

Forced cremation of Muslim and Christian COVID-19 deaths (2020–22)

From March 2020 until February 2021, Sri Lanka enforced mandatory cremation of COVID-19 deaths regardless of the deceased's religion — in direct violation of Islamic and some Christian burial rites and with no WHO public-health basis. Reversed only after sustained intervention by UN OHCHR Special Procedures, the OIC, and Christian and Muslim civil-society leadership.

The forced cremation policy is the most extensively documented post-Easter expression of the Article 9 + 2008 Circular + One Country One Law trajectory. It was not a public-health measure — the WHO explicitly stated that burial is safe for COVID-19 fatalities. It was a religious-practice measure applied through Ministry of Health regulations under presidential direction.

§1 Timeline and reversal

March–April 2020: Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health issued regulations under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance requiring cremation of all COVID-19 deaths. The regulations were applied to Muslim and Christian fatalities in direct conflict with established burial rites.

April 2020 – February 2021: Muslim civil society, the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, the OIC, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and Christian denominations made repeated public objections. UN OHCHR issued a joint statement of five Special Rapporteurs (FoRB, minority issues, health, freedom of expression, cultural rights) in January 2021.

February 2021: Policy reversed; designated burial sites established. No public-health rationale was offered for either the original policy or the reversal. The episode entered the public record as a documented case of religion-specific state coercion without a stated countervailing necessity.

§2 Why this matters structurally

USCIRF, OHCHR and ICG all read the policy as continuous with the post-Easter 2019 collective-suspicion environment and the 2021 One Country One Law Task Force trajectory. The policy is therefore not an isolated public-health misstep — it is the operational expression of the religion-state architecture in a moment of presidential discretion. The UN Human Rights Committee concluding observations CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6 (2024) recorded the episode as a violation of ICCPR Articles 18 and 27.

The reversal demonstrates the structural argument from the other direction: sustained external pressure (UN Special Procedures, OIC, ICCPR/ICERD obligations, foreign-policy cost) is the lever that produced the policy reversal. Internal constitutional remedy did not.

Sources

- [tlte-cite:ohchr-forced-cremations-2021](#)
- [tlte-cite:uscirf-srilanka-2024](#)
- [tlte-cite:ohchr-shaheed-srilanka-2020](#)
- [tlte-cite:iccpr-art-18-27](#)
- [tlte-cite:icerd-5d-vii](#)
- [tlte-cite:one-country-one-law-2021](#)

What this is not

- This article does not name individual ministers, officials, or families of the deceased.
- This article does not aggregate the number of forced cremations in TLTE voice. The figure is referenced to OHCHR and Muslim-community civil-society sources.
- This article does not frame the policy as a Buddhist religious practice imposed on others — the policy was a state-administrative measure under public-health regulations, not a religious ritual.