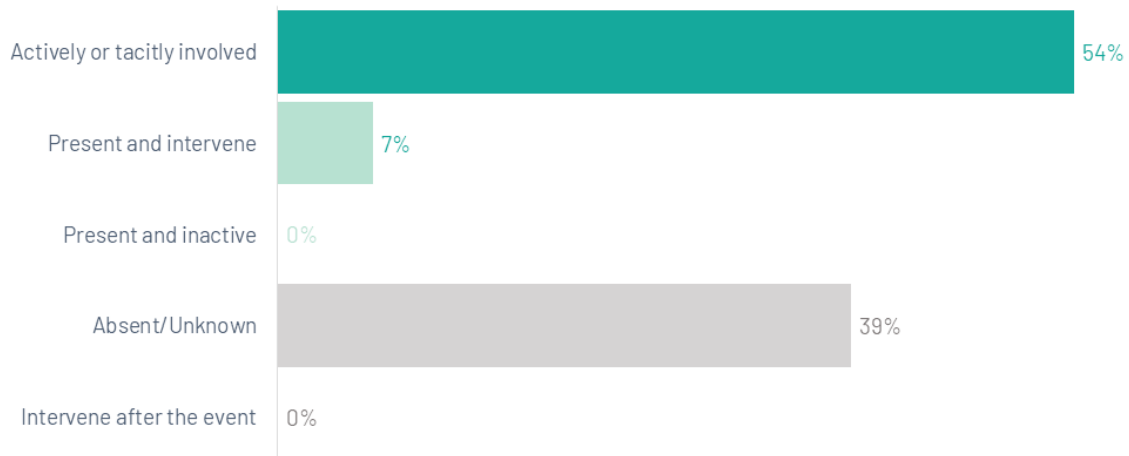
**Key takeaways:** There is a concerning pattern of active/tacit police support for acts of violence against Christian clergy, churches and Christian congregants. Passively positive police action (intervened after an incident) was recorded only when the violence against these targets was quite severe (such as physical violence and property damage).

This assessment set out to examine the responses of the police—either in defence of the three main primary targets (Christian clergy, churches and congregants) or the role they played in enabling acts of violence to continue. As illustrated by Figure 12, the police were actively or tacitly supportive of violence aimed at the three main targets during the period under review.

Actively positive police action (present and intervene) during incidents of violence against all three primary targets was low. There was passively positive police action (intervened after an incident) in most incidents where violence was quite severe (physical violence and property damage). Of a total of 9 incidents where violence was quite severe, the police took follow-up

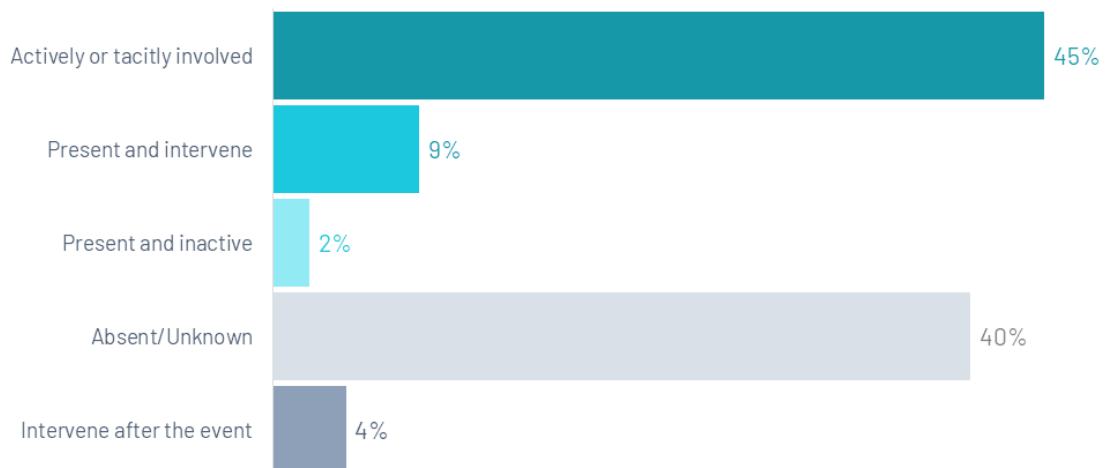
**Figure 10 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: How did the Police Respond in Incidents Involving Borderline Severe Forms of Violence?**

**Borderline severe forms of violence: Threats, intimidation or coercion**



**Figure 11 | Most Frequent Types of Violence: How did the Police Respond in Incidents Involving the Least Severe Forms of Violence?**

**Least severe forms of violence: Discriminatory action or practices**



action in 6 incidents. However, the follow-up action was largely limited to commencing an investigation. The available data does not record any incident where perpetrators were held accountable for carrying out acts of violence against the three main primary targets.

**(C) Main perpetrator groups: How did the police respond?**

**Key takeaways:** There is a concerning pattern of active/tacit police support for violence committed by fellow state officials, Buddhist monks and identifiable individuals (locals in the area). The data suggests that there is some degree of positive police action (both active and passive) when the perpetrators do not command a high level of authority to challenge police action.

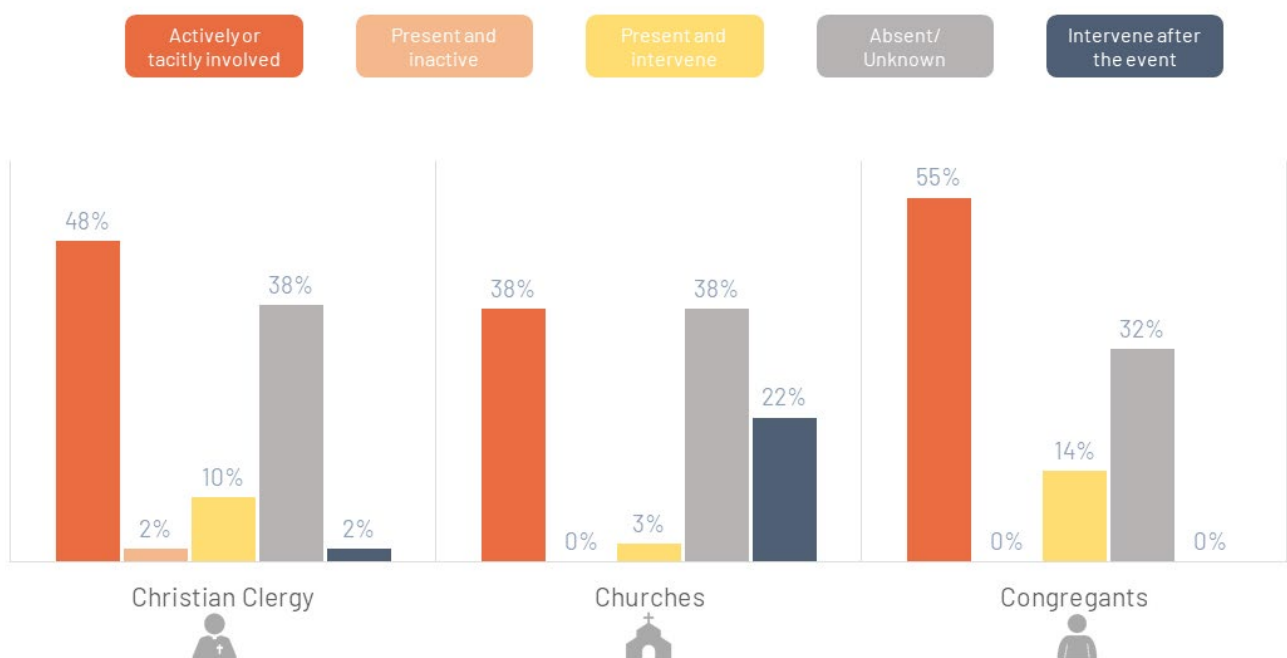
This analysis set out to examine the nature of police action or responses to the three main perpetrator groups (state officials, Buddhist monks and identifiable individuals) identified in the period under review. As illustrated by Figure 13, the police were either actively or tacitly supportive of religiously motivated violence

carried out by fellow state officials, Buddhist monks, and identifiable individuals from the area. They were more likely to be actively or tacitly supportive of the violence carried out by fellow state officials (57%) and Buddhist monks (65%) in comparison to the violence carried out by identifiable individuals (30%).

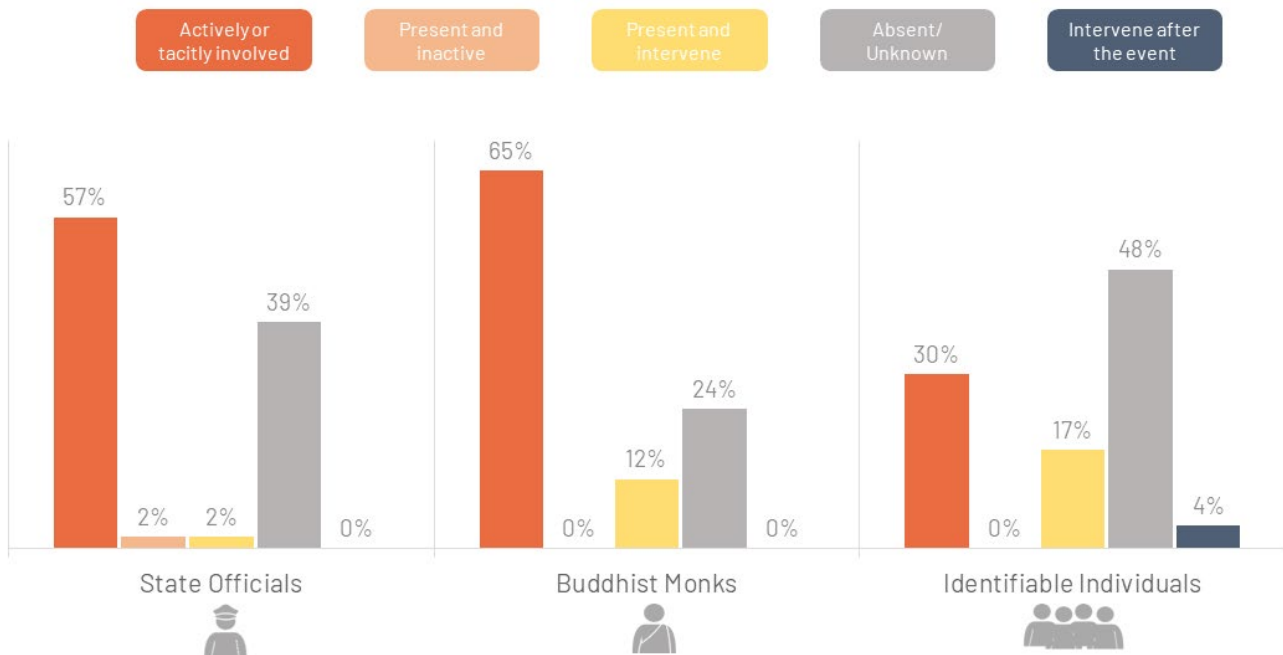
The data on police action appears to suggest that the **police are more likely to take some positive action (both active and passive) when perpetrators do not command a high level of authority to challenge police action.** This observation is supported by two data points relating to identifiable individuals.

The first point relates to the slightly higher proportion of actively positive police action (present and intervene) for incidents of violence committed by identifiable individuals. There was actively positive police action (present and intervene) in 17% of violent incidents led by identifiable individuals. By contrast, the police only took similar action in 12% of incidents led by Buddhist monks and 2% of incidents led by fellow state officials.

**Figure 12 | Primary Targets: How did the Police Respond?**



**Figure 13 | Main Perpetrator Groups: How did the Police Respond?**



The second point relates to the slightly higher proportion of passively positive police action (intervened after an incident) when the perpetrators were identifiable

individuals (4%). Passively positive police action was not observed in incidents where Buddhist monks or fellow state officials were the perpetrators.

## 2.2. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF VIOLENCE (DISTRICT-LEVEL BREAKDOWN)

Violence against Christians was recorded in 12 out of the 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka. This is a slight decrease from the data analysed in the previous study conducted by Verité Research (2021a).<sup>16</sup> According to that study, violence was recorded in 16 out of 25 administrative districts. Moreover, Batticaloa and Polonnaruwa were the districts with the highest number of incidents in the previous study. By contrast, the districts of Kalutara (20 incidents) and Colombo (17 incidents), both of which are located in the Western Province, recorded the highest number of incidents during the current period under review (see Figure 14). Kalutara has previously featured in the top 2 districts with the highest number of incidents in 2017 (18 incidents) and 2020 (10 incidents). Meanwhile, Colombo

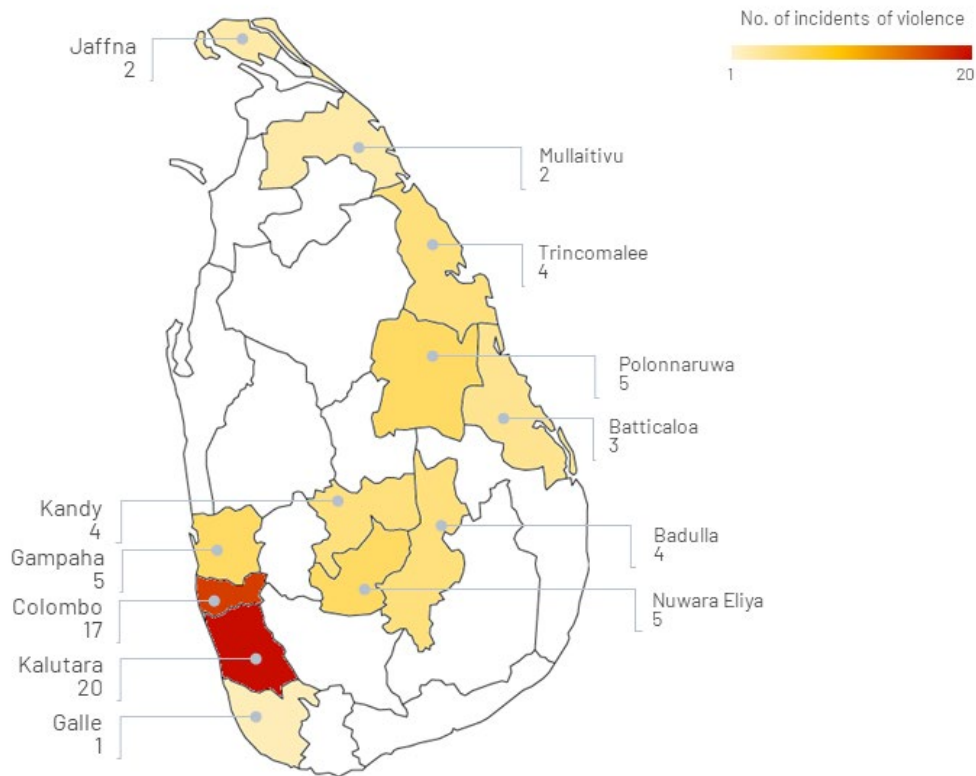
has previously featured in the top 2 districts with the highest number of incidents in 2018 (13 incidents).

This section draws comparisons between the districts of Kalutara and Colombo in terms of the **characteristics and patterns of violence in both districts** from October 2020 - October 2021.

### (A) Kalutara and Colombo: Demographic characteristics

The demographic composition with respect to the religious groups in Kalutara and Colombo are relatively similar. According to the last census (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012), Buddhists constitute the majority in both districts; 83.3% in Kalutara and 70.2%

**Figure 14 | District-Level Breakdown of Incidents of Violence Targeting Christians**



in Colombo.<sup>17</sup> The proportion of diverse minority faith groups are, in comparison to the Buddhist majority, extremely low in both districts. Each minority faith group in Kalutara and Colombo amounts to nearly 12% or less of the total population in each district. The population breakdown of minority faith groups in Kalutara is as follows: Hindus 3.2%, Muslims 9.3%, and Christians (both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic) 3.9% or 4%. The population breakdown of minority faith groups in Colombo is as follows: Hindus 8%, Muslims 11.7% and Christians (both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic) 9.8% or 10%.

From the incidents recorded in Colombo and Kalutara, the identity of the perpetrators in several incidents was Buddhist. However, the religious identity of all the perpetrators in the incidents of religious violence documented by NCEASL was not available. As observed in the previous study conducted by Verité Research (2021a), the identification of the majority community as

the offending party in some cases can be taken as being indicative of the majority community having greater agency in carrying out violence.

**(B) Kalutara and Colombo: Patterns of violence**

An evaluation of the types of violence, key perpetrators and primary targets also revealed several similarities between the incidents in Kalutara and Colombo. The **most frequent types of violence** in both districts were borderline severe forms of violence (15 in Kalutara and 12 in Colombo), and the least severe forms of violence (10 incidents in each district). However, Kalutara also witnessed 2 incidents involving property damage.

In terms of the **key perpetrators**, state officials were the actors responsible for most incidents of violence in Kalutara and Colombo (13 incidents in each district). There were some differences with respect to other perpetrator groups in both districts. For example, Buddhist monk-led violence against Christians was

higher in Kalutara than in Colombo (8 incidents vs. 3 incidents). Colombo also witnessed a slightly higher number of incidents led by identifiable individuals than Kalutara (9 incidents vs. 6 incidents).

With respect to the **primary targets**, Kalutara and Colombo witnessed a similar number of incidents of violence aimed at Christian clergy (16 in Kalutara and 15

in Colombo). Akin to the data on key perpetrators, there were some differences pertaining to other primary targets in both districts. For example, the number of incidents where churches were targeted was higher in Kalutara than in Colombo (11 incidents vs. 4 incidents). The number of incidents where congregants were targeted was much higher in Colombo than in Kalutara (8 incidents vs. 3 incidents).



# CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify key trends pertaining to religious violence against Christians from October 2020 to October 2021. The study mainly evaluated the macro-level trends of violence aimed at Christians from 2010 to October 2021 and the micro-level trends in the period under review. The findings of the study shed light on two possible patterns with respect to anti-Christian violence.

The macro-level analysis presented in Chapter 1 provided a broad overview of patterns of religious violence in the last decade. It observed that ground-level violence against Christians tends to increase in momentum, with disruptions to this pattern of upward momentum being brought about by national elections. COVID-19 was also identified as having generated a similar effect in terms of disrupting the pattern of upward momentum.

The micro-level analysis presented in Chapter 2 offered detailed insights into patterns of violence involving state officials. The state was generally responsible for 30 – 40 incidents from 2015 to October 2021. In the current period under review, state officials (inclusive of the police) were the main perpetrators in nearly 50% of incidents featuring borderline severe forms of violence

(threats, intimidation or coercion) and the least severe forms of violence (discriminatory action or practices).

An analysis of police responses to incidents of violence also revealed that the police were actively/tacitly supportive of nearly 50% of violent incidents aimed at Christian congregants and Christian clergy. They were also actively/tacitly supportive of nearly 40% of violent incidents targeting churches. While the police actively/tacitly supported a relatively high proportion of incidents carried out by identifiable individuals, their active/tacit support was significantly higher when Buddhist monks and fellow state officials were the perpetrators. The police showed a slightly higher tendency to take preventive measures when identifiable individuals were the perpetrators, as opposed to when fellow state officials and Buddhist monks were the perpetrators. Their likelihood to take some action (although limited) against identifiable individuals appeared to suggest that the police take certain positive measures when the perpetrators do not command a high level of authority.

In terms of district-level violence, the previous report noted the highest number of incidents in Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa. By contrast, Kalutara and Colombo were the 2 districts that recorded the highest number of

incidents in the period under review. Once again, state officials were the main perpetrators responsible for most incidents of violence in both districts.

Overall, the macro-level and micro-level insights into incidents of violence against Christians suggest two patterns – one on the frequency of violence and the

other on the possible systemic nature of violence. The analysis on the frequency of violence suggested that sustained periods of disruption may contribute to the long-term prevention or decrease in religious violence.

The analysis on the possible systemic nature of violence provides scope for further research to determine the entrenchment of state led violence.

# 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 revised version was adopted in the last study by Verité Research, *Prejudice and Patronage: An Analysis of Incidents of Violence Against Christians, Muslims, And Hindus in Sri Lanka (September 2019 - September 2020)*, and is reflected below.

### Definitions and parameters of the study

The study adopts a broad definition of violence that includes physical violence (physical assault and property damage), non-physical violence (threats, coercion, intimidation and hate speech) and structural violence (discriminatory actions or practices).<sup>16</sup> Previous studies by Verité Research have also classified these types of violence into severe forms of violence and non-severe forms of violence.

Similarly, the study broadly focuses on 'ethno-religious' violence as opposed to 'religious' violence by considering the features that are specific to the Sri Lankan context. Distinctions between ethnicity and religion are often blurred in Sri Lanka as these identity categories tend to overlap. Thus, examining ethno-religious violence, which captures both identity categories,

may offer richer insights into the entrenched nature of violence aimed at minority groups.

The study undertakes 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 report compiled by NCEASL may not be an exhaustive list that reflects the total number of incidents during the period under review. In line with previous studies by Verité Research, Verité has undertaken data coding and cleaning. Verité has not verified 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 anti-Christian violence, the incidents pertaining to violence against Muslims and Hindus may not reflect the total number of incidents against these groups. The study noted a significantly lesser number of incidents documented on anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu violence in comparison to the higher degree of anti-Christian violence documented by NCEASL. Thus, owing to limitations in the documented

data, the study provides only a brief description of the violence documented against Muslims and Hindus in Annexure 2.

## Data coding

### Incident and incident ID

The current study maintains 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 5 types of harm was not classified as an 'incident'. A single incident may have more than one type of harm or violence.

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.<sup>19</sup> In the context of this report, hate speech includes any printed material, meeting, rally or media campaign which expresses messages to attack or incites 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 of or monitoring the primary target/s in a manner that is aimed to intimidate the primary target/s.
5. *Discriminatory action 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 perpetrators categories listed.

Previous studies by Verité Research have, on occasion, used alternative classification systems to analyse the above forms of harm. The current study uses a classification system that assesses the severity of harm or violence. There are four sub-categories to assess the severity of violence: the most severe form of violence (physical violence); severe form of violence (property damage); borderline severe forms of violence (threats, coercion or intimidation); and the least severe forms of violence (discriminatory action or practices).

## Key perpetrators

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

1. **a.** *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.
 

**b.** *Political/social movement comprising Buddhist monks or led by a Buddhist monk*
2. *Unidentified individual or group* – when the affiliations of perpetrators are unclear or unstated.
3. *Institution or public servant (state officials)* – only used when the institution or person in question has a legal affiliation to the state, and includes elected individuals holding public office (e.g., state-run school, government administrator, minister).
4. **a.** *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.
 

**b.** *Buddhist monk* – 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 and (ii) NCEASL's incident reports have documented many episodes involving Buddhist monks. Past reports for NCEASL have thus included a separate analysis

of Buddhist monks' involvement in incidents of violence.

5. *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 acting as a space for promoting commercial activity.
6. *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.

## Perpetrators' religious affiliation

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

## Primary targets

This section refers to the main target in the recorded incident. The 6 choice categories represent the broader classifications of potential targets and more than one may be entered for a given event.

1. *Individual/s (church members/congregants)* – could 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.

2. *Local community* – could include, for example, all the Christian households in the village or a sect of Christians who are targeted.
3. *Place of worship* – could be a church or the location/house where prayer meetings are held.
4. *Business* – could be a Christian-owned enterprise.
5. *Wider community* – could be used particularly in events when many or all categories may be targeted *en masse* or Christians targeted at a national level.
6. *Institutions, clergy, officials or public figures* – could 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 role actively or tacitly 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 official's 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 role actively or tacitly 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 the 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 was deemed illegal if a public official e.g., a policeman, claimed that the pastor could not continue his worship services at a church or prayer meetings without the necessary documentation from the Ministry of Buddha Sasana.

## Annexure 2 – Incidents of Violence against Muslims and Hindus

In addition to monitoring anti-Christian violence, NCEASL recorded incidents of violence aimed at Muslims and Hindus. NCEASL adopted the same methodology and data collection methods to monitor violence against Muslims and Hindus. Notwithstanding, NCEASL is in the process of expanding its networks to monitor violence against both religious groups more

comprehensively. Thus, the data collected against these religious groups is significantly less than the data collected regarding anti-Christian violence. Verité Research has featured a brief description of incidents of violence against Muslims and Hindus by drawing from NCEASL's incident reports.

### Incidents of violence against Muslims

A total of 11 incidents of violence against Muslims were documented by NCEASL from October 2020 to October 2021. Figures 15 - 17 provide a brief description of these incidents as described in NCEASL's incident reports. Where relevant and applicable, Verité

Research has provided the underlying narratives that are used to justify violence against Muslims. Similarly, Verité Research has provided key insights into certain incidents wherever such observations were relevant and applicable.

**Figure 15 | Underlying Narrative: Muslim Cultural 'Peculiarities'**

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

A previous study by Verité Research (2021a) analysed media coverage regarding the narrative on Muslim cultural 'peculiarities' that is used to justify discrimination against Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Under this narrative, certain Islamic laws, customs and practices are portrayed as being 'at odds with that of the Sinhalese Buddhists' and as discouraging cultural assimilation.<sup>21</sup> The view that Muslims are 'non-compliant' with local laws and local culture has contributed to increased scrutiny of their religious attire (especially Muslim women's attire), Islamic schools and Sharia law, among other aspects. During the initial stages of COVID-19, the narrative on Muslim cultural 'peculiarities' was used to criticise requests by Muslims who wanted to bury their relatives who died of the virus (Verité Research 2021a).<sup>22</sup>



A weekly analysis by Verité Research (2021b), *The Media Analysis*, also noted similar observations when examining media coverage on the government's One Country, One Law concept.<sup>23</sup> The concept partly garnered support owing to beliefs among certain population segments that ethnic and religious minorities (especially Muslims) had personal laws that provided 'undue space' to be different.

The following incidents documented by NCEASL suggest that the narrative regarding Muslim cultural 'peculiarities' continues to be used as a basis to justify certain discriminatory policies, including the proposal to ban face veils. Many of the incidents highlight that Muslim women's religious attire is associated with 'extremism' and is viewed as a threat to national security. Some of the incidents described below suggest that the narrative on Muslim cultural 'peculiarities' is not solely held by Sinhala segments of society.

Incident no.	Date and area	Description
1	13 March 2021 Colombo	Sri Lanka announces move to ban the burqa:  Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekara stated that the government would ban the burqa, calling it 'a sign of religious extremism'. The minister also stated that the government plans to ban over 1,000 Islamic schools, which he claimed were contrary to the national education policy.
2	27 April 2021 Colombo	Cabinet grants approval to ban full-face coverings:  Minister of Mass Media Keheliya Rambukwella announced that the cabinet has approved the drafting of legislation to ban face veils. He stated that the government had decided to take this step in the interest of national security. This government decision builds on Minister Sarath Weerasekara's statement regarding the government looking into banning the burqa.
3	28 July 2021 Colombo District	Former Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) member issues allegations against Muslims:  Former CMC member Nadarajah Ravikumar alleged that 90% of Muslim women who wear the abhaya engage in prostitution and drug-trafficking. He also claimed that 90% of the entire Muslim population is engaged in terrorist activities. He then called on the government to ban the face veil. A video of the original interview that was uploaded on Facebook was reportedly removed after several complaints.  The Muslim Members Forum of the CMC later lodged a complaint against Ravikumar in a letter addressed to the senior Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police of the Western Province. The letter stated that Ravikumar had insulted the entire Muslim community through his speech and misled other communities. The letter further urged the senior DIG to conduct a thorough investigation on the matter.
4	7 August 2021 (No area documented)	Former Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) member reiterates the allegations levelled against the Muslim community:  In another interview given to ShortNews.lk, former CMC member Nadarajah Ravikumar stated that he stood by his previous comments regarding the Muslim community and refused to recant his statement.

5	15 August 2021 Kilinochchi	<p>Former Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) once again makes derogatory statements about Muslims:</p> <p>At a press conference held at the Kilinochchi Media Centre, former CMC member Nadarajah Ravikumar once again called for a ban on the burqa and made derogatory statements about Muslims and Islam. He reportedly stated that Muslims should abide by the One Country, One Law policy, and if they do not wish to comply, they should move to the Middle East.</p> <p>He reiterated his previous claims that Muslims engage in criminal activities while wearing the burqa. He commented against Leader of the All-Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) Rishad Bathiudeen and his family. He allegedly called for the execution of Bathiudeen’s family if they are found guilty of Hishalini’s (a worker at Bathiudeen’s residence) death. He further called on the government to make an example of Bathiudeen’s family as a warning to other Muslims.</p>
6	24 March 2021 Colombo District	<p>Sinhala-Buddhist organisations file a complaint against the burial of COVID-19 victims:</p> <p>According to NCEASL’s report, three organisations—Sinhala Ravaya, the Buddhist Information Centre and Sinhale—filed a joint complaint at the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission and called for the gazette notification allowing the burial of COVID-19 victims to be revoked. The complaint further called for the policy on mandatory cremation to be reintroduced until further examinations are conducted to rule out groundwater contamination.</p> <p>The government allowed burials after its policy on mandatory cremations was contested by certain religious groups, including Muslims, on the grounds that it lacked a clear scientific basis and failed to respect religious beliefs.</p>

**Figure 16 | Underlying Narrative: Land Acquisition and/or Encroachment**

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

As observed in Verité Research’s (2021a) previous report, this narrative suggests that Muslims and other ethno-religious minorities tend to acquire or encroach on lands that have historically been owned and populated by Sinhalese and Buddhists.<sup>24</sup> However, the previous report also noted that allegations of ‘land grabs’ are not restricted to the Muslim community alone. Tensions over land persist among other ethnic and religious groups in the country.

The following incident documented by NCEASL suggests that narratives regarding Muslim land encroachment continue to give rise to communal tensions. It is possible that such tensions may not initially emerge due to religious or ethnic reasons. However, they may acquire ethnic and religious overtones as the degree of hostility increases.

Incident no.	Date and area	Description
7	18 September 2021 Sammanthurai	<p>Disagreements due to a land dispute:</p> <p>A group of Sinhalese youth led by a Buddhist monk reportedly forcibly entered a land belonging to Muslims and attempted to assault a few persons working there. A quarrel broke out between the two groups thereafter. The landowners lodged a complaint with the Ampara police on 22 September 2021.</p> <p>A few days later, a meeting was held regarding the incident. All-Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) MP S.M.M. Muszhaaraff was also present. He presented documents to prove that the land belonged to Muslims. This was accepted by the governor and the police.</p> <p>NCEASL noted that there are historic and frequent disputes over land between the Sinhala-Buddhist and Muslim communities in the area. According to observations reported by NCEASL, Muslims have been cultivating land in the Sammanthurai area since 1943. However, since 2013, Sinhala settlers have reportedly been encroaching on these lands, laying claim to them, and attempting to cultivate on them. Landowners claim they have all the necessary deeds to the lands and warn of a communal conflict if the issue is not resolved.</p>

**Figure 17 | Other Incidents Involving Violence, Discrimination and/or Derogatory Statements Against Muslims**

Other incidents involving violence, discrimination and/or derogatory statements against Muslims		
Incident no.	Date and area	Description
8	27 July 2021 Karaitivu	<p>Local government chairperson denigrates Prophet Mohammed:</p> <p>Chairperson of the Karaitivu Pradeshiya Sabha Krishnapillai Jeyasril shared a post on his Facebook page denigrating Prophet Mohammed. A police complaint was lodged at the Sammanthurai police station regarding the post.</p>
9	26 – 31 July 2021 Kuragala	<p>Muslim burial sites desecrated:</p> <p>Two burial sites close to the Kuragala Jailani Mosque were desecrated and covered with mud by unidentified individuals. The burial sites are of historical significance to the Muslim community in the area.</p> <p>The mosque's management lodged a complaint with the Kaltota police station regarding the incident. However, it was later withdrawn by Balangoda Urban Council member J. Malik Shah stating that he did not wish to divide the Sinhala and Muslim communities.</p>

		<p>Gunatilleke (2018) notes that Kuragala has witnessed tensions between Sinhalese and Muslim groups that can be traced back to 2013.<sup>25</sup> He also notes that such tensions have prevailed despite historical co-existence between the two communities. Since 2013, groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya have campaigned for the removal of the Daft-har Jailani Mosque in Kuragala over claims that it is the site of an ancient Buddhist monastery.</p>
10	<p>13 September 2021</p> <p>Colombo</p>	<p>Derogatory statements by Ven. Gnanasara Thera:</p> <p>NCEASL documented that General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera made derogatory statements about Islam in an interview with <i>Hiru TV</i> on the 'Salakuna' programme. NCEASL also noted that the thera had claimed that Allah was the 'mastermind' behind the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. The thera had gone on to state that he had evidence of an upcoming terror attack similar to the 2019 attack.</p> <p>NCEASL noted that many parties had lodged complaints and made statements against the thera following these remarks, including Muslim parliamentarians, the All-Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama and the Catholic clergy. However, Minister Sarath Weerasekara had stated that the police will not summon the thera to record a statement.</p>
11	<p>13 October 2021</p> <p>Dehiwala</p>	<p>Mosque in Dehiwala attacked:</p> <p>An individual on a motorbike had driven up to the mosque on Bathiya Mawatha and proceeded to kick the main door. He had also reportedly attacked a neighbouring house belonging to a Muslim when he was told to stop. The neighbour had called the Kohuwala police. They had arrested the individual going by CCTV footage. The complainants claim that the same individual had attacked the mosque in August 2021. The suspect had been remanded twice in October by the Mount Lavinia Magistrate.</p>

## Incidents of violence against Hindus

A total of 2 incidents of violence against Hindus were documented by NCEASL from October 2020 to October 2021. Figure 18 provides a brief description of these incidents as described in NCEASL’s incident reports. Verité Research has—where relevant and applicable—provided key insights into certain incidents.

**Figure 18 | Incidents Involving Tensions and Discrimination Against Hindus**

Incidents involving tensions and discrimination against Hindus		
Incident no.	Date and area	Description
1	23 March 2021 Karachchi	<p>Residents protest against attempts to take over kovil lands:</p> <p>Residents around the Uruthirapuram Sivan Kovil held a protest against the Archaeology Department. Members of the Archaeology Department had previously visited the kovil premises after claiming to have discovered Buddhist artifacts on temple grounds. Construction on the kovil had been halted 8 years earlier when the Archaeology Department had first made this claim.</p> <p>Representatives of the Archaeology Department returned the next day and the protest had reportedly continued with the presence of law enforcement officers.</p> <p>As observed in a previous study by Verité Research (2021a), tensions between Hindus and the Archaeology Department over contested sacred sites are a longstanding issue.<sup>26</sup></p>
2	3 June 2021 Puthukkudiyiruppu	<p>Hindu priests arbitrarily arrested:</p> <p>The Puthukkudiyiruppu police reportedly arbitrarily arrested and detained two Hindu priests and a trustee of the Sivan temple in Mullaitivu for four hours. The priests were reportedly threatened not to carry out their daily prayers at the temple.</p>

# END NOTES

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