
Sri Lanka's Crackdown on Drugs Raises Concerns About a Return to Strongman Rule

Elliot Waldman | Friday, May 24, 2019

Editor's Note: This article is part of an [ongoing series](#) about national drug policies in various countries around the world.

In February, job advertisements appeared in Sri Lankan newspapers, soliciting male candidates between 18 and 45 years old. According to [The Associated Press](#), the posting said applicants must be male Sri Lankan citizens of “excellent moral character” who can pass a test certifying their “mental strength.”

The position? Hangman.

For over four decades, majority-Buddhist Sri Lanka has maintained a moratorium on carrying out the death penalty, even as judges continued to hand down death sentences for murder and drug trafficking offenses. That will soon change, as the Sri Lankan government prepares to bring back capital punishment as part of a crackdown on drugs. Currently, nearly 1,300 people are on death row, including 48 drug offenders.



Sri Lankan authorities have struggled in recent years to address a steady rise in drug trafficking, particularly heroin. According to the country's [national police](#), there were 41,000 heroin-related arrests across the country in 2018, up from 14,000 in 2011.

There are many reasons for the rise in drug-related crime, says Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits, an assistant professor of conflict and peace studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam, in an email interview. From 1983 until 2009, an intermittent and bloody civil war raged on the island, as ethnic minority Tamils fought an ultimately unsuccessful military campaign for independence. But as the conflict receded, instances of drug smuggling began to tick up.

“Particularly since the end of the civil war, there are growing concerns about Sri Lanka becoming a regional hub for drug traffickers,” Jayasundara-Smits says. She points out that state security and intelligence services have reduced their activities on the island since the conflict ended, potentially creating openings for drug traffickers. There was also a post-war tourism boom facilitated by on-arrival visa schemes for neighboring countries, offering potential routes into the country for smugglers.

Intense media coverage of drugs in Sri Lanka has created a widespread sense that the government is dysfunctional and paralyzed when it comes to addressing the drug crisis. According to Jayasundara-Smits, “Many people think the government is very weak and in continued disarray when it comes to

issues of law and order,” so bringing back the death penalty could be part of a “political survival strategy.”

President Maithripala Sirisena first **announced** his intention to bring back the death penalty for drug offenses in July 2018. At the time, he promised to “replicate the success” of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, whose violent vigilante campaign against drug dealers and drug users has led to **thousands** of extrajudicial killings.

Since then, the political urgency has no doubt **increased** for Sirisena, whose government is under intense criticism for intelligence failures ahead of the coordinated terrorist attacks across Sri Lanka last month. Both Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe are under intense pressure to step down before the country’s next presidential election, which must be held by December.

Sirisena could be calculating that a strong anti-drug stance could rebuild his approval. There is a powerful emotional dimension to this issue for many Sri Lankans, Jayasundara-Smits points out, as “people think about the future of their children.” The move also “has the blessings of the holy trinity of Sri Lankan politics,” she says: The Buddhist clergy, the military and the political elite. Recently, Sirisena has also attempted to link the drug issue with terrorism. “At this moment, when a strong campaign has been carried out to eradicate illicit drugs and crimes, emergence of terrorism could be a part and parcel of that unholy alliance,” he **said** last month in comments carried by the state news service.

Domestic politics aside, the influence of brutal drug crackdowns in other countries—not only in the Philippines but also nearby **Bangladesh**, where hundreds of people have died in a fierce anti-drug push by the government—has raised alarms among human rights watchdogs. “President Sirisena’s decision to restore the death penalty because he was inspired by the Philippines’ murderous ‘drug war’ may be the worst possible justification and would violate international law,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, in a statement.

Perhaps most concerning is the apparent emergence of a preference for more authoritarian-style governance in the country, says Jayasundara-Smits. On Sri Lankan social media and in conversations among market vendors and tuk-tuk drivers, “there is a public discourse in the making favoring a dictatorial type of leadership,” she notes, a phenomenon that has gained more momentum since the Easter attacks. Only four years after they were elected on a platform of good governance and building a resilient democracy, Sirisena and other Sri Lankan leaders could be using an anti-drug and anti-terror message to return the country to strongman rule.

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