

Country Summary: Sri Lanka

Introduction

The Sri Lankan government adopted a broad range of measures to counter the spread of COVID-19. These included a nationwide curfew, bans on public gatherings, and increased testing and contact tracing, among others. Many of these measures affected Sri Lankans' capacity to gather, speak out, and otherwise organize for their rights and interests. This briefer considers the impact that specific Sri Lankan COVID policies had on civil society and civic space.

Freedom of expression

Sri Lankan officials restricted their citizens' ability to comment on and share information about the pandemic, often through investigating or charging them for publishing false information. By mid-March 2020, Sri Lankan police had launched an investigation to arrest forty individuals for spreading misinformation about the pandemic through social media (Newsfirst, [2020](#)). In April 2020, the Inspector General issued an order instructing the police to arrest individuals who criticized the COVID-19 response or who disseminated false or harmful information about the pandemic (HRW, [2020](#)).

Following this approach, law enforcement charged a journalist and his source, a doctor at a private hospital, under Section 6 of the Computer Crime Act and the Ceylon Penal Code, for allegedly publishing false information after the journalist shared a post stating that a baby infected with COVID-19 was born at the hospital (Lanka Views, [2020](#) and LankaDeepa, [2020](#)). Law enforcement similarly arrested and charged an activist for publishing an alleged false statement in violation of the Computer Crime Act after she claimed that people in quarantine did not have access to food, medicine, or COVID tests (Lanka Deepa, [2020](#)). A retired government official, Ramzy Razeek, also faced detention after he criticized a government policy requiring cremation of COVID-19 victims, which violated the religious burial rites of Muslims (Civicus, [2020](#)).

Such arrests and charges may have deterred individuals from sharing information and opinions about the pandemic and the government's pandemic measures.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

During the pandemic, authorities applied COVID-19 prevention measures selectively to disperse sensitive protests. In several instances, authorities dispersed demonstrations

on sensitive issues while allowing other similarly attended public or private events to proceed around the same time period.

For example, in June 2020, law enforcement dispersed a Black Lives Matter protest in Colombo, citing a court order that prohibited demonstrations around the U.S. Embassy. The President had advised the police to disperse the protesters on the basis of COVID-19 prevention regulations. A local organization noted that the police did not disperse similarly large crowds which had gathered for the funeral of a former Minister some-time before the Black Lives Matter protest (Economy Next, [2020](#)).

In July 2021, authorities banned public gatherings and protests to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As protests against the government's ban on chemical fertilizer imports persisted beyond this order, law enforcement arrested several opposition politicians participating in the protests (New Indian Express, [2021](#)). Law enforcement also arrested more than forty-five individuals for participating in demonstrations against a proposed bill on Kotelawala Defence University (EconomyNext, [2021](#)). By contrast, in the same month, authorities relaxed several COVID-19 regulations, permitting corporate meetings and conferences with a participant maximum, reopening shopping malls in the Western Province, and allowing supermarkets to operate at twenty-five percent capacity (Crisis24, [2021](#)).

Securitization and Abuse of Force

The Sri Lankan police were implicated in several [unlawful deaths](#) linked to disproportionate and abusive enforcement of Covid-19 quarantines. For instance, on May 17, police allegedly stopped a man for violating a Covid-19 quarantine and ordered a civilian police employee to beat him, resulting in the man collapsing in the road and being killed by a passing bus. Another man died after police arrested him for an alleged quarantine violation, with his wife alleging that police beat him to death. Law enforcement also reportedly engaged in extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary detention under the cover of an anti-drug campaign during the pandemic (HRW, [2021](#)).

Conclusion

Sri Lanka's pandemic response measures unduly limited civic freedoms in the country, especially with respect to accessing and sharing information and opinions, and demonstrating for shared interests. Moving forward, civil society and other stakeholders must advocate for legal frameworks that will protect fundamental freedoms, even during emergencies.