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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

February
2018

Civil Society Activists Ready To Take Up Challenge

Six days after the local government elections of February 10, civil society activists from several districts around the country involved in promoting inter religious cooperation for peace took part in a meeting organized by the National Peace Council in Colombo. They saw the government's poor electoral performance as a result of its failure to honour the mandate it had received in 2015 for good governance, anti-corruption, strong state institutions, economic development and inter ethnic justice and reconciliation.

In addition, it was pointed out that at the Presidential election of January 2015, civil society at all levels had contributed to the victory. They had acted as a movement for change. However, at the Local Government election of February 2018, civil society had been marginalized.

Among the other reasons identified for the election debacle was the government's failure to put a stop to corruption and to take action against those with allegations of corruption. The denial by each side of the corruption of their own was seen as a trap from which the country needed to extricate itself from but which the government had failed to do. Another reason given was the failure to address the problems of the poorer sections of the people even while striving to cater to international expectations.

An example given was the ban on asbestos sheeting that is used as roofing material by those with limited incomes, the reduction of the fertilizer subsidy and the replacement of the free school uniform by a voucher system. From the north came the observation that the failure to reduce the military presence symbolized the slowness of change and the possibility of a relapse into another era of impunity.

Other reasons given by participants included ministers not bothering to go back to their electorates to work for the people, that the personality of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa was more appealing to the masses than that of the current president and prime minister, the rousing of nationalism by the former president that saw him take his campaign to the Buddhist temples, the adverse comparison made between the infrastructure development of roads and ports by the former government as against the paucity of such development work today and the perception that the government was too ready to give in to international pressures.

What was encouraging was that these civic leaders were not disheartened but prepared to continue with their work for inter ethnic harmony, national reconciliation and economic development. They did not see the election result as directly negating their work.

Conflict Transformation Training for Youth in Colombo

Young people of different religions and ethnicities were trained in peace building and conflict analysis at a five day residential training programme on Conflict Transformation in Colombo.



Forty eight delegates from eight districts were shown how to use tools to address conflict in their communities under NPC's project, Religions to Reconcile.

The project is implemented by NPC in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace-building organization based in Amman, Jordan and supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The goal is to strengthen community networks mentored by religious leaders and engage them in building consensus for Transitional Justice and a pluralistic identity.

The programme was held in all three languages. In addition to theoretical sessions on peace building and conflict analysis, theory of change, beneficiary community and key stakeholders' inputs, and risks and assumptions, the delegates also held sports activities and art sessions

Alena J. Tansey, Deputy Director, Office of Governance and Vulnerable Populations, USAID /Sri Lanka and the Maldives told the delegates that by engaging in dialogue with their communities and learning important peace making skills, they had shown their commitment to longstanding peace in Sri Lanka.

“People-to-people reconciliation programs are important to building lasting peace. By bringing together individuals or groups of different ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds, these programmes provide opportunities to address issues, reconcile differences, promote greater understanding and mutual trust, and work on common goals,” she said.

She added that USAID recognised the steps taken by NPC to engage the public on these efforts, as lasting peace requires the support of grassroots communities to succeed.



Strategies For Engaging Youth in Transitional Justice

NPC held an experience sharing session with Transitional Justice (TJ) civil society trainers and experts to plan a TJ training module and discuss the best methods of training, resource materials, lessons learnt and to exchange success stories.

NPC was seeking suggestions on how to engage with youth for its upcoming project, Empowering and Mentoring Youth Volunteers to Engage with Transitional Justice to Promote Reconciliation.

One civil society trainer said engagement should be the focus so that young people could talk to each other as well as discuss issues with resource persons. He said government programmes were also reaching out to youth such as university students using different approaches. He added that it was important to prioritise empathy creation among the youth because they had not actually experienced the horrors of war.

Another trainer said there were new technologies to engage the youth. There was a need to hold the attention of young people who did not understand what had happened because they had not gone through the war. Movies, documentaries and discussions could be used to draw in youth.

One expert said TJ should be taken to the south because the people there were the ones who should be persuaded on the need for reconciliation. If it were not a national effort, it would be divisive, he pointed out. For the process to be meaningful to university students, they had to have credible people they could identify with taking the message to them. Theatre and song could be used to grab their attention.

Another expert said young people should be involved in the process until the end because they could have an objective view. He advised NPC to work with young journalists and bloggers to get the message across. Trust needed to be built between youth and the government, he said.

Two university students who attended the meeting said a better strategy and tools were needed to take TJ to young people. Language was also an issue, they said.

Promoting Clean Elections in Nuwara Eliya

In time for the local government elections, Nuwara Eliya District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) launched a campaign in Hatton to promote an election free of racism and religious discrimination. The campaign was funded by the IMPACT/CAFOD project.

Four thousand copies of leaflets were distributed among the people in Hatton town to urge voters not to elect anyone to local government bodies who promoted racism, religious discrimination or violence to disrupt peace and harmony among the communities. Ten banners were displayed at different religious places in Hatton and nearby areas carrying the message.

One of the candidates praised the DIRC for its campaign, saying it was passing on a good message to the people. He pointed out that a politician should look into the problems of all people regardless of their party affiliations, and serve everyone equally.

Wristbands that carrying the message, “My Vote is Against Racism and Corruption” were distributed by the DIRC members.

Youth and Private Sector Partnership

Two Batticaloa DIRC members and two Trincomalee DIRC members attended a Youth 4 Youth symposium under NPC's project Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka funded by the British High Commission.

The symposium aimed at creating a youth-led platform to enable partnership between the youth and private sector, Civil Society Organizations and academia to achieve sustainable peace in post-war areas, youth mainstreaming in provincial youth policy shaping processes, capacity sharing among youth, and the designing of community project proposals.

The participants said they had the opportunity engage with other youth and exchange ideas.

TJ Training for Religious Leaders

Under its IMPACT project, NPC held a training workshop on Transitional Justice (TJ) for 32 Hindu priests, from the districts of Ratnapura, Badulla and Nuwara Eliya.

The facilitator was lawyer S. Niranjan, who described the principles of TJ to the participants. NPC Senior Project Officer, Shantha Pathirana, explained the importance of reform and LLRC report.

Workshops have also been held for Catholic priests in Kandy, Moulavis in Batticaloa and Buddhist nuns in Badulla so that the religious leaders, who had the trust of their communities, could explain TJ to their community members who had been affected by the war.

The Hindu priests said the issues were important but that they usually dealt only with religious matters and did not get involved in politics. They required permission from their main religious body to talk about such issues with their congregations.

For many of them, it was the first time they had heard about the TJ process. They wanted to participate in further training. They were confident to work with NPC, which was recognised as an organisation working for reconciliation at the national level, they said.



Dilemma of Transitional Justice

NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera was invited to be a panelist in a session on Civil Society and Reparations at the International Conference on Reparations organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on February 22 to 23. The UN Migration Agency is currently providing technical assistance to the government on reparations, one of the four pillars of the national reconciliation framework, which Sri Lanka has committed to, as part of its broader efforts in promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka.

The purpose of the conference was to generate a meaningful discussion around the multiple and complex challenges that the establishment of a reparation system demands by drawing upon the lessons learned and best practices from other countries who faced or are facing similar challenges associated with the development of legal framework, institutional set-up, capacities and resources, monitoring mechanisms and financing models.

In his presentation Dr Perera focused on the challenge involved in presenting the concepts of Transitional Justice in a manner that was acceptable to the majority of people. He said that the dilemma that the government faced was that Transitional Justice was focused on the victims, but the government had to take the majority along with it, or else it risked being removed from power. The recent local government election had sent a clear warning to the government that the majority was not satisfied with its performance.

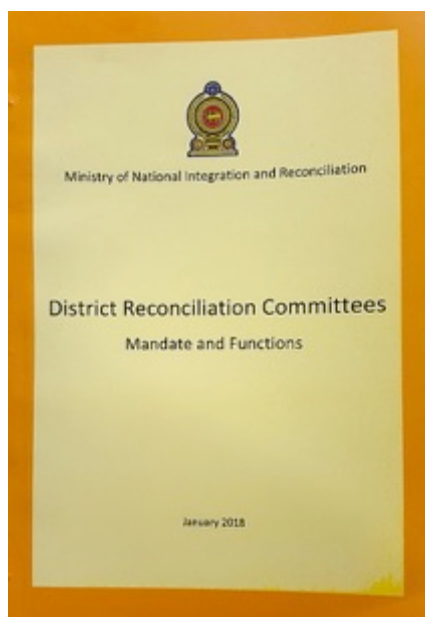
Government Sets Up Values-based District Network

The Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation that functions under the office of the president conducted a one day conference for District Reconciliation Committees (DRCs) consisting of religious clergy, government officials, police and civil society members, appointed by the president in his capacity as Minister of National Integration and Reconciliation.

A book giving details of all DRCs and their memberships was launched on the occasion. It also sets out the values and objectives of DRCs.

Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, Mano Tittawella, who functions under the Prime Minister's Office, addressing the meeting of DRCs gave a hopeful view of the post-election scenario.

He said that apart from the Office of Missing Persons which has been established in law, two more of the reconciliation mechanisms promised by the government, the Office of Reparations and Truth Seeking Commission, would be presented to parliament and to the general public in the aftermath of the elections.



NPC's executive director Dr Jehan Perera, who was invited to be a panelist at the conference, pointed out that learning about the importance of values mattered little unless those values were expressed in public life.

He said he hoped that the issue of inter ethnic power sharing would be resolved amicably between the government and ethnic minority parties and would take place after the local government election.

Responsibility for Post War Reconciliation Lies Within Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's commitment to human rights is being debated in Geneva at the 37th session of the Human Rights Council, which meets in Geneva from 26 February to 23 March 2018. There is a considerable amount of international dissatisfaction with the slow pace of progress due to the long delay in setting up the reconciliation mechanisms, such as the Office of Missing Persons, Office of Reparations, Truth Commission and Special Judicial Mechanism.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has stated that the fulfilment of the transitional justice commitments made under Human Rights Council resolution 30/1 of October 2015 has been virtually stalled for more than a year. The High Commissioner has also called on the UN Human Rights Council to explore other avenues that could foster accountability in Sri Lanka, including the application of universal jurisdiction that could foster accountability.

The International Organisation of Migration (IOM), one of the specialized UN agencies in Sri Lanka last week held an international conference on the role of reparations in the transitional justice process. International experts who participated in the conference gave examples from other conflict-ridden countries where reparations had been used to meet the needs of victims and to send a message of care to those who had been victims from all sides. This type of collaboration between international and national experts points to the way forward in the transitional justice process.

The National Peace Council is of the view that the government's failure to take the reform process forward with requisite speed is due to the popular misconceptions that are fed by opposition and nationalist politicians. They see the post-war reconciliation process as being driven by the international community who wish to set up hybrid mechanisms in the country.

The Office of Missing Persons that has been legislated is an example of a Sri Lankan mechanism, with eminent Sri Lankans proposed by the Constitutional Council at the helm that can address the needs of victims while drawing on the relevant resources, advice and experiences of the international community in dealing with similar problems elsewhere in the world.

The primary responsibility for healing the wounds of the war and post-war period lie with Sri Lankans as the victims whose rights have been violated are Sri Lankans and so are the perpetrators. This is reflected in the legislation of the Office of Missing Persons. We call on the government to likewise establish an Office of Reparations and a Truth Commission on similar lines.

Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

Our Mission: To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.

Keep Pledges of 2015 and Work Cohesively

The recently concluded local government elections and the reaction to it by the main political parties, has led to political uncertainty as they manoeuvre for their own advantage. The National Peace Council is concerned about the outcome of a prolonged period of uncertainty that will hinder effective governance and also negatively impact on the country's national reconciliation process. There is a need on the part of the leaders of the government who now appear to be at loggerheads to remember why they were elected to power and to keep the promises they made at that time. They also need to take into account the concerns of the people that were manifested during the election.

We believe that it is the responsibility of the government leadership to respect the constitution and practice reconciliation at the political level between themselves, make amends where they have failed and strengthen their good governance focus on which they were elected. These include strengthening state institutions, tackling the problem of corruption and showing greater care for the marginalized in society. We echo the sentiments of the Most Venerable Thibbatuwawe Sri Sumangala Thera, the Maha Nayake of the Malwatta Chapter who warned that the situation in the country is obstructing the cohabitation and reconciliation among the people. He called on the government to fulfil the pledges given at the 2015 presidential election and general election.

Through its contacts and work at the grassroots level the National Peace Council is confident that the majority of people does not harbour feelings of antipathy towards those of other communities and would not oppose a political solution. The government parties need to be conscious of the fact that they were elected for a five year period and have a mandate to remain in power till 2020 which a local government election cannot take away. We call on the government to fulfil its pledges of 2015, starting with those aspects on which there is a general consensus in society. These include strengthening state institutions, tackling the problem of corruption and showing greater care for the marginalized in society, whether for reasons of ethnicity or poverty.

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