The island is home to many cultures, languages and ethnicities. The majority of the population is from the [Sinhalese ethnicity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinhalese_people), while a large minority of [Tamils](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamils) have also played an influential role in the island's history; Christians in both groups are recent converts who have kept the traditional culture. [Moors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Moors), [Burghers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burgher_people), [Malays](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Malays), [Chinese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_people_in_Sri_Lanka), and the aboriginal [Vedda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedda_people) are also established groups on the island.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-11)

Sri Lanka's documented history spans 3,000 years, with evidence of pre-historic human settlements dating back to at least 125,000 years.[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-histr-12) It has a rich cultural heritage and the first known [Buddhist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_in_Sri_Lanka) writings of Sri Lanka, the [Pāli Canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81li_Canon), date back to the [Fourth Buddhist council](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Buddhist_council) in 29 BC.[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-13)[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-14) Its geographic location and deep harbours made it of great strategic importance from the time of the ancient [Silk Road](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road)[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-silkr-15) through to the modern [Maritime Silk Road](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maritime_Silk_Road).[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-16)[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-17)

Sri Lanka was known from the [beginning of British colonial rule](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Ceylon) until 1972 as **Ceylon** ([/sɪˈlɒn, seɪ-, siː-/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA/English)). Its recent history has been marred by a thirty-year [civil war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Civil_War) which decisively ended when the [Sri Lanka Armed Forces](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka_Armed_Forces) defeated the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_Tigers_of_Tamil_Eelam) (LTTE) in 2009.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka#cite_note-18)

The current constitution stipulates the political system as a [republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic) and a [unitary state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitary_state) governed by a [semi-presidential system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semi-presidential_system). It has had a long history of international engagement, as a founding member of the [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asian_Association_for_Regional_Cooperation) (SAARC), and a member of the [United Nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations), the [Commonwealth of Nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Nations), the [G77](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_of_77), and the [Non-Aligned Movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-Aligned_Movement). Along with the [Maldives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maldives), Sri Lanka is one of only two South Asian countries rated high on the [Human Development Index](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Development_Index) (HDI), with its HDI rating and [per capita income](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Per_capita_income) the highest among South Asian nations.