

The 2008 Buddha Sasana Circular on places of worship

The October 2008 Ministry of Buddha Sasana Circular requires Ministry approval for the establishment of any new place of worship. NCEASL, Verité, OHCHR Shaheed (2020), and USCIRF have documented its disproportionate application against evangelical Christian congregations, with secondary effects on Muslim mosques in mixed areas and Hindu kovils in the Eastern Province.

The Circular is the operative document beneath Article 9 for the everyday question 'can this community build a new place of worship?' Its text is procedural. Its enforcement record, documented across more than a decade of civil-society incident logs, is not. The Circular has become the most-cited single instrument in religious-freedom complaints from Sri Lanka to UN treaty bodies and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

§1 The Circular and its administrative theory

Issued by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana in October 2008, the Circular requires that any new place of worship in Sri Lanka obtain Ministry approval before construction or operation. The Ministry's mandate covers all religions, but the asymmetry of Article 9 — and the operational fact that the Ministry is the Buddha Sasana ministry — produced predictable enforcement asymmetry. The Special Rapporteur Shaheed (A/HRC/43/48/Add.2, 2020) recorded that the Circular has been used to halt construction of churches, deny registration to existing congregations, and require demolition of unregistered places of worship.

NCEASL's Religious Liberty Commission has maintained an incident database since 1994 and has logged hundreds of post-Circular incidents involving police inaction, mob action led or accompanied by Buddhist monks, and selective enforcement against evangelical Pentecostal congregations in particular. Verité Research's *Fading Beliefs* (2018) corroborates the pattern from a Colombo-based Sinhala-majority research institution.

§2 Cross-community effects

Although the Circular's most-documented application has been against evangelical Christian congregations, secondary effects are recorded across communities: Muslim mosque construction in mixed-population coastal and hill areas (Aluthgama 2014 and Digana 2018 backdrop), Hindu kovil construction and restoration in the Eastern Province, and Hill Country Tamil estate kovils on plantation land where land tenure is itself contested. The Circular therefore connects the Article 9 architecture to the everyday lived religious-practice question across all four minority communities.

The 2020 Forced Cremation policy (see article: forced-cremation-2020-2022) sits in the same institutional ecology — the Ministry of Buddha Sasana plus the Ministry of Health plus security agencies acting in concert under presidential direction without legislative debate.

§3 International record

OHCHR Special Rapporteur Shaheed (2020), USCIRF annual reports (2021–24), Article 19 and CIVICUS Monitor have each named the 2008 Circular as a structural obstacle to freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka. The 2024 UN Human Rights Committee concluding observations (CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6) reiterated the concern. The 2027 EU GSP+ regulation (entering force 1 January 2027) makes meaningful FoRB compliance a condition of preferential trade access — the Circular is on the list of documented enforcement gaps to be addressed.

Sources

- `tlte-cite:ohchr-shaheed-srilanka-2020`

- tlte-cite:nceasl-incident-database
- tlte-cite:verite-fading-beliefs-2018
- tlte-cite:uscirf-srilanka-2024
- tlte-cite:iccpr-art-18-27
- tlte-cite:icerd-5d-vii
- tlte-cite:eu-gsp-2027

What this is not

- This article does not name individual congregations, clergy, monks or officers. The enforcement record is sourced to NCEASL, Verité and OHCHR — TLTE never duplicates their intake.
- This article does not aggregate incident counts in TLTE voice. All counts are attributed to the named civil-society and UN sources.
- This article does not call for repeal of the Circular. The remedy question is referenced to the constitutional-reform repertoire and the EU GSP+ 2027 compliance pathway.