

Another Anti-Conversion Bill

The immediate aftermath of the devastating Tsunami that battered Sri Lanka saw a decrease in the acts of religious violence. To a great extent, ordinary Sri Lankan citizens responded magnanimously, irrespective of race or religion. While the world at large marvels and rejoices over the unity and harmony between different religious groups; the Sri Lankan government has decided to introduce a new law restricting religious conversion.

The Daily Mirror newspaper and the Lakbima newspaper of 18th March 2005 report that the Bill will be presented in Parliament next month, by the Minister of Buddha Sasana Mr. Rathnasiri Wickramanayake.

According to the press reports, the Bill was discussed at the Cabinet meeting on 16th Wednesday. The government has decided to allow members to vote according to their conscience when the Bill is taken up for voting in Parliament. (Usually, the party members vote en-block).

Should this controversial Bill become law, it will invariably affect relief efforts carried out by many religious groups, NGOs and others. There is great concern that genuine acts of charity and good will may be construed as enticement and attempts of unethical conversion. The offence carries heavy penalties ranging from fines of Rs. 100,000 – Rs. 500,000 and prison terms up to 7 years.

Act for Protection of Religious Freedom

This was the original draft Bill that Minister of Buddha Sasana presented to the Cabinet in June 2004. Subsequent to the Supreme Court determination regarding the ‘Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill’ proposed by the JHU in August 2004, the Minister announced that the government would re-look at the draft (Act for Protection of Religious Freedom), taking in to account the Supreme Court’s determination on the JHU Bill.

The scope of this draft Act was wider in interpretation than the JHU Bill. It effectively made conversion from one religion to another an offence under the law. It is still unclear whether this draft has been amended since then.

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