

Joint Statement by PAFFREL, CMEV, TISL, CaFFE, MFFE, MDL, NEM, NPOC

PROTECT THE RIGHT TO A FREE, FAIR AND VIOLENCE- FREE ELECTION

Sri Lanka is presently in the midst of its seventh presidential election. As election observers, whose primary objective is to ensure a free and fair environment for elections, we are concerned about the prevailing conditions. The sovereignty of the people is foremost in a democracy and the legitimacy of the elected leadership arises from the free vote of a country's constituency. It is a right of the people to be able to choose a candidate of their choice within the framework of a free and fair contest.

Having observed events in the run up to the election, we note the following:

- Spontaneous and organised violence is rising.
- There is unfettered use of state resources for election campaign purposes.
- There is unfettered use of publicity material including hoardings and posters in clear violation of election laws.
- The Police is not sufficiently active in dealing with election related violations, and violence which is in contravention of the regular laws of the country.

We are apprehensive that the forthcoming weeks will only see a rise in such incidents, which will restrict the space for a free and fair electoral process. We are seriously concerned that incidents resulting in physical harm to political campaign supporters and members of the general public will increase due to the inability and/unwillingness of the Police to act independently and urgently to preempt and in response to such incidents.

THE CANDIDATES

In this context, we support the call of the Election Commissioner for a "violence-free election" and ask all candidates,

- To respect and uphold all election laws, and the law in general in conducting their election campaigns.
- To direct supporters to desist from violence in any form in the cause of the campaign, and ensure that the election is violence-free.
- To respect the right of voters to vote independently on the basis of a free and fair electoral contest.
- To end the use of state resources for election purposes.

- To strengthen the hand of the Election Commissioner to conduct a free and fair election in the real meaning of the term.
- To empower the Police to act independently in responding to electoral violations and violence.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE

We also collectively make urgent appeals to other sectors of the public to fulfill their own role in ensuring that the contest is free, fair and violence-free. Members of the public service especially have a role in ensuring that the state structure acts in the interests of all citizens and is non-partisan.

We ask members of the Sri Lankan public service,

- To act impartially in performing their duties.
- To bring violations taking place within the framework of the state to the attention of the Election Commissioner and election monitoring organizations.

RELIGIOUS CLERGY

The religious clergy in their role as moral leaders and guardians of their communities need to be proactive in protecting the people from violence and in preserving the space for a free and fair contest. It is they who can urge candidates and state structures to ensure that violence and intimidation does not become a key element of the campaign process. We ask religious clergy,

- To be proactive in urging the public to desist from and not collude in acts of violence.
- To form multi-religious collectives and actively engage with candidates and their local representatives and the local Police to preempt violence and hold perpetrators to account.

MEDIA

The media plays a crucial role in informing the public and creating a discourse centred on the policies of candidates. It is the media that keeps the populace up to date on events happening around them. It is on the basis of the information provided by the media that the public forms its opinions and ultimately makes its decisions. The media bears a great responsibility to ensure that its information is accurate and its reportage impartial, equitable and responsible. We ask the media,

- To ensure that its reportage is accurate, impartial, equitable and responsible.
- To ensure that there is no personal vilification of candidates or campaign supporters.
- To be fair in granting opportunity, time and space to candidates.

- To not carry news or opinion intended to incite to violence any segment of the public, or any community.

CITIZENS OF THE COUNTRY

It is the right of the citizen to elect a leader to chart the course of the country that is at the core of the electoral process. Citizens have multiple responsibilities in this situation. The first is as voters to participate in the election process. The second is as observers to ensure that their right to choose freely is upheld. The third is to act as protectors to ensure that the electoral environment is violence-free. To this end we ask citizens of the country to do the following:

- To exercise their franchise at the election.
- To not participate or collude in acts of violence.
- 3• To report violations and violence to the Police, Election Commissioner's office and monitoring organizations.

We reiterate that our role in the electoral process as observers is to work towards a free and fair election. We assert the need to act urgently and seek the support of the state, all political parties and contestants, public institutions, religious clergy, media, Sri Lankan citizens and civil society in this effort.

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