



**THE LANDSCAPE OF
FREEDOM OF
RELIGION OR BELIEF
IN VAVUNIYA | 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 Vavuniya 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. The findings reveal several patterns that shape the status of FoRB in the region, with land-related concerns emerging as central to many of the divisions and issues within religious communities. The perceived “Sinhala-Buddhisisation” of Vavuniya through Sinhalese settlements is seen as a threat to the cultural and religious heritage of the Saiva community. This fear is intensified by actions taken by the Department of Archaeology, the Forest Department, and other state bodies, which are reportedly demarcating land inaccurately, encroaching on traditional Tamil lands, and, in some cases, sacred Saiva worship sites. The ongoing issue of the contested Vedukkunaari site and the involvement of the Archaeology Department is viewed as illustrative of the broader threat to religious freedom in the district. At the same time, it is noted that the political handling of this case serves the interests of regional politicians. There is also a strong perception frequently emphasised by stakeholders that Sri Lanka is constitutionally a Buddhist country. This has created a strong perception that other religious communities are viewed as having a secondary status, placing them at a disadvantage in cases like this. The Muslim community displaced during the war continues to face challenges in reclaiming land deeds and permits from the authorities. Government inefficiency in addressing these concerns is noted to be a strong reason for this issue to continue.

Beyond land concerns, the influence of Hindutva ideology, propagated by groups like Shiv Sena, is considered to carry a threat to the traditional culture and practices of the Saiva community. The growing influence of this movement is forecasted to have long-term consequences for Saiva, Muslim, and Christian communities. The collaboration between Hindutva groups and those supporting alleged Sinhala-Buddhisisation is also viewed as a future concern.

Additional tensions include inter-religious disputes over noise pollution, incidents of vandalism, and accusations of proselytising by Christian groups. The ongoing economic crisis, severe poverty, and underdevelopment are cited as key drivers of religious conversion in the district. Cases concerning difficulties with the registration of religious sites and conflicts over the removal and placement of religious idols and symbols have also been noted in the past year.

The role of the state is particularly prominent in the district, with the pervasive presence of the Archaeology Department, Forest Department, police, military, which are reportedly working in collaboration to disadvantage the Tamil and Muslim communities. Furthermore, favouritism and bias among local officials on ethno-religious lines have been reported.

The upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections are seen as potential turning points with concerns that ongoing disputes may be escalated during election periods to create unrest. Politicians in the district whose voter bases are divided along ethno-religious lines are expected to mobilise their support by capitalising on such conflicts. The influence of social media and the diaspora in the district, as well as the manipulation of religious symbols to provoke communities are also key concerns. Developments in neighbouring districts like Mannar and Jaffna on issues related to FoRB, are seen as having a ripple effect on Vavuniya and will need to be monitored closely in the future.

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 area were included. Field data was collected between July and September 2024. Key informant interviews were conducted with these identified stakeholders.

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

Type of Stakeholder	Number of Interviews
Field Consultants	2
Local Politician	1
Civil Society Actors/Human Rights Activists	7
Lawyer	1
Religious Leaders <i>* Representatives each from the Saiva, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist communities</i>	5
Journalist	1
Total	17

Limitations of the methodology

The study was conducted over a very short period, so the data collection period was not as extensive as desired. Therefore, certain issues and concerns at the micro level may have been inadvertently omitted in this report.

INTRODUCTION

Vavuniya, located in the Northern Province, is considered a central district to the region. In terms of its population composition, Vavuniya is predominantly a Tamil district with a total population of 172,115. The population consists of 141,144 Tamils, 11,748 Sri Lankan Moors, 17,138 Sinhalese. In terms of religion, the majority of the population is Hindu (119,401), followed by Buddhists (16,853), Catholics (15,305), and Muslims (11,972).¹ The communities living in this district have experienced severe displacement during the war. There are four Divisional Secretariat units within Vavuniya district. It has been reported that since 2009, Sinhalese settlements have been spreading rapidly in the Vavuniya North and Vavuniya South Divisional Secretariats. The resettlement process in Vavuniya, combined with its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition and proximity to Sinhala villages, has made the district prone to conflict. It has been observed that Tamil and Muslim lands in the area, which belonged to those who were displaced and relocated elsewhere, are now increasingly populated by Sinhala settlers. In recent years, Vavuniya has become a contentious area receiving attention due to various issues flagged over archaeological disputes, such as the case of the Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple. This site is contested as a sacred place by both Saiva people and Buddhists. Moreover, ongoing land-grabbing cases involving the Department of Forest² and Military³ are also reported from the district. Furthermore, it has been noted that groups advocating Hindutva—a form of Hindu nationalism derived from India—are present in the district. Alongside the rise of Hindu extremism in parallel to increased Sinhalisation, which also includes the imposition of Buddhism in the district, minority religious communities such as Christians and Muslims continue to face added challenges. In light of the above, this report aims to provide an overview of the status of religious freedom between 2023 and 2024 in the Vavuniya district, focusing on the challenges faced by different religious communities and highlighting key disputes during this period.

1 Census and Statistical Report 2012, Sri Lanka

2 Tamils halt land grab attempt in Vavuniya by Sri Lanka's Forest Department. (2024, June 12). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamils-halt-land-grab-attempt-vavuniya-sri-lankas-forest-department>

3 Society for Threatened Peoples. (2018). The Vanni - Civilian Land under Military Occupation. <https://www.gfbv.ch/wp-content/uploads/sri-lanka-vanni-e-lang.pdf>

FORB LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT FROM RESEARCH FINDINGS

Inter-Religious Issues

Interference During Karthikai Vilakeedu

It has been reported that during the month of Karthikai (November), when Saivites celebrate the Karthikai Vilakeedu (Karthikai Lamp Festival), the day coincides with Maaveerar Day, a remembrance for LTTE members who died in the war. Reports suggest that during the temple rituals for the Karthikai Lamp Festival, police, army, and government intelligence officials have visited the sites, disrupted events, and arrested individuals in the past⁴. These authorities reportedly continue to conduct close surveillance during this period, including actions such as damaging puja items and extinguishing lamps.

Complaints About Noise Pollution

Hindus in the Vavuniya district have expressed concerns about disturbances caused by Christian (non-Roman Catholic) groups, particularly regarding the use of loudspeakers during their religious activities. It is reported that multiple complaints have been lodged with the Vavuniya police station about this issue. One example comes from the Maravankulam area, where a Christian pastor was allegedly using a loudspeaker, which prompted the neighbouring Saiva-Hindu community to file a complaint with the Grama Niladhari in mid-2024. However, the matter was resolved without escalating to the police, as the pastor was invited for a mediated discussion. At the same time, the Saiva community has also been accused of contributing to noise pollution in certain areas by using loud music during their own religious worship.

Alleged Proselytising by Christian Sects and Imposition of Religion

It has been reported that certain Christian (non-Roman Catholic) religious groups are reportedly targeting Saiva communities, especially in the most impoverished and backward villages. It is observed and perceived that Christian groups often provide livelihood assistance as a means to induce conversion and this has raised concerns about the possible decline in the Saiva population due to these conversions. Jehovah's Witnesses have been reported to actively convert Hindu people from marginalised backgrounds, mostly those facing caste discrimination in Vavuniya. It is observed that caste-based marginalisation within the Hindu

⁴ Jaffna Uni student arrested and further crackdown on Karthikai festival. (2020, November 29). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/jaffna-uni-student-arrested-and-further-crackdown-karthikai-festival>

community, makes these individuals more vulnerable to conversion efforts, as they seek relief from social exclusion.

Economic hardship, further intensified by the ongoing economic crisis, is another factor that these religious groups are said to exploit, offering money, goods, and other forms of assistance in exchange for conversion to Christianity. It has been noted that women are allegedly more prone to embracing conversion efforts due to their responsibility for managing household finances, and this is more visible in female-headed households. This is also more prevalent in cases where husbands struggle with addiction to drugs and alcohol, making these women more susceptible to conversion attempts as they seek stability and support for their families. Furthermore, the counselling and psychological support offered by churches to such women is seen as a significant pull factor, as it provides them with a sense of relief and stability. It was noted that many people displaced during the war and later resettled, who did not receive adequate housing or compensation from the government, are also said to be more prone to conversion attempts. This vulnerability is partly attributed to the negligence of local Members of Parliament, who have failed to address the needs of these communities.

Interviews reveal that many conversion efforts in Vavuniya are conducted by individuals from outside the district, and traditionally there has not been significant concern about conversions within the district. However, there is a growing perception that some Christian denominations, supported by foreign organisations, use conversion as a tool to exert influence. Some view the changing demographic composition of traditional villages through marriage and conversion as a threat to the preservation of Hindu culture.

A discussion with a sister from a Christian church in the Maravankulam area revealed that they provide guidance to parents, Sunday school facilities, and counselling services, welcoming Hindus, Muslims, and Christians alike. While there is significant public discourse surrounding conversions through these efforts, the sister emphasised that these claims are inaccurate. Amid the current economic crisis, the church offers rations, medical support, and assistance to families with sick children, though this type of support is often met with suspicion by villagers. The sister also highlighted the additional challenges the church faces in providing such assistance which does not get highlighted. For instance, a few months ago, CID officers visited the church and questioned the source of its funding. Moreover, three years ago the Shiv Sena group reportedly sent a book written in Sinhala, Tamil, and English to all the churches in the area, including the one in Maravankulam, accusing them of engaging in forceful conversions.

Impact of (Re)Settlement and Land Encroachment

Sinhala-Buddhisisation through Sinhalese Settlements

Since 2009, there has been a reported rapid expansion of Sinhalese settlements in the Vavuniya North and Vavuniya South Divisional Secretariats. Uninhabited areas are being selected for these settlements, with Buddhist shrines subsequently established. According to the 2012 census, the district, which is home to 172,115 people, has 17,138 Sinhalese residents. This demographic shift is perceived as a strategy to reduce the political representation of minority populations. The settlements are seen as part of a broader strategy, with the Mahaweli Development Authority incorporating Vavuniya and Mullaitivu Districts into the "L ZONE", which is viewed by some as an attempt at colonisation to diminish Tamil political influence in these areas. Further, there are apprehensions among communities regarding the intentions and accuracy of land demarcation by government bodies. For example, in Karupanichangulam, a Tamil village in Vavuniya, government officials who arrived to survey agricultural land for a cemetery for Sinhalese residents from nearby Kokkuveli were forced to leave after facing protests from local residents in 2023.⁵

Land encroachment has been noted as a pervasive issue in this district, allegedly carried out in a systematic manner through the Department of Archaeology and the Department of Forest. Many border villages in Vavuniya are close to Sinhalese-populated districts such as Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura. This geographical proximity has facilitated the systematic settlement of Sinhalese people in Tamil border villages in Vavuniya, with settlers reportedly laying claim to these Tamil villages as their own.

There have been several reports of Sinhalese settlements in the district. For instance, Kokkichangulam, a traditional Tamil village where people were displaced during the war in 1987, has been occupied by Sinhalese settlers since the end of the war in 2009. Currently, over 2,000 Sinhalese people live there, and the village's name has been changed to Bogaswewa, merging it into the Vavuniya North Divisional Secretariat. According to interviews there are other Tamil villages that have been similarly occupied in the past, such as, Eeralakulam, Thekkawatte, and Cheddikulam. In another case reported, a Tamil land in the Omantha area was reportedly allocated to Sinhalese settlers, with the area renamed to Namal Gama.

⁵ பெளத்த பிக்கு தலைமையில் வவுனியாவில் தமிழர்களின் விவசாய நிலத்தை மயானமாக்க முயற்சி : அளவீட்டு பணிக்கு தமிழ் மக்கள் எதிர்ப்பு. (2023, September 15). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/164658>

Interviews with the Saiva-Tamil community, repeatedly brought out the point that since the country prioritises Buddhism, other communities are left with having a secondary status. This feeling is reinforced by the perceived disparity in the respect and recognition given to Buddhist leaders versus leaders of other religious communities. Many fear that continued Sinhalese settlements will erode the cultural and religious identity of the Tamil population in the district. This sentiment is heightened by a lack of political representation and key administrative appointments for Tamils in Vavuniya, such as the District Secretary position, which is currently held by a Sinhala appointee. Some interviewees also noted that according to their understanding politicians seem to sponsor the settlement of Sinhalese people, evidenced by better infrastructure and resource allocation in Sinhalese areas, such as tarred roads, while Tamil areas continue to be neglected. Moreover, there are allegations that local officials reportedly show bias, with claims that the Divisional Secretariat refuses to approve land purchases by Tamil people in Sinhala areas.

On the other hand, an interview with a Buddhist monk in Madukanda revealed that territorial bias and discrimination are also present among certain Tamil politicians, some of whom explicitly state that land in Vavuniya should not be given to Sinhalese people. The monk noted that even though Sinhalese-Buddhist people have historically lived in villages located throughout Vavuniya, the support for those living in such border and resettlement villages is uneven. Moreover, the monk pointed out that poverty remains a significant issue for Sinhalese-Buddhist communities in Vavuniya as well, which is noted as an issue overlooked in broader discussions.

Encroachment of Saiva Temples in Forest Areas

Many traditional Saiva temples, where Tamil Saiva communities have worshipped for generations, are located in forested areas. It has been reported that these areas are increasingly being identified and occupied by the Department of Archaeology, Department of Forest, Department of Wildlife Conservation, and the Army, who claim these lands as belonging to Buddhism. In some instances, Buddhist statues are placed, and Viharas are constructed, leading to the encroachment of these lands. The Department of Forest, in particular, has reportedly prevented displaced people from returning to their lands, citing that these areas now belong to the department due to forest growth in villages that were abandoned during the war.

Case of Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple

In 2018, the Department of Archaeology identified several sites in the Vavuniya district, including the Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple, as belonging to the department⁶. Since then, the area has become a contested site, leading to conflict between various factions of the Saiva and Buddhist communities, both of which have been trying to claim the area as a place of significance. Among the Saiva community, it is believed that the Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple is a Hindu shrine, whilst the Buddhist monks and the Department of Archaeology consider this an ancient Buddhist site. Recent developments in this case have raised concerns about the infringement on the religious freedom and other rights violations of the Saiva community in Vavuniya. In March 2023, the temple's statues were desecrated by unknown persons, which created tensions within the community. Following this incident, a protest led by Tamil civil society condemned the destruction. In February 2024, the Sri Lankan army, accompanied by Buddhist monks, visited the site, with the monks continuing to assert that Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple is an ancient Buddhist site. In March 2024, authorities detained eight Tamil-Saiva worshippers, including the temple's chief priest, during the celebration of the Shivaratri festival⁷ at the location. The detainees were eventually released, and the charges were dismissed. In early 2024, mass protests erupted across Nedunkerny, Vavuniya⁸, in support of the detainees⁹. On the 9th of August 2024 the Vavuniya High Court made a resolution that all parties should be allowed to perform their worship without causing any disturbance or damage to the heritage site.¹⁰

The use of the Antiquities Act in this case was flagged as a serious issue by a lawyer representing the temple administration. He noted that the Act is being used by the state as a tool to prevent Saiva and other communities from engaging with the site. The lawyer also stated concern over the stricter regulations surrounding bail under the Antiquities Act and its use in the arrests in early 2024 for allegedly damaging the

6 Sri Lanka's archaeology department takes over Tamil temple lands in Vavuniya. (2018, August 12). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lanka%E2%80%99s-archaeology-department-takes-over-tamil-temple-lands-vavuniya>

7 Sinhala Buddhist monks call on Sri Lankan police to halt Shivarathri at Vedukkunaari Temple. (2024, March 7). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-buddhist-monks-call-sri-lankan-police-halt-shivarathri-vedukkunaari-temple>

Sri Lankan Authorities Detain Hindu Worshipers | Human Rights Watch. (2024, March 19). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/19/sri-lankan-authorities-detain-hindu-worshippers>

8 Hartal halts Nedunkerny as protests against Sri Lanka's assault of Tamils continue. (2024, March 16). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/hartal-halts-nedunkerny-protests-against-sri-lanka-s-assault-tamils-continue>

9 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2024). Sri Lanka's Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/2024%20Sri%20Lanka%20Country%20Update.pdf>

10 வெடுக்குநாறிமலை சர்ச்சைக்கு உயர்நீதிமன்றில் இணக்கத் தீர்வு. (2024, August). Tamil News. <https://samugammedia.com/amicable-settlement-of-vedukunaimalai-dispute-in-high-court-1723208948?page=1>

temple's antiquities.¹¹ The lawyer revealed that the case has evolved over the years into a matter of power politics, with regional politicians using it to mobilise voters. The lawyer also highlighted the role of social media in spreading disinformation about the case. Several Saiva interviewees raised concerns about the stricter regulations surrounding Vedukkunaari compared to other archaeological sites in predominantly Buddhist areas like Anuradhapura, which are more accessible to the public without favouring any specific religious group. This disparity has led the Saiva community to question why the Department of Archaeology is particularly insistent on classifying the site as Buddhist and restricting access for Saiva worshippers. Another viewpoint presented by a Saiva religious leader, noted that the attention given to high-profile cases like Vedukkunaari often overshadows the rights violations of poosaris in smaller Kovils in Vavuniya, such as issues regarding their lack of resources and proper compensation. The poosari also observed that the Vedukkunaari case is increasingly being seen as a political issue in the district rather than a religious one, with those involved often perceived by communities to gain some form of political advantage from the ongoing dispute.

Muslim Community and Land Issues

After the war ended in 2009, many displaced Muslim families returned to their lands located in Vavuniya, finding them occupied by the Army, the Forest Department, and Tamil residents. In Saalambaikulam village, Muslim families who had lived there until 1990 returned to lands which had been reassigned to Tamil residents by the Divisional and District Secretariats. These families had held annual permits for their lands, which were supposed to be renewed each year. This annual renewal system of land permits in the North and East has complicated land rights and ownership issues for these communities. Moreover, in the Manic Farm area, both Muslim and Tamil communities have lands that have been occupied by the Army¹². Since 2010, these communities have struggled to reclaim their lands, but their efforts have been largely unsuccessful, as the Army has refused to abandon control.

Issues with Land Deeds

Many Tamil people who were displaced by the war and have since been resettled are still without proper legal land deeds. This issue has been worsened by difficulties with land reclamation efforts, mostly in areas declared forest reserves

¹¹ Sri Lanka's archaeology department claims Vedukkunaari devotees damaged temple antiquities. (2024, March 12). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankas-archaeology-department-claims-vedukkunaari-devotees-damaged-temple-antiquities>

¹² Displaced families, military and companies seek Menik Farm land | The Sundaytimes Sri Lanka. (n.d.). <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/120930/news/displaced-families-military-and-companies-seek-menik-farm-land-14691.html>

by the Department of Forest during the absence of communities, making it difficult for them to reclaim their property. Locals have criticised the government for delays in issuing land deeds to Tamil residents in the district and for not giving adequate attention to this issue. Inefficiency in processing land deeds is noted as a serious concern by a local politician as well. It was reported that land allocation is often expedited for individuals with political connections, while ordinary citizens face long delays.

Land Seizure by Local Officials and Politicians

A former Divisional Secretary of Vavuniya has been accused of illegally seizing lands¹³ from individuals who migrated to India as refugees during the war and later settled there. This issue remains unresolved. Similarly, the current Parliamentary Representative for the Vavuniya district, in collaboration with the Divisional Secretary, has allegedly allocated lands to supporters of his political party. These activities are reported to have primarily occurred in the border villages of the Vavuniya district.

Rise of Hindu Extremism

It is observed that the rise of Hindutva and rapid Sinhalisation in the Northern Province is contributing to an increase in religious extremism. Hindutva, in specific, is seen as an ideology that seeks to fracture the Tamil community, with a significant impact on the Tamil-Saiva community. The presence and increasing influence of groups affiliated with the Hindutva ideology, such as Shiva Sena, has heightened tensions between those practising an alleged form of Hindu extremism and those with more moderate religious views. In the Vavuniya district, other organisations with ideologies similar to Shiva Sena, influenced by Indian groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, are also active. These organisations are mostly opposed to Christian and Muslim groups. These groups are known for inciting religious violence, targeting Muslim communities over the issue of cow slaughter. However, it is noted that for the Tamil community, rearing livestock and selling cattle is a common economic practice. This practice has led to opposition from Shiva Sena, especially concerning the consumption of beef by Muslims. However, it has been observed that singling out only Muslims for consuming beef is problematic and deliberate. It has been reported that the activities of Shiva Sena are becoming increasingly intense, contributing to fears of future religious conflicts.

13

வவுனியா பிரதேச செயலாளருக்கு எதிராக மனித உரிமை ஆணைக்குழுவில் முறைப்பாடு . (2019, April 4). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/53375>

The cross-collaboration between Hindu groups such as Shiva Sena and Buddhist monks has raised concerns regarding the future status of religious freedom for Saiva, Christian, and Muslim communities. The support provided by these groups, as seen in the recent case of Kurunthormalai in Mullaitivu¹⁴, has also raised concerns about similar issues potentially arising in the Vavuniya district, especially with contested sites. Furthermore, it was reported that four years ago, a Hindu-Buddhist association was formed in the region, reportedly backed by a Sinhalese politician. Through this association, Buddhist religious activities have been promoted, raising concerns among locals about possible conflicts in the future and how such an association might influence disputes over contested sites.

Furthermore, concerns have arisen regarding the changing patterns of worship among the Saiva people. In an interview, it was noted that traditionally, Lord Murugan and Lord Shiva have been the primary deities worshipped by Saivites in Sri Lanka. However, with the growing influence of Indian culture, there has been a shift in the deities that are worshipped and also the language of worship, which some perceive as a dilution of traditional Saiva culture in Sri Lanka.

¹⁴ An attempt to ward off international pressure? Clandestine meeting between Buddhist monks and Shiv Sena in Kurunthormalai. (2024, January 18). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/attempt-ward-international-pressure-clandestine-meeting-between-buddhist-monks-and-shiv-sena>

OTHER REPORTED CASES

Registration of Religious Sites

In the village of Rambai Vetti, applications were submitted to the Vavuniya South Divisional Secretariat, Pradeshiya Sabha, and the Department of Hindu Religious Affairs to register a Saiva temple and allow for its reconstruction. However, after three years, no permission or legal registration has been received, raising concerns about extensive delays or discrimination in the process. In an interview, a Saiva priest from the Omantha area expressed frustration over perceived double standards in the handling of religious sites. He noted that while building or renovating a Buddhist vihara faces no such delays, with political support facilitating the process, the government seems to create obstacles at every stage when it comes to obtaining permits for Saiva temples. The priest further suggested that there is a deliberate effort to block the construction and registration of Saiva kovils, citing the example of his own temple, which has been trying to obtain a permit for some time now without success.

Conflict Over Religious Idols in Komarasankulam

In the village of Komarasankulam, under the Vavuniya Divisional Secretariat, a conflict was reported when the past students of V/Periya Komarasankulam Maha Vidyalayam decided to install a Saiva Goddess Saraswathi idol and a Mother Mary idol at the school. A local Catholic priest intervened by writing a letter to the school administration, expressing concerns that the installation of these idols could lead to tensions between the Catholic and Saiva communities. His actions were reportedly in response to requests from Catholic villagers, who emphasised that the village has historically been a Catholic stronghold¹⁵.

¹⁵ வவுனியா பள்ளசாலை ஒன்றில் சரஸ்வதி மற்றும் மாதா சிலை அமைக்க எடுத்த முயற்சியால் குழப்பநிலை - தமிழ்விண். (2024, August 9). Tamilwin. <https://tamilwin.com/article/god-statue-issue-in-vavuniya-komarankulam-school-1723153275>

ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT OF STATE ACTORS

Local State Officials and Discrimination Against Muslims

The Muslim community settled in the Salampikulam area of Vavuniya¹⁶ as facilitated by former Minister Rishad Bathiudeen is reportedly facing continued challenges due to actions by the Vavuniya Urban Council¹⁷. Approximately 30 tons of garbage are dumped near this settlement each month, leading to severe health and environmental problems for the residents. Despite repeated appeals to the Urban Council, the issue remains unresolved. The garbage dumping has been ongoing for a long time, but following the political situation and change of government in 2022 the implementation of any effective solution has stalled. Protests have been held over the issue, but no proper resolution has yet been found for the waste management problem.

Department of Archaeology

The Department of Archaeology has been criticised for allegedly supporting the interests of the majority community at the expense of minorities. A notable example is the incident at Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple, where Saiva devotees were reportedly denied water during the Shivrathri Puja, with the department's actions appearing to favour the position of Buddhists and Monks¹⁸. The department has also been accused of restricting Saiva people from accessing these areas for worship. Interviews with Saiva community members highlight concerns over the sudden emergence of restrictions to worship sites and the discovery of artefacts, which they believe are being used to undermine their religious and cultural heritage.

Police and Military Intervention

It is noted that the police intervention in religious matters varies depending on the parties involved. Recently, police actions have been criticised for infringing on religious freedom and human rights, specifically when minority communities are involved. There is growing suspicion that the police, many of whom are from the majority community, may exhibit bias against minorities, as seen in incidents

¹⁶ சாளம்பைக்குளம் குப்பை மேடு விவகாரம் - 2வது நாளாகத் தொடரும் மக்களின் போராட்டம் . (2020, January 23). <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/73907>

¹⁷ Health of Uni students, villagers threatened by Vavuniya garbage dump. (2017, February 22). Times Online. <https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news/health-of-uni-students-villagers-threatened-by-vavuniya-garbage-dump/18-1017343>

¹⁸ Sinhala Buddhist monks call on Sri Lankan police to halt Shivarathri at Vedukkunaari Temple. (2024, March 7). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-buddhist-monks-call-sri-lankan-police-halt-shivarathri-vedukkunaari-temple>

like the arrests related to the Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple earlier this year. It is noted that the military remains vigilant and conducts surveillance in Vavuniya to prevent any potential reconsolidation of separatist forces. This has led to the close monitoring of all activities in the region by intelligence agencies. Further, the military's involvement in civil activities such as construction work and farming, which fall outside their mandate are also observed by communities.

The Department of Archaeology has increasingly involved the military in activities related to archaeological sites, supposedly for protection. However, militarisation, though now less overt, is often noted to be in the form of expansion of military camps into forested areas where Buddhist symbols are placed. The military's role in these activities has raised concerns about the encroachment on minority religious sites under the guise of archaeological preservation.

The police and military presence in religious matters, for example at sites like Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple, has intensified the perception on active collaboration between the security forces and the Archaeology department. On March 8, 2024¹⁹ during the Shivrathri Puja, over 150 police officers, military, including Special Task Force personnel were involved in controlling the Vedukkunaari Adi Shiva temple – reportedly supporting actions against Saiva devotees. There are several other instances that exemplify the collaboration between security forces and the Department of Archaeology in the district. For example, in June 2023, a case was reported where villagers were restoring the Pattaraipirindakulam Amman Temple. Intelligence officers visited the site and alerted the Department of Archaeology, leading to a response from the Vanni Regional Archaeology Department.²⁰ Accompanied by the police, the Archaeology Department officers removed Saivism idols and halted further construction. The police and officials allegedly threatened to arrest those involved in the restoration, banned worship at the temple, and warned of potential arrests for any violations. Villagers had reportedly been worshipping at this small Saiva temple for years, despite its lack of formal records. On the 1st of September 2024, the Ministry of Defence openly acknowledged the contributions of the Tri-Forces and Civil Security Development in construction projects of Buddhist viharas and stupas. The Ministry noted their contribution in building the Sadahiru Stupa in Anuradhapura, Kurundi Vihara in Mulathivu, Deegawapiya Raja Maha Vihara in Ampara, and Neelagiri Stupa in Lahugala. This recognition was given during the unveiling of the pinnacle of the

19 Sri Lankan police unleash violence at Vedukkunaari during Shivarathri: MP assaulted, 8 Tamils arrested. (2024, March 8). <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-unleash-violence-vedukkunaari-during-shivarathri-mp-assaulted-8-tamils>

20 Trend Analysis of Violence Against Christians in Sri Lanka. (2023). <https://www.minormatters.org/storage/app/uploads/public/665/577/799/6655777992a98857146076.pdf>

restored Stupa at the Sapumalgaskada Raja Maha Vihara in Vavuniya.²¹

The continuing activities of land encroachment by the Department of Archaeology, Mahaweli Development Authority, and the Department of Forest have increasingly been reported to affect violation of human rights. These actions, often supported by the military and other state actors, are observed to contribute to the systematic marginalisation of communities in Vavuniya. Further to this, there are doubts about the impartiality of other government departments in allocating land for recreational spaces and issuing permits. In one incident reported in March 2023, despite protests from local villagers, the Geological Survey & Mines Bureau granted an individual permission to extract black stone from a hill that had been a Saiva worship site for many years. Villagers claimed the permit was issued without consideration for their religious practices on the hill.²²

21 Defence Secretary unveils the Pinnacle of restored Sapumalgaskada Stupa in Vavunia. (2024, September 1). Defence.lk. https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/28122

22 வவுனியாவில் கருங்கல் அகழ்விற்கு பொதுமக்கள் எதிர்ப்பு!! (2023, March 10). <https://www.vavuniyanet.com/news/350875/%e0%ae%b5%e0%ae%b5%e0%af%81%e0%ae%a9%e0%ae%bf%e0%ae%af%e0%ae%be%e0%ae%b5%e0%ae%bf%e0%ae%b2%e0%af%8d-%e0%ae%95%e0%ae%b0%e0%af%81%e0%ae%99%e0%af%8d%e0%ae%95%e0%ae%b2%e0%af%8d-%e0%ae%85%e0%ae%95-2/>

OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS, OBSERVATIONS AND FUTURE TRENDS

Impact of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

In the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, significant influence is expected from Buddhist organisations and Buddhist monks in the region. Moreover, groups with Hindutva ideologies, such as Shiva Sena, have reportedly begun to actively engage in political activities, with the expectation that they will be involved in both the upcoming elections. The current situation in the district is reported to present potential challenges for minority religious groups and religious leaders, particularly those who support the Tamil common candidate. These groups may face increased obstacles and pressures as the election approaches. It is noted that the campaign for the Tamil common candidate is gaining momentum. This strategy is seen by some as an attempt to create divisions among Sri Lankans and to dilute the vote share of the candidate(s) from the ethno-religious majority.

This election is reported to be significant for the Tamil community, whose aspirations are closely tied to their religious identity and the protection of their beliefs. With more candidates contesting this time, it is assumed that many will likely seek the support of religious leaders to boost their voter base. Furthermore, politicians are reportedly rekindling past grievances, such as the cremation issues during the COVID-19, allegedly to influence voters, a tactic predicted by many to continue into the parliamentary elections. There are concerns that voters may be targeted based on regional and religious lines, with religion and emotional appeals being used by parliamentarians to gather support.

Media

Regional media in Vavuniya North is noted to be influenced by diaspora-funded outlets, which have a significant presence in the region. However, a major concern is that these media organisations often do not adhere to standard media ethics. This lack of ethical journalism is seen as a serious problem, as it can lead to biased reporting, misinformation, and the potential aggravation of existing tensions within the community especially on sensitive issues related to religious communities. Furthermore, the role of social media and its influence in spreading hate speech is reported to be concerning in Vavuniya, where it has become a common platform for expressing hate speech.

It is noted that a key example of strategic social media campaigning can be observed in the actions of certain well-known politicians in the district, who manage multiple Facebook pages that are primarily activated during election

campaigns. These media units become fully operational around elections, with the ability to reach a large audience, predominantly among the youth, who are significant users of social media. It has been noted that social media campaigning is often tied to political favours, such as providing relief and support to villagers in exchange for promoting certain content online.

Restrictions for Women

There are several ongoing restrictions noted that affect women and their ability to uphold their FoRB. In Saiva temples, restrictions are still observed that prevent women from entering kovils and pooja rooms during certain times such as during menstruation. Similarly, Muslim places of worship are reported to impose certain restrictions on women, although some Muslim women do not necessarily view these limitations as problematic and accept them as part of their culture, hence do not oppose them. Furthermore, it is noted that many women have become more accustomed to, and comfortable with, practising their religion independently rather than mixing with their male counterparts.

An interview with a sister from a Christian church revealed that women face cultural and societal restrictions in their religious roles. She noted that women are often unable to speak openly, lead worship, or take on certain responsibilities in the church, and that becoming a priestess is a particularly difficult process. Furthermore, she emphasised the need for laws to protect female religious leaders from verbal and physical harassment, stressing that these protections must be implemented to ensure that female religious leaders are treated with the same respect and rights as their male counterparts.

Fear of Distortion of Religious Identities and Attacks on Religious Symbols

An increasing trend has been noted where, rather than engaging in overt conflict with members of religious communities, attempts to target FoRB are focused on distorting religious identities. In Vavuniya, the Department of Archaeology and the Ministry of Buddhism and Religious Affairs have identified many ancient sites as belonging to Buddhism, sometimes overlooking the significance of these sites to other religious groups. In Saiva temples, statues of gods and religious symbols, such as the Sulagam, hold deep spiritual significance for Saiva devotees, who maintain a strong mental and physical connection to statue worship. However, it has been noted that various parties inciting violence against religions, sometimes supported by government officials, have been known to break or destroy these

statues and symbols. Such acts of violence and vandalism cause significant distress to the devotees, as they are seen as deliberate attacks on the very core of their religious and cultural identity. Furthermore, the “grabbing” of religious places and land is perceived not only as the physical takeover of sacred spaces but also as a broader attempt to erase the religious and cultural heritage of these communities. On the other hand, the continuous engagement of the Tamil diaspora through funding the construction of kovils and bringing Siva Lingams to support the Saiva community, is also noted as a factor contributing to ongoing tensions. As both the State and the Tamil diaspora continue their involvement, concerns remain that tensions over religious idols and symbols may persist in the district.

Influence from Neighbouring Districts in Vavuniya

It is noted that the FoRB status in Vavuniya is closely linked to developments in neighbouring districts such as Mannar and Jaffna, where different religious communities are making efforts to assert their influence in different ways. For example, the construction of Buddhist temples in Jaffna and the placement of Siva Lingams in areas like Mannar are seen as symbolic efforts to assert territorial presence in response to other religious communities, which in turn has a ripple effect on Vavuniya as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Recommendations for Civil Society

1. Improved Public Discourse on FoRB related issues

There is a need for greater public discourse on FoRB to clarify misunderstandings and address challenges related to sensitive issues such as religious conversion. Increased engagement by non-state actors is essential on the ground to help tackle the misconceptions and challenges related to issues like conversion.

2. Strengthening the Role of Interreligious Forums

There is a call for more transparency in the localisation efforts of NGOs, and the role of interreligious forums must be strengthened through fair allocation of resources. Continuous support should be provided to these forums to ensure they have a strong standing in their communities, mostly during times of inter-communal tensions.

Implementing organisations must discuss with local and grassroots groups to identify their needs, challenges, and barriers to sustainability, and explore appropriate funding and grants to ensure these forums remain active and do not dissolve over time.

3. Recognising that Economic Concerns are a Catalyst and Enabler for Inter-Religious Conflict

A concerted effort should be made to address poverty and economic concerns in the district, which are often cited as root causes of conflicts. The vulnerability of communities across different religious groups is exploited during resource distribution, creating room for political and religious actors to incite conflict along religious lines for political gain.

4. Continuous Monitoring, Research, and Documentation by Civil Society, and Improved Early Warning Mechanisms

There is a need for improved documentation of FoRB violations and related developments in the district by relevant researchers and analysts. For example, the rise of groups promoting Hindutva or collaborations between Hindutva and Buddhist organisations must be closely monitored and studied to understand their long-term implications for other communities and the status of FoRB in the district. Alongside such monitoring efforts, early warning and response mechanisms should be implemented by relevant organisations to address potential FoRB violations by analysing trends and patterns that emerge.

5. Addressing 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.

In addition to fact-checking, it is essential to train more young journalists in the region to improve the limited media coverage of incidents occurring in the North and East. This includes equipping them with necessary media skills, such as ethical reporting and the responsible dissemination of news.

Recommendations for State Actors

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. Creating Awareness among Teachers and Children

Efforts should be made to revise school curriculum or, at the very least, raise awareness among teachers about FoRB. Under the guidance of teachers and principals, schools could help create an understanding among students regarding FoRB. This could also be achieved through non-state interventions and programs, with necessary support from the state to ensure effective implementation.

3. Support to Civil Society Actors

Relevant state ministries, authorities, and administrative officials must provide necessary support to civil society actors in implementing programs and projects related to FoRB. State officials should also remain open to capacity-building efforts offered by civil society on issues concerning FoRB.

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?

