



## Sri Lanka

### Background and Historical Setting

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon until 1972, is a constitutional democracy in South Asia with relatively high levels of development. It is strategically located in the Indian Ocean off the southeastern tip of India's Deccan Peninsula. The island nation was settled by successive waves of migration from India beginning in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century BC. Indo-Aryans from northern India established Sinhalese Buddhist kingdoms in the central part of the island. Tamil Hindus from southern India also settled in northeastern coastal areas and established a kingdom on the Jaffna Peninsula. Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sri Lanka was colonized in succession by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English.

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

### Civil War and Subsequent Political Developments

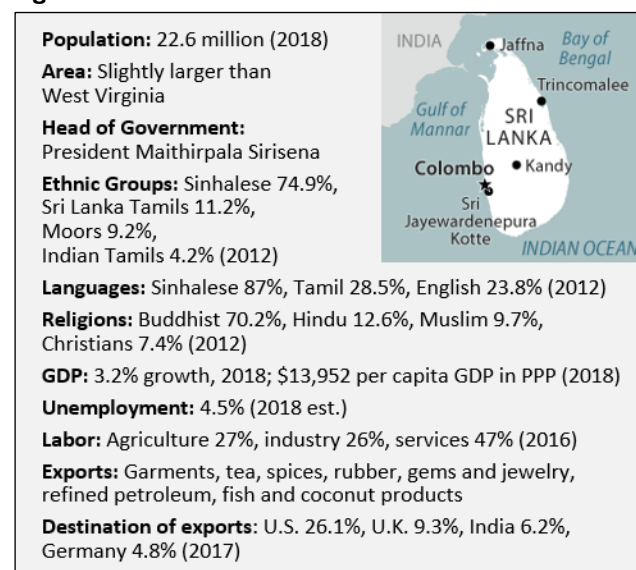
For 26 years, from 1983 to 2009, Tamil militant separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) sought to establish a separate state or internal self-rule in the Tamil-dominated areas of Sri Lanka. Political, social, and economic development was constrained by the ethnic conflict and war between the government and the LTTE, which cost an estimated 70,000-130,000 lives.

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

including efforts to reduce the authority of the executive presidency.

Sirisena's governing coalition began to fracture after a poor

**Figure 1. Sri Lanka In Brief**



performance in the February 2018 local elections, losing out to the newly-formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party, which capitalized on rising Sinhalese ethnic nationalism. In late 2018, Sirisena sparked a political crisis when he tried unsuccessfully to dismiss then-Prime Minister Wickremesinghe of the opposition United National Party (UNP), and replace him with Mahinda Rajapaksa.

### The 2019 Presidential Election

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of former President and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (in office from 2005 to 2015), was sworn in as Sri Lanka's new president in November 2019. Gotabaya won the election with 52.3% of total votes, while his main political rival, Sajith Premadasa of the UNP, received 42% of the vote. The Rajapaksas' political base is expected to be further strengthened in 2020 when the SLPP is projected by observers to win a majority of seats in parliament. Gotabaya Rajapaksa campaigned heavily on a platform of national security, pledging to suppress Islamist extremism. His key base of support is the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Most Tamils, who are largely Hindu or Christian, as well as most Muslims voted for his opponent. Former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP announced his resignation following the election. This move opened the way for Gotabaya to select his brother as prime minister.

Many observers fear that Gotabaya's election could lead to a return to nepotistic and authoritarian style government and an end to the limited democratic reforms and limited reconciliation measures with the ethnic Tamil community

that occurred under former President Sirisena. Gotabaya is reportedly seeking to repeal the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, a key reform of the previous government that curtails some of the powers of the president and makes the office more accountable to parliament. For the location of his swearing-in ceremony, Gotabaya chose a sacred Buddhist shrine in the ancient capital of Anuradhapura. The shrine commemorates the defeat in 140 BC of King Elara, a Tamil Hindu king, by the Buddhist King Dutugemunu.

The context for the Presidential election was at least partially set by the April 2019 “Easter bombings” that killed over 250 people at several churches and hotels in Sri Lanka and highlighted security failures of the Sirisena government. As a result, security was a key theme in the election, which played in favor of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a former Secretary of Defense who is credited by many Sinhalese with playing a central role in defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 and ending the country’s 26-year-long civil war.

## U.S.-Sri Lanka Relations

Historically, U.S. policy towards Sri Lanka has included focus on supporting Sri Lanka’s democratic institutions, encouraging its economic development and promoting human rights. U.S. policy has also promoted bilateral trade and addressed regional geopolitical dynamics. Through foreign aid and diplomacy, the United States has supported initiatives intended to strengthen governance, democratic reform, rule of law, and human rights in Sri Lanka. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has maintained a presence in Sri Lanka since 1948. The United States is Sri Lanka’s single largest market, accounting for approximately 25% of Sri Lankan exports. Sri Lanka’s largest exports are garments, tea, spices, rubber, gems and jewelry, refined petroleum, fish, and coconuts/coconut products.

Following the Easter 2019 bombings of several churches and hotels in Colombo, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared, “We stand with the Sri Lankan government and people as they confront violent extremism and have offered our assistance as they work to bring the perpetrators to justice.” U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Alaina Teplitz also told reporters that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and the military are supporting the investigation into the bombings.

Three key aspects of the U.S.-Sri Lanka bilateral relationship include an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement between the United States and Sri Lanka, which was signed in 2017; a new Status of Forces Agreement, which the two sides have been negotiating since 2018; and the implementation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact, which was negotiated with the Sirisena government and approved in April, 2019.

## The United Nations, Sri Lanka, and Human Rights

Sri Lanka co-sponsored a U.N. Human Rights Council resolution on accountability for human rights abuses during the Sri Lanka civil war that was adopted by the Council in October 2015. The resolution followed the September 2015 publication of the Report of the U.N. Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka and was viewed by many at the time as a positive step toward justice in Sri Lanka. Following the adoption of the resolution, however, former President Sirisena backed away from supporting any significant involvement of international judges in a special judicial mechanism to prosecute war crimes. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, noted steps taken by Sri Lanka, but also called for a transitional justice mechanism to deal with past human rights abuses. An Office of Missing Persons was established, and a Right to Information law was passed during Sirisena’s term of office. Observers believe President Gotabaya Rajapaksa will be reluctant to fulfill previous commitments made to the U.N. Human Rights Council relating to a transitional justice agenda. Tensions between Sinhalese and Muslim groups led to a wave of violence and a state of emergency in the Kandy District in March 2018. Ongoing human rights concerns include unlawful killings, torture, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention, and violence against LGBTI persons.

## Strategic Setting

Sri Lanka is situated near strategically important sea lanes that transit the Indian Ocean. These lanes link the energy-rich Persian Gulf with the economies of Asia. Maritime trade is increasingly integrating the Indian and Pacific Oceans’ littoral regions. Sri Lanka and India share close, long-standing historical, cultural, and religious ties. India became entangled in the counter-insurgency war against the LTTE following the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. Between 1987 and 1990, India lost over 1,200 soldiers in this conflict, and then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in November 2019 in an effort to improve bilateral ties. A \$400 million loan for infrastructure projects and a \$50 million loan for security assistance reportedly were offered by Modi. India, along with the United States, has been an active voice for reconciliation and fair elections.

While a candidate, Gotabaya stated he would “restore relations” with China, which were not as close under Sirisena as they were under Mahinda Rajapaksa. Under Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency, there was concern over Sri Lanka’s deepening relationship with China, including China’s 2014 naval submarine visit to Sri Lanka. Beijing has invested significantly in Sri Lanka’s infrastructure. In 2017, Sri Lanka leased port facilities at Hambantota to China for 99 years for an estimated \$1.1 billion. China’s activities in Sri Lanka are called part of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative aimed in part at gaining access to ports in the Indian Ocean to help secure China’s interests along vital sea lanes. China’s largely economic and investment presence in Sri Lanka—and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean—is causing increasing concern among some strategic analysts and policymakers in Washington, New Delhi, and other capitals.

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