



**THE LANDSCAPE OF  
FREEDOM OF  
RELIGION OR BELIEF  
IN BATTICALOA | 2023-2024**

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**September 2024**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the landscape of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in the Batticaloa district, with a specific focus on the years 2023-24. The findings of this study were gathered through interviews with relevant stakeholders. The findings reveal several key themes, patterns, and observations currently impacting the FoRB landscape in the district. A central theme is the issue of land scarcity and the concerns over land ownership, which often instigates or has the potential to cause conflict between different groups along ethno-religious lines. Alleged land grabbing and encroachment by state actors, such as the Department of Archaeology, the Forest Department, and the military, are highlighted as significant stressors for communities. There is also a growing fear among religious communities regarding the presence of Sinhala-Buddhist settlers in traditionally Tamil or Muslim areas, which is seen as a threat and a potential source of tension between various groups. In addition, the presence of forces propagating Hindutva ideology, derived from India, is considered a threat to the religious culture of the Saiva community in Batticaloa.

Allegations continue to surface regarding religious conversions, particularly by Christian communities and conversions to Islam through inter-faith marriages, which is a cause of concern particularly for the Hindu community. Since the Easter Sunday attacks, the Muslim community continues to face aftereffects, including arbitrary arrests, targeting by certain politicians who use the attacks to incite animosity from other communities, and challenges in registering and building mosques. However, surveillance of the Muslim community is reported to have decreased over the past year in comparison to previous years. Intra-religious concerns are also noted within the Hindu community, particularly regarding the growing influence of Hindutva ideology and its differing practices from the Saiva tradition, as well as within the Christian community and various denominations regarding their stance on conversions, and among Muslim groups over differences between sects and their religious practices. The role of state actors, as highlighted in this study, points to the continued involvement of the Department of Archaeology, the Forest Department, the military, and the police, who are perceived as siding with the state, disadvantaging the Tamil and Muslim communities in the district. Further, there are cases of discrimination by local state officials, including favouritism and bias for certain ethno-religious groups in employment and official appointments.

A trend highlighted throughout the study is the role of social media in drawing attention to and escalating regional issues and incidents, particularly appealing to youth, which requires close monitoring. Discrimination against religious

expression, such as imposing bans on attire, particularly targeting Muslims, also remain a concern in the district. Finally, the impact of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections is flagged as an issue to monitor closely, given past patterns of violence and riots along ethno-religious lines during election cycles.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Relevant stakeholders were identified in consultation with field consultants to ensure those most capable of providing an understanding of the status of religious freedom affecting various communities in the district were included. Key informant interviews were conducted with these identified stakeholders. Field data was collected between July and September 2024.

The following table provides a breakdown of the stakeholders interviewed to develop this report.

Type of Stakeholder	Number of Interviews
Field Consultants	2
Human Rights Activist	4
Local Politician	1
Religious Leaders <i>* Representatives each from the Saiva, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist communities</i>	4
Lawyer	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

*Limitations of the methodology*

The study was conducted over a very short period; hence the data collection period and the number of stakeholders interviews was not as extensive as anticipated. Therefore, certain issues and cases at the micro level may have been inadvertently omitted in this report.



## INTRODUCTION

The Batticaloa District has historically been a contentious area, with conflicts occurring between various groups at different periods. The rising tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities in the district during the 1990s, amid the civil war, is one of the key inter-communal issues that have defined this district. Although tensions have persisted in the following decades, this inter-communal issue has received relatively less attention compared to the broader Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict.<sup>1</sup> In the recent past, the Easter Sunday attacks revived some of these inter-communal issues, particularly the targeting of the Muslim community in Kattankudy, fuelled by fears of Islamic extremism perceived as a threat to all religious groups in the district. The Muslim community in Batticaloa has since become the target of intensified state surveillance. In 2019, with the onset of COVID-19, Muslims faced further marginalisation, being stigmatised as super-spreaders of the virus, and issues that arose over forced cremation and denial of their burial rights<sup>2</sup>. The Christian community in the Batticaloa district has also faced accusations over the years related to religious conversions and has been subjected to instances of discrimination and side-lining by other communities. Simultaneously, the Hindu community in the Batticaloa area continue to face several challenges, particularly those related to overt militarization, land loss, and increased surveillance that have persisted for years. In recent years, significant attention and concerns over archaeological sites and lands belonging to the Hindu community have emerged, threatening the religious presence of Hindus in the region. The Presidential Task Force on Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province, appointed in 2020 to protect areas of archaeological importance, was strongly condemned for its non-inclusive representation. It was predominantly composed of members from the Buddhist community, thereby disadvantaging the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious communities.

### Overview of the Current Situation

The overt presence of religious violence in the Batticaloa district is noted to be reduced, yet underlying issues are reported to persist. Batticaloa serves as a case in point, illustrating how religious issues can be closely intertwined with and escalate into ethnic tensions. Religious conflicts often morph into broader ethnic disputes, with tensions between communities following Islam, Christianity, or Saivism

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1 Arjuna Ranawana. (2020, February 9). Building Race Relations in Uneasy Batticaloa. *EconomyNext*. <https://economynext.com/building-race-relations-in-uneasy-batticaloa-48215/>

2 Moinudeen, S. (2021). Is The Cure Worse Than the Disease? Reflections On Covid Governance in Sri Lanka. <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/09-Chapter-5.pdf>

frequently being reframed as Tamil-Muslim ethnic conflicts. A notable example is reported to be a tree-cutting incident in 2023<sup>3</sup>. A 400-year-old tree located in front of the Batticaloa town Jumma mosque, maintained by the mosque management, became the centre of conflict between the Muslim community and state authorities last year. Despite the mosque management's refusal, local authorities decided to cut down and burn the tree. In response, the mosque management filed a court case against this action. It is reported that the incident quickly escalated due to the involvement of politicians and social media influencers. Certain politicians reportedly used their own social media platforms to broadcast the event in real-time, mobilising people to gather at the site. Different political groups and their supporters created and spread their narratives through social media, inflaming tensions and transforming the tree-cutting incident into a case of ethnic conflict between the Muslim and Tamil community. There is also an incident reported of ongoing protests by the Tamil community, politicians, and Tamil civil society members against the construction of a building at the Siharam Sir Razik Fareed Vidyalyaya, a Muslim resettlement village in Batticaloa. While incidents of such nature in the district may be framed as ethnic or religious, the overt expression of dissent or retaliation against such issues could come at the cost of hindering the religious freedom of different communities.

In light of the above, this report aims to provide an overview of the status of religious freedom between 2023 and 2024 in the Batticaloa district, focusing on the challenges faced by different religious communities and highlighting key disputes during this period.

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3 இனவாதத்தின் குறிகாட்டியே மட்டக்களப்பில் தறிக்கப்பட்ட மரம். (2023). [https://www.lankanvoice.lk/2023/10/blog-post\\_17.html](https://www.lankanvoice.lk/2023/10/blog-post_17.html)

## FORB LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT FROM RESEARCH FINDINGS (2023-2024)

### Situation 5 years after the Easter Sunday Attacks

Five years after the Easter Sunday attacks, there is a sense of disappointment among both the Christian and Muslim communities in Batticaloa with the lack of proper solutions addressing the mental and physical health needs of the victims. While some individuals have received relief, overall support systems are reported to remain inadequate. Both the Muslim and Christian communities have expressed disappointment, stating that the real perpetrators of the attacks have yet to be properly identified, despite the Supreme Court holding former President Sirisena and others accountable<sup>4</sup> for their failure to prevent the attacks. In the absence of definite answers, there is a fear that false opinions and continued mistrust are likely to persist between the Christian and Muslim communities in the district. In addition, there is ongoing surveillance and arrests of Muslim individuals in the Batticaloa district by security forces. A recent example is the arrest of a Maulawi in Batticaloa for allegedly transporting firearms and ammunition, who is currently under investigation, as reported in the news<sup>5</sup>. It is noted that although many individuals who were arrested on suspicion have been released, they continue to be monitored by intelligence agencies. Their homes are reportedly frequently visited, and some investigations are still ongoing. Further it is noted that the military is continuing to conduct search operations around the homes of those who surrendered their weapons.

There are also ongoing concerns regarding the continued regulation of Arabic literature, which has caused unease within the Muslim community. A recent incident involved the detention of 15,000 copies of a Quran translation and other Arabic books at customs since April 2024. The release of these books was contingent on clearance from the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Defence<sup>6</sup>.

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4 Al Jazeera. (2023, January 12). Sri Lanka ex-leader ordered to compensate Easter bombing victims. Al Jazeera; Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/12/court-rules-sri-lanka-ex-leader-failed-to-stop-easter-attacks#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka>

5 Vidivelli. (2024, August 22). துப்பாக்கிகளுடன் கைதான மௌலவி விவகாரம் பின்னணியில் ஆயுத விற்பனை என்று சந்தேகம். Vidivelli.lk. <https://www.vidivelli.lk/article/17609>

6 Colombo Times. (2024, August 9). Sri Lankan government gives permission to clear the detained copies of holy Quran at Colombo Customs. <https://www.colombotimes.net/sri-lankan-government-gives-permission-to-clear-the-detained-copies-of-holy-quran-at-colombo-customs/>

### ***Controversy Surrounding Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan alias Pillayan's book on the Easter Sunday Attacks***

Controversy has risen recently surrounding the release of a book on the 23rd of March 2024 by State Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, alias Pillayan, on the Easter Sunday attacks. The book has been criticised for discussions on Islamic terrorism, and many view it as an attempt to rekindle divisions between communities. The content is perceived as demeaning to Islamic beliefs and creating misconceptions about Islam among followers of other religions. Activists and civil society members have expressed concerns that the book's misleading portrayal of the attacks reinforces harmful stereotypes, particularly targeting Muslims in the Kattankudy area. There is growing apprehension that this narrative could be exploited in the upcoming elections by politicians seeking to further their campaigns.

### **Religious Extremism and Imposition of Religion**

#### ***Rising Hindu Extremism***

The spread of Hindu extremism, particularly influenced by ideologies from groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Shiv Sena in India, has become an increasing concern, especially in the Batticaloa district. Hindu groups, influenced by and supported by this ideology, are reported to be affecting the religious freedom of other religious groups in the area. Activities around the Thiruchenthur Murugan Temple have reportedly targeted Christians, who are a minority religious group in the region. A recent incident in June 2024 exemplifies this tension when members of a Catholic church attempted to install an idol of Mary at a junction on the road leading to the Thiruchenthur Murugan Temple, they faced significant opposition from Hindu groups. Despite the opposition, the statue of Mary was eventually installed. In retaliation, Buddha and Pillaiyar idols were placed in the same location and later removed. It was noted that the placement of these statues was an attempt to provoke the Catholic community.

#### ***Imposition of Sinhala-Buddhism in the East***

There has also been a growing issue of land grabbing associated with what is considered the imposition of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism. Concerns have been raised regarding the lack of proper action against derogatory remarks made by Buddhist monks towards Hindu and Muslim communities. The lack of proper action taken against organisations with Buddhist extremist tendencies, such as Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balaya, is noted as concerning, as it is believed that these groups continue to spread false views against Muslims even today. For instance,

in 2023, Ampittiya Sumana Rathna Thera publicly expressed hate speech against Tamils<sup>7</sup>. Despite these remarks, no action was taken by the relevant authorities, leading to disappointment among local communities. In July 2024, The Court of Appeal granted bail to Ven. Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thero, who had been sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment in March 2024 for making defamatory comments about Islam at Kuragala. This recent release of the former Bodu Bala Sena leader also raises potential concerns for the future<sup>8</sup>.

The imposition of Sinhala Buddhism is also reported in the form of encroachment and forced settlement in the Eastern Province. A case in Trincomalee was noted, where these encroachments are seen as a direct attempt to target and marginalise Tamil and Muslim communities in the region, raising concerns for those in the Batticaloa District as well. In the Kuchchaveli area of Trincomalee, land traditionally owned by Muslims has been settled by Sinhala Buddhists, reportedly from the Hambantota and Weeraketiya areas in the South since 2022, with the names of the villages also gradually being changed. This settlement is said to have been endorsed by extremist monks, such as the leader of the Bodu Bala Sena, Gnanasara Thero, who has actively supported these movements. Furthermore, the establishment of around 32 new Buddhist statues or temples in this area at various points in the post-war period is viewed as an imposition of Buddhist religious beliefs, carried out without the consent or endorsement of the other religious groups in the area.

It is also observed that there is a close relationship between groups supporting Hindu extremism and those imposing Buddhism in the region, which is indicative of cross-religious collaboration. The presence of collectives such as the “Hindu-Buddhist Association” is noted as an example of this collaboration between both groups, working together to advance their respective agendas. In addition, there is growing concern over the involvement of the Indian government in supporting the preservation of Sinhala-Buddhist heritage, which requires closer attention. In 2023, an Indian politician announced a grant of USD 15 million to Sri Lanka to strengthen long-standing Buddhist connections, including the installation of Buddha statues, raising concerns about the implications of such involvement in districts like Batticaloa<sup>9</sup>.

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7 TNA questions IGP over Ampitiya Thera's controversial statement - Newswire. (2023, October 27). Newswire. <https://www.newswire.lk/2023/10/27/tna-questions-igp-over-ampitiya-theras-controversial-statement/>

8 Colombo HC orders release of Ven. Gnanasara Thero on bail. (2024). Adaderana.lk. <https://www.adaderana.lk/news/100688/colombo-hc-orders-release-of-ven-gnanasara-thero-on-bail>

9 India allocates USD 15 mn grant to Sri Lanka to bolster long-standing Buddhist connections. (2023, November 3). The Economic Times; Economic Times. <https://m.economictimes.com/news/india/india-allocates-usd-15-mn-grant-to-sri-lanka-to-bolster-long-standing-buddhist-connections/articleshow/104944465.cms>

## **Religious Conversions**

The issue of religious conversion remains a contentious topic in the Batticaloa district. Despite the constitutional right to manifest one's faith, the general perception of conversion is often negative rather than positive. The Hindu population in Batticaloa often levels accusations of religious conversion against both Christianity and Islam. It was also noted during an interview that some unregistered minority religious groups appear to be involved in conversion efforts, possibly with the aim of increasing their membership and establishing a presence in the district.

### ***Factors Influencing Conversion***

Several factors are noted as contributing to the current trend of religious conversion, with the ongoing economic crisis playing an important role. Other contributing factors include the vulnerability of women, caste dynamics, and a lack of knowledge about one's own religion. It has been observed that projects under the banner of 'Relief from Poverty in the Name of Jesus' provide funds and resources to poor communities who convert to Christianity. It is noted that conversions to Islam are more prevalent in isolated, impoverished Tamil villages near Muslim towns. In these areas, Islamic conversion activities are reportedly carried out by providing livelihood assistance to vulnerable individuals.

Conversion practices are said to range from voluntary to forced, which has become a significant point of contention, particularly among Saiva religious leaders in Batticaloa. These leaders are reportedly opposed to conversions, especially when economically disadvantaged Saiva individuals are targeted by various groups under what they perceive as the guise of providing material support. Cases have been noted where Hindu religious leaders have filed petitions and court cases against mainline churches, accusing them of engaging in conversions without consent. In addition, it is reported that some religious groups are utilising medicine and religious worship as tools to address the growing issues of suicide and drug usage in the district, which have escalated in recent times.

### ***Conversion Through Marriage***

There are ongoing concerns regarding the alleged practice of Muslims directing Tamil-Christians and Saiva individuals, particularly women, to convert to Islam through love marriages. An alternate view suggests that those who convert to Islam generally do so willingly, with some choosing to convert in order to marry Muslims. It is also noted that Muslim organisations typically do not actively proselytise among other religious communities.

It is observed that there is a pattern where women are often the first to be

approached in religious conversion efforts. Due to their responsibility for caring for their families, women are said to be drawn to conversion as a means of accessing greater freedom or resources. In addition, it is noted that through conversion, some women find an avenue for counselling or psychological support in their new religious communities - which may not be available within their previous religious communities. For example, it is noted that Catholic and mainline churches often provide psychological support to women in vulnerable situations, which is seen as a source of relief and acts as a pull factor towards the religion.

### **Registering Places of Worship**

Under Sri Lankan law, currently there is no mandatory requirement to register religious places. However, following the Easter Sunday attacks and growing concerns about the spread of extremism through unregistered religious establishments, the government has attempted to introduce regulations to mandate the registration of these places. It was noted in an interview that there seemed to be an understanding that the government initially advised Divisional Secretariats to withhold approving permits for the construction of new places of worship. Although such restrictions have since been relaxed, strict regulations still remain in place. Unlike before, it is reported that individuals can no longer freely construct places of worship wherever they choose. Government officials now require numerous documents and ask a multitude of questions before granting permission.

A 2022 circular issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana stated that new religious centres, places of worship, prayer centres, or any establishments engaging in collective worship must be registered. While this circular officially applies only to new places of worship, it has been reported that local authorities are using it at their discretion to apply these regulations to existing places of worship as well, especially targeting religious minorities. The lack of clear direction on regulations and laws, combined with how authorities interpret the existing ambiguity and exercise it at their discretion, has led to several issues at the local level.

In March 2024, Vidura Wickramanayake, the Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs, stressed that, according to the law, all religious institutions—including Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim—must be registered. He also mentioned that this requirement would extend to other groups like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons. He further stated that unregistered religious institutions would be subject to raids<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Alahakone, N. (2024, March 11). Sri Lanka planning to raid unregistered places of worship. EconomyNext. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-planning-to-raid-unregistered-places-of-worship-154081/>



### ***Challenges faced by Religious Minorities***

Given the complexities and legal requirements associated with mandatory registration, minority religious groups are particularly vulnerable to potential legal issues in the future. For instance, if documents are demanded for registration, many minority religious groups may struggle to comply, as important documents like land deeds were often destroyed during the war. It is noted that in the Arayampathy village there are 54 Saiva temples, some of which are unregistered. There are apprehensions that the lack of registration raises the possibility of legal challenges and potential threats to the existence of these temples in the future.

### ***Registration and Regulatory Changes for Mosques***

As of August 2024, the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Wakf Board have announced the resumption of the registration of new mosques, indicating efforts to regulate the registering of new Muslim institutions. Under the Wakfs Act, all mosques are required to register with the Wakf Board within the Muslim Cultural Department. The Wakf Tribunal also deals with ongoing issues related to this registration<sup>11</sup>. It is further reported that the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs has announced that permission will be granted to reopen two mosques in Kattankudy that were closed following the 2019 attacks. These mosques, the National Thawheed Jamath Mosque and the Dharul Athar Mosque, are expected to be handed over for public use soon.

### **Land and Resource Scarcity**

Both the Muslim and Tamil communities are increasingly worried about land allocation and their land rights, often due to land grabs by various government authorities. This has also created apprehension between the two communities regarding the limited availability of land, intensifying concerns about land security and creating tensions between communities. While these cases are not directly related to the violation of or affecting the Freedom of Religion or Belief, it is noted that it is important to highlight these issues to ensure that land scarcity is not used to target religious groups by various parties or lead to inter-religious conflicts. An example illustrating the sensitivities around land scarcity and ownership issues is highlighted through an incident reported in March 2024, when the Thiruneelakanda Pillaiyar Temple and Maariyamman Temple administrations decided to exclude a family from participating in worship and temple activities due to their sale of land to a Muslim individual from Kattankudy in Arayampathy village.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/DMRCASriLanka/posts/pfbid0NRTGQz9iEJWbnPY8CKZFaWgdtq6jdZA7uBNWXaMhD8aD5fQBIDBRHyZfw6hy5a4HI>

### ***Scarcity of Land in Batticaloa for Muslims***

Kattankudy, a densely populated area predominantly inhabited by Muslims, is experiencing a severe land shortage. Over 2,500 families have already submitted requests for land allocations from the Kattankudy Divisional Secretariat, but these requests have yet to be addressed. It is reported that these delays are due to religion-based discrimination. It is noted that government officials, including those from the Divisional Secretariat and other local level administrative offices, who predominantly belong to the Tamil community, are supposedly not supporting the Muslim community in their requests for land. The Forum of Civil Institutions and Professionals submitted a letter, dated August 3rd, 2024, to the President, highlighting these land issues and noting that while Muslims make up 27% of the Batticaloa population, only 1.46% of the total district land is allocated to them.

Land scarcity issues in Batticaloa have been further complicated by the actions of the Department of Archaeology. Attempts to establish Sinhalese settlements in Vakara and the Western part of Koralai have led to the threat of ethno-religious tensions in the district. In addition, Muslim communities allege that Tamils are encroaching on Muslim-owned lands in areas like Kattankudy South border, Siharam, Palamunai, and Karbala, or obstructing their settlement in these areas. There is also an opinion that politicians in Batticaloa are involved in land grabbing. The Department of Archaeology has allegedly acquired a portion of Muslim-owned land in Siharam village in 2019. The Department has restricted the access to this land, preventing local residents from entering. The residents claim that there are no archaeological artefacts on this land and allege that the department has deliberately buried some artefacts to justify the acquisition.

### ***Mayilathamadu Madhavani Pasture Land Conflict***

The Mayilathamadu pasture land issue is another key example of land conflict in Batticaloa. Tamil farmers have been protesting for over 200 days as of April 2024<sup>12</sup>, demanding a fair resolution to this issue. This conflict is perceived as part of a broader effort to reduce the proportion of Tamil people in the Batticaloa district through the establishment of Sinhalese settlements and the Sinhala-Buddhisization of the area. It is reported that the Mahaweli Development Authority has claimed ownership of this pasture land and allocated it to Sinhalese farmers for agricultural purposes. These farmers, who have settled illegally with the support of the Mahaweli Development Authority and a Buddhist monk, are now in conflict with Tamil cattle farmers who are attempting to reclaim the land.

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<sup>12</sup> Tamil Guardian. (2024, April 1). Tamil livestock farmers mark 200 days of protest against Sinhalese settler violence in Batticaloa. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-livestock-farmers-mark-200-days-protest-against-sinhalese-settler-violence-batticaloa>

Government actions continue to disadvantage the Tamil community in this case. In 2023, a Buddhist monk and a group of Sinhalese people detained religious leaders and journalists in Mayilathamadu who were trying to bring attention to this issue. When the incident was reported to the Karadiyanaru Police Station, the police officers reportedly worshipped the Buddhist monk instead of taking legal action against him<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Encroachment of Saiva Temple Lands***

Land encroachments by the Department of Archaeology, with the support of Buddhist monks, have reportedly targeted over 20 Saiva temples, including the Kusalana Murugan Temple and Sittandy Murugan Temple<sup>14</sup> in 2020 and the Velodu Malai Temple in 2018. Some of these encroachments are allegedly reported to be carried out with the primary support of Buddhists, with the indirect support of some Muslims who are participating in land grabbing against Tamils. An interview also suggested that there is a suspicion that some Tamil politicians are silently supporting the government without addressing these land encroachments adequately. In addition, the installation of Buddha statues in predominantly Hindu areas has been a concern for many.

### ***Impact of Proposed Development Projects in Vaharai***

In the midst of ongoing apprehensions regarding lack of land for communities, it is reported that under the guise of development, the land resources of the Vaharai Divisional Secretariat have been sold to international companies for activities such as aquaculture and ilmenite excavation<sup>15</sup>. There is also a sense of disappointment regarding the lack of action by Tamil politicians in addressing these issues affecting their communities.

### ***Attempts to Create Tensions Between Tamil and Muslim Communities in Poonochimuna***

More recently, tensions have emerged between Tamil and Muslim fishermen in the Poonochimuna area under the Kattankudy Police Division. In June 2024, an incident was reported involving the burning of a fishing boat parked on the Poonochimuna beach, leading to the arrest of two Tamil fishermen by the police on suspicion. This incident created some tensions between the Tamil and Muslim fishermen in the area, whilst some Muslim fishermen were protesting for the

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13 மும்மத தலைவர்கள் சிறைப்பிடிப்பு: மட்டக்களப்பு எல்லையில்லுந்து திரும்ப முடியாத நிலையில் தமிழர்கள்..! - தமிழ்வின். (2023). Tamilwin. <https://tamilwin.com/article/imprisonment-religious-leaders-in-batticaloa-1692733099>

14 Sinhala Archaeology officials attach GPS tracking to "heritage" stones in East. (2020, July 26). Tamilnet.com. <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=39900>

15 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=TrnelP&v=1395925874437486&rdid=W9EK3JhuXhEhByWi>

protection of their livelihoods and against external forces attempting to disrupt Tamil-Muslim harmony<sup>16</sup>. In July 2024, an explosion occurred in a household in the same village<sup>17</sup>, and a few days later, a hand grenade was found near this household, which caught media attention<sup>18</sup>.

## **Intra-Religious Tensions**

### ***Between Hindu Groups***

Saivism, a sect of Hinduism that has been practised in Sri Lanka for centuries, is reportedly facing systematic erosion due to the imposition and influence of Hindutva ideology that is derived from India. This ideology is reportedly aimed to establish the dominance of the Indian government in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka, particularly among the Saivite population. This cultural and religious intrusion is considered to pose a significant threat to the preservation of Saivite and Tamil identity.

Prominent Indian collectives such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad are reported to be actively operating under the patronage of the Thiruchenthur Murugan Temple in the Batticaloa district. These groups are noted to be conducting training programmes focused on Tamil recitation, which, while seemingly benign, are perceived as efforts to create division among the Tamil people and to undermine the tradition of Sanskrit recitation. They also reportedly organised the traditional Kumbabhishekam event on an inauspicious day, a move interpreted as an attempt to undermine traditional Saiva worship practices in the country and promote other worship systems. It is highlighted that the perceived loss of Saivism under the shadow of Hindutva ideology is not merely a religious concern but also a cultural one, as it is considered to threaten the identity of the Saiva-Tamil community in Sri Lanka.

### ***Between Christian Groups***

Within the Christian community, particularly among Catholics and other Christian denominations, intra-religious conflicts have reportedly emerged due to disagreements related to religious conversions. Members from certain denominations are said to be involved in conversion activities driven by personal beliefs or financial incentives. These actions have led to internal tensions and conflicts within the Christian community in the district.

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16 மட்டக்களப்பு - பூனொச்சிமுனையில் மீன்பிடி படகு எரிக்கப்பட்டமைக்கு எதிராக மீனவர்கள் ஆர்ப்பாட்டம். (2024, June 24). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/186791>

17 மட்டக்களப்பில் வெடிப்புச் சம்பவம் : இராணுவம், பொலிஸர் தீவிர விசாரணை. (2024, July 16). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/188570>

18 காத்தான்குடியில் கைக்குண்டு மீட்பு : இராணுவம், விசேட அதிரடிப் படையினர் விசாரணை. (2024, July 22). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/189059>

## ***Between Muslim Groups***

Tensions have been reported in previous years between the Sufi and Sunni factions in Batticaloa. It has been noted that internal dissension within the Muslim community has subsided since the Easter Sunday attacks. It is observed that there is less tendency to openly criticise or engage in conflict with one another. Although the overt hostility of the past between these groups has diminished in recent times, underlying tensions still persist.

In 1979, the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama issued a fatwa<sup>19</sup> declaring Moulavi A. Abdur Rauf Mibaahi, a leader of Sufi Muslims in Kattankudy, and his followers as “murtads” (apostates) for their beliefs which purportedly goes against the principles of Islam. In 2017, the Aliyar Junction clash between members of the National Thawheed Jamaat, led by Zahran, and followers of Moulavi A. Abdur Rauf Mibaahi and Sufism marked the first overt confrontation between these two factions, highlighting their disagreements with one another. In 2022 and 2023, the discussion over the fatwa issued against the Sufi leader of Kattankudy resurfaced when Moulavi K. R. M. Sahlan Rabbani, Secretary of the Alhaj Abdul Jawadh Alim Waliyyullah Trust, addressed a letter where he cautioned about the potential for individuals from Kattankudy, to mobilise Muslim youth towards Wahhabism and extremism. He also highlighted how the fatwa issued in 1979 against Moulavi A. Abdur Rauf Mibaahi violated his fundamental rights and placed the Moulavi’s life under threat<sup>20</sup>. This fatwa was brought to the attention of President Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2023<sup>21</sup>.

Further, it was noted that there are several factions and doctrinal differences among communities following the Tawheed ideology itself, with some groups following different rules and practices than others and operating separate mosques. While some adhere to nationally adopted practices, others follow those observed in Saudi Arabia. In addition, in the Batticaloa district, there is a population of Shia Muslims living in the Kalkuna division; however, there have been no reported issues or clashes between them and other factions.

## ***Administrative and Caste-Based Issues in Religious Institutions***

Administrative challenges are reported to be prevalent across various religious institutions, including mosques and temples. Boards of trustees, often comprising

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19 A formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar

20 Moulavi cautions revival of Wahhabism from Kattankudy. (2022, January 17). Dailymirror.lk. <https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/news/Moulavi-cautions-revival-of-Wahhabism-from-Kattankudy/239-229219>

21 காத்தான்குடி அப்துர் ரவுப் இற்கு வழங்கப்பட்ட பத்வா குறித்து ஜனாதிபதி கேள்வி. (2023, July 13). [https://www.shortnews.lk/2023/07/blog-post\\_774.html](https://www.shortnews.lk/2023/07/blog-post_774.html)

community leaders and intellectuals, are reported to be involved in competitions for prestigious positions. This rivalry sometimes escalates into legal disputes or even violence. Caste-based discrimination remains a significant issue within Hinduism, with higher castes continuing to marginalise lower castes.

### ***State Surveillance and Exploitation of Intra-Religious Divisions***

It is observed that the state has identified and monitors these internal religious factions. Security forces often seem to leverage these divisions to gather intelligence. However, this approach has unintended consequences, as individuals involved in internal conflicts may provide misleading information about rival groups to security agencies. Military intelligence capitalises on these divisions, using them to advance their objectives, which can further destabilise religious harmony.

## **ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT OF STATE ACTORS**

### **Department of Archaeology**

The Department of Archaeology in Sri Lanka is reported to be identifying and claiming Hindu cultural symbols as Buddhist symbols. Historically, Saivism and Tamil culture were intertwined, with overlaps between Saivism and Buddhism in ancient times. This historical interconnection has led to many cultural sites with inscriptions and artefacts being contested. For instance, several Saiva temples have been reclassified as archaeological sites by the Department of Archaeology, including the Thaanthamalai Murugan Temple, Kusalana Malai Murugan Temple, Velodu Malai Murugan Temple, and Sittandy Murugan Temple. The Hindu community views these actions as a threat to their religious identity.

### **Military and the Police**

In various parts of the district, the military and police have reportedly planted Bo trees and installed Buddha statues within military camps and police stations. These installations often remain in place even after the military or police vacate the premises, symbolising their presence and offending other religious communities who access these spaces. In addition, there is growing distrust among the local population in Batticaloa due to the alleged involvement of security forces in activities, such as smuggling and drug trafficking into the district. The military and police are also accused of providing security and support to encroaching Sinhalese settlers and Buddhist monks, particularly in the Mayilathamadu pasture land case, where they are perceived as taking the side of the Sinhalese settlers over the local Tamil community.

### **Discrimination and Bias by State Officials**

There are growing concerns over favouritism by local state officials, particularly in financial allocations and resource distributions in the Batticaloa district. It is reported that local officials often prioritise community members of their own religion, leading to unjust treatment of other communities. For example, the Eastern Provincial Governor has been accused of supporting Hindu interests while neglecting the needs of the Muslim community, a pattern of behaviour that reportedly extends back to previous governors as well. There are reported incidents of discrimination against Muslims by state officials. A recent example reported this year involves a Muslim female government official in Batticaloa who was denied a promotion to a higher position in the Batticaloa District Secretariat and was subsequently transferred to the Muthur DS office in the Trincomalee district.

Some government officials in Batticaloa, including those working in the District



Secretariat, Divisional Secretariats, and other agencies, are reportedly displaying a less favourable attitude towards Muslims. Some of these officials are reported to be withholding permission to register mosques, stalling Muslim settlements, and deliberately placing Muslim teachers in remote areas. This pattern of events has raised concerns that officials in the Department of Education and other government bodies are operating along racial and religious lines. An example was reported where in February 2024, appointed Muslim female teachers have been posted to distant locations, while Tamil female teachers have been placed in more convenient locations closer to their homes. Teachers accuse the Provincial Director of Education of ethnic bias in these placements. It is further noted that Kattankudy, a town with a significant Muslim population, has had a Tamil Divisional Secretary for the past six years, despite the availability of qualified Muslim officers who could fill the position. It has been observed that state officials involved in causing these issues range from local administrators to high-ranking officials at various levels.

### **Other State Actors**

In addition to the issues mentioned above, the involvement of the Forest Department and the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka is noted as important, with these state actors being complicit in upholding the interests of the Sinhalese community, particularly in matters like the Mayilathamadu Madhavani Pasture Land. Furthermore, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs is reported to be working closely with the Department of Archaeology. The Ministry's actions, including making statements that impose raids on religious institutions, raise direct concerns about the status of religious freedom in the region. It is noted that the Ministry's lack of knowledge and understanding of other religious groups affects the fair and impartial treatment of these groups, particularly religious minorities.

Overall, the active collaboration between state institutions, supported by the Army and Police, in encroaching on land, conducting surveillance, and dismissing the concerns of local religious communities, has led to several issues. This type of collaboration is noted to be common in Batticaloa.

## OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS, OBSERVATIONS AND FUTURE TRENDS

### Impact of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

As the upcoming presidential and parliamentary election in Sri Lanka approaches, there are concerns regarding the possibility of religious riots and conflicts. There are concerns that election campaigns are framed around protecting religion and society, especially in the Batticaloa district. Recently, presidential candidates such as Ranil Wickremasinghe and Sajith Premadasa have been reported to have visited the Batticaloa district in the lead-up to the presidential elections in September.<sup>22</sup> It is observed that the recent campaign rally for presidential candidate Ranil Wickremasinghe was organised along ethnic lines, with separate meetings held for Muslim and Tamil communities, where concerning remarks were reportedly made against each of the communities<sup>23</sup>. In addition, for this year's election, Tamil civil society and religious leaders from the North-Eastern provinces, including Catholic and Saivite priests, are rallying behind a Tamil Common Candidate<sup>24</sup>.

Among the Muslim community, there is apprehension about how election campaigns might unfold in the district. There are concerns that, based on past election campaigns, the tactic of othering Muslims may be used again this year. Observations have been noted of ongoing propaganda suggesting that the Muslim population is increasing and a generalisation that Muslims are extremists.

The possibility of violence during the parliamentary elections is also noted as a concern, especially due to the actions of regional politicians, who are often known to stir tensions between communities for electoral benefits. Two incidents were highlighted to illustrate how the Tamil-Muslim issue has been pushed in the recent past in the Eastern Province. In Sammanthurai, an issue was reported where a welcome arch for a Tamil village was placed inside a Muslim village, leading to tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities. It is said that the board was directed to be placed by a Tamil politician in the area<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, in Kalmunai, Muslim politicians have been involved in supporting the building of a

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22 President Inspects Restoration Work of Zion Church in Batticaloa. (2024, June 23). News.lk; Department of Government Information Sri Lanka. <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/36516-president-inspects-restoration-work-of-zion-church-in-batticaloa>

Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the opposition, meets with unemployed graduates in Batticaloa and promises to take up their concerns in parliament. (2024). Serenbona.lk. <https://serenbona.lk/index.php/2024/07/07/sajith-premadasa-the-leader-of-the-opposition-meets-with-unemployed-graduates-in-batticaloa-and-promises-to-take-up-their-concerns-in-parliament/>

23 <https://www.facebook.com/Minnal24newspageofficial/videos/3887154548170155/>

24 Tamil Common Candidate P Ariyaneathran. (2024, August 8). <https://lankasara.com/news/tamil-common-candidate-p-ariyaneathran>

25 வீரமுனை கிராமத்திற்கான நுழைவாயில் வரவேற்பு வளைவு விவகாரம்...! வழக்கு ஒத்திவைப்பு. (2024, தூரநெ 21). வீரமுனை கிராமத்திற்கான நுழைவாயில் வரவேற்பு வளைவு விவகாரம்...! வழக்கு ஒத்திவைப்பு...! Tamil News. <https://samugammedia.com/the-issue-of-the-welcome-arch-at-the-entrance-to-veeramune-village-adjournment-of-the-case-1718950399?page=14>

memorial museum dedicated to the late Mohamed Ashraf in a Tamil village, which has caused friction between the Tamil and Muslim communities. These incidents are reported to be issues of concern that may unreasonably escalate ongoing problems between the two communities. Even though these issues are not directly occurring in Batticaloa but in the Ampara district, it is noted that they could have certain snowball effects, potentially influencing the tensions in Batticaloa as well.

### ***Fears Regarding Eroding Political Representation from the Batticaloa District***

There is growing concern that both Tamils and Muslims will lose their political representation in the future. It is noted that political representation is already limited, with only one political representative for the Muslim community from the district. A prevailing fear is that if a president from the majority community is elected, he may govern with a bias towards Buddhism, further worsening the existing situation for other religious groups in the district. This fear is echoed in the Tamil candidate movement, which aims to address these concerns and advocate for the rights of the national ethno-religious minorities in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

### **Social Media, False Information and Hate Speech**

Unlike mainstream media channels, which primarily focus on national issues centred in Colombo and other urban areas, social media platforms have become a powerful tool for regional media outlets, particularly in Batticaloa. These regional media outlets are reported to cater to specific audiences, with Tamil reporters often writing specifically for the Tamil audience and Muslim reporters addressing issues specific to the Muslim communities. For example, during the tree-cutting incident in Batticaloa, social media platforms supported by a prominent Tamil politician were reported to have fully broadcasted the event, using social media to mobilise people and create tensions. It is noted that social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have become especially powerful for sharing visual content, and those who recognise this power often use it to advance their own agendas. It is observed that Christians and Hindus frequently clash on these platforms, leading to social media “fights” that further inflame tensions.

With the upcoming election, social media is expected to play a central role in political campaigns. Most politicians are noted to have dedicated media units that spend significant amounts of money on social media campaigns. These units often hire young people, providing them with Wi-Fi, data, money, and food to promote candidates and counter opponents’ arguments on social media platforms.

## ***Youth in Batticaloa and Social Media***

The rise of social media has led to an increase in the spread of false information and hate speech, particularly affecting young people who are vulnerable to these influences. It is reported that there is a strong call for preserving cultural and religious identity, which is becoming more important to uphold, especially among young people. It is noted that the roots of more overt violence are beginning on social media platforms, which have become the primary platform of expression. In addition, new forms of expression, such as the exchange of memes and other new-age content, are being used to express disapproval against communities online. A recent example is the issue over the suspension of examination results of Muslim students who were wearing a hijab in the Trincomalee district due to issues of identity verification<sup>26</sup>. This incident led to social media fights among young users, who voiced their opinions on the Muslim women's attire and restrictions. Although these exchanges did not escalate to physical violence, they reportedly involved the spread of hateful speech. These issues and online confrontations are contributing to broader concerns about threatening communal harmony and negative discourse about religious freedom of communities in the Eastern Province.

## **Continued Restrictions on Religious Expression and Practice**

It is reported that there have been increasing restrictions imposed on persons by members of their own religious group, other religious groups, and state and non-state officials. Examples include restrictions on Muslim women wearing the hijab and preventing people from visiting places declared as archaeological sites, particularly Saiva temples. In addition, discriminatory practices have been reported through the rules imposed on students in schools. For example, in some Muslim schools, Hindu children are reportedly required to wear the shalwar pants as part of their uniform, while Christian schools prohibit the wearing of Pottu by Hindu students. In addition, there have been incidents reported where students were restricted from participating in academic activities due to their physical appearance or personal expression. For example, in May 2023, a Muslim student at Eastern University was prohibited from attending lectures and taking an exam due to his beard. He filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission in Batticaloa on June 1st, 2023, after facing discrimination from university staff.<sup>27</sup> Religious discrimination is also reported to be evident in the admission processes of students from other religious groups in Saiva, Christian, and Islamic schools. It

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26 Advanced Level exam results of Muslim students suspended over hijab. (2024, June 12). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/advanced-level-exam-results-muslim-students-suspended-over-hijab>

27 Vidivelli. (2023, December 21). கிழக்குப் பல்கலைக் கழகத்தில் தாடி வைத்துள்ள மாணவருக்கு அனுமதி மறுப்பு. <https://www.vidivelli.lk/article/16225>

is noted that the selectiveness in admissions to these schools has been a long-standing issue in the district.

Women in the Batticaloa district are reported to be facing numerous challenges that limit their ability to exercise religious freedom and expression at their own discretion. Several factors contribute to these limitations.

- Limited Leadership Roles for Women

One of the fundamental issues noted is the lack of women in leadership roles within religious institutions. Women are noted to be often excluded from decision-making positions on the trustee boards of churches, temples, and mosques. This exclusion hampers their meaningful inclusion and access to useful information regarding their own religion and places of worship, which is seen as a significant shortcoming in their ability to feel a sense of connection with their religious community.

- Lack of Awareness on FoRB

It is reported that in many areas of Batticaloa, women are not fully aware of fundamental issues such as the involvement of various state institutions in challenging the FoRB of their communities. Specific issues in Batticaloa, such as land grabbing, difficulties with registering places of worship, intra-religious concerns, and the discourse on religious conversion, are reported to be not fully understood by women. This gap in knowledge is partly due to their exclusion from leadership positions, where such information is typically shared, often by male counterparts who have greater access to these discussions and information.

- Cultural Norms

It is reported that religious and cultural restrictions on women are becoming more pronounced in the district. There has been an increase in restrictions imposed by places of worship, particularly regarding attire. Women are also continued to be barred from entering Kovils, puja rooms, and participating in funeral services during their menstrual periods.

## **Issue of Regionalism**

The issue of regional bias is reportedly becoming more pronounced. Regionalism, based on the principle that the ruling powers and administrative structures of a region should be controlled by those who live there, has created a strong sense of ownership over regional identity. This often results in local populations being resistant to outsiders. Individuals from other regions or districts who come into the area frequently face opposition, as there is a prevailing belief that those from other regions should not hold positions of power or influence. Christian pastors from outside Batticaloa, for example, often face significant challenges when trying to work within the district. These difficulties also affect Hindu religious leaders. It

is noted that this problem becomes especially critical when support from religious leaders from other districts is needed to address and amplify critical issues within Batticaloa.

### **Inter-Religious Groups: Lacking Authority and Independence**

It is reported that groups working for inter-religious harmony currently lack real authority, making it difficult to quickly resolve conflicts when they arise. For example, when the tree in front of the Batticaloa town mosque was cut down, tensions escalated rapidly in the district. At that time, religious leaders and civil activists reportedly did not have much authority to summon the relevant parties and issue orders to de-escalate the situation. Another example noted is the limited role of inter-religious forums in long-standing cases such as the Mayilathamadu Madhavani Pasture Land Conflict, where their involvement and ability to apply pressure is minimal. In addition, there are concerns about the erosion of independence within inter-religious groups and forums, which is seen as a significant issue moving forward, especially when these forums are needed to intervene to resolve future conflicts. It is also noted that their functionality is often limited to periods when they are supported by active projects from relevant NGOs, with inactivity or absence during other times.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### 1. Public Awareness on RTI and Legal Mechanisms

In light of ongoing land disputes, land grabbing, and encroachment, the public should be made aware of the mechanisms available for accessing and clarifying information on these issues. This includes awareness on using the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which can be used to seek information on land cases and also better awareness on accessing legal aid. It is essential that communities know who to approach for assistance in resolving land disputes and encroachment cases.

### 2. Training for State Officials on FoRB

Awareness training should be provided to state officials, such as police officers, on how to address emerging issues related to religious land disputes, archaeological sites, and FoRB. These trainings should help ensure that interventions are both fair and appropriate, equipping officials to assess situations impartially. Other relevant local authorities, including the Divisional Secretariats, District Secretariats, Grama Niladhari, as well as School teachers and Principals, should also receive training on the importance of respecting FoRB.

### 3. Addressing Social Media's Role in FoRB-Related Conflicts

Given the growing role of social media in escalating FoRB-related tensions, efforts should be made to establish regional fact-checking mechanisms. These should involve responsible individuals and organisations to ensure timely fact-checking, prevent the spread of disinformation, and reduce the potential for violence.

### 4. Strengthening Inter-Religious Forums

Inter-religious forums should be strengthened to operate independently, with attention given to the challenges they face in sustaining their work beyond funded project periods. Recognising their strengths and limitations, efforts should focus on building stronger forums and connecting them with state and non-state bodies to enhance their influence at the regional level.

### 5. Monitoring and Researching Ideological Influences

Further monitoring is required to understand the impact and long-term repercussions of the imposition of ideologies, such as Hindutva and Sinhala-Buddhism on local communities. It is crucial to track the role of different organisations promoting these ideologies to prevent potential violence instigated by such groups in the future.



# ANNEXURE – SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

## NCEASL Landscape Study – Batticaloa and Vavuniya

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am supporting the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) with a study on the status of Freedom of Religion and Beliefs in Vavuniya and Batticaloa in 2023 and 2024. The project’s main objective is to create awareness regarding the challenges to the Freedom of Religion or Belief in these districts. This awareness will be raised by conducting a research component first. I am conducting this interview with you since you are an important stakeholder who has worked with the communities in this area and as someone who can provide valuable input for this research component. The information you provide will be crucial for NCEASL in developing interventions in this district to advance the status of religious freedom for all religious communities.

### Ground Rules:

- 1. **Confidentiality:** Your name and other personal details will not be included in the final report. The information you provide will be combined with that from other interviews to develop a comprehensive analysis.
- 2. **Privacy:** The information you provide will be private and confidential. It will only be shared with NCEASL and the report writer of this study.
- 3. **Voluntary Participation:** If you do not want to answer any questions, please do not feel pressured to do so. Only answer what you can and want to answer.
- 4. **Right to Withdraw:** If you wish to stop this interview at any point, you have the option to do so without any consequences.

### Details of the Stakeholder

Name of the Stakeholder:

Type of Stakeholder: (e.g., Activist/Lawyer)

Location:

### Questions

- 1. What is your opinion of the current situation in the district regarding the status of religious freedom?
  - a. What are the key issues in the district since 2023?

2. Do you think there is an impact on the status of religious freedom in this district due to the upcoming presidential elections?
  - a. If yes, can you explain what this impact is?
  - b. Who are the religious groups impacted?
3. What was the effect of the Easter Sunday Attack in this district?
  - a. Have the effects of the attacks in the district been resolved in the past 2 years?
  - b. If not, which issues are still prevalent?
4. What is the situation with land grabbing in the district since 2023?
  - a. Can you provide examples of such land grabbing?
  - b. Who are the parties involved in land grabbing and affected by land grabbing?
5. What is the situation with religious conversions in the district since 2023?
  - a. Which religious groups are involved in conversion?
  - b. Which religious groups are more prone to being converted?
  - c. What are the common reasons for conversion?
6. What is the situation with religious extremism in this district since 2023 (this includes the current situation with all religions)?
  - a. Do you see any upcoming trends of extremism (from any religious group) in the district?
7. Are there difficulties for any religious groups to build places of worship in this district?
  - a. If yes, what kind of difficulties are there?
8. Do you notice any conflicts or issues within religious groups, or among different subgroups of a religious group in this district?
  - a. If so, can you explain what these issues are and the reasons behind them?
9. What are the issues specific to women in this district that are tied to their religion?
10. Are there any issues related to archaeological sites in this district? If there are issues, what are they?

11. Who are the key state actors and non-state actors involved in the violation of religious freedom in this district since 2023?
12. What is the role of the military in the district in the status of religious freedom?
  - a. Are they supportive of certain religious groups and in conflict with others in these districts? If so, please explain.
13. What is the response of the state/government with regard to the violation of religious freedom in the district?
  - a. How do they intervene?
  - b. Is it a positive intervention or a negative intervention in your opinion?
14. Do you see any trends or patterns in the conflicts in the area over religious freedom? If so, what are they?
15. What kind of work should be implemented in the district in the future to bring attention to issues of religious freedom? What are your recommendations?



