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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

March  
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## Mobilising Community Leaders to Advocate for Religious Freedom

To tackle potential religious conflicts during the upcoming local government elections, NPC's Action for Religious Co-existence (ARC) project organized advocacy campaigns targeting Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members and candidates who are competing in the election. Eight campaigns have been carried out with the participation of 166 LIRC members and 177 election candidates in Trincomalee, Beruwela, Batticaloa, Mawanella, Mannar, Vavuniya, Ampara and Bandarawela.

Through the campaigns, targeted beneficiaries were told how religious conflicts have been known to lead to violence, discrimination and the marginalisation of certain groups, which can have far reaching consequences for individuals and communities. By educating election candidates and LIRC members on the importance of religious tolerance and the dangers of religious conflicts, they are better equipped to promote peace and harmony among different religious groups. This includes developing policies that foster religious diversity, protecting the rights of religious minorities and promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

By emphasising the need to avoid religious conflict, the ARC intervention teaches candidates about the benefits of a pluralistic society and the role that different religions can play in shaping a country's culture and identity.

Participants said politicians should be committed to sustaining peaceful religious coexistence. S.J. Janaka, a candidate for the Trincomalee District, pointed out the need to address the spreading of false rumours that escalate hatred for political advantage. He pointed out the negative consequences of racism that exist in the form of religious divisions.



Mohammad Tuan Kasir, a candidate from the Trincomalee District, highlighted the need for uniting divided communities to achieve reconciliation. "Politicians create conflicts among religious communities. We need to end this negative political culture. Politicians should stop using religion for their political advantage," he said.

The advocacy programme was a platform for the participants to share their ideas and find solutions through direct questioning. "I want to ask the Muslim people why they still keep the bullet holes in the mosque attacked by the LTTE," said Wiramuttu Dineshkumar from the Batticaloa District.

Answering him, Moulavi Firdaws Naleemei explained the importance of commemorating people lost in the war. "Commemoration is considered a right in the international world. Everyone has the right to remember and Muslims also have that right," he said.

"The misuse of religion in politics is a threat to religious freedom and coexistence. These advocacy campaigns are needed to ensure better politics," said Amila Nishantha from Banadarawela.

"This programme created an open platform to discuss our issues directly with the other candidates. Through discussions we can decide how to mitigate religious based violence. This paves the path for positive change in our society," M.N.M. Nasrin from Beruwela said.

## Sabaragamuwa University Commences Academic Activities

Sabaragamuwa University commenced academic activities of the Advanced Certificate Course on sustainable peace through pluralism and inclusive service delivery, becoming the first of the four universities where the course will be taught to do so.

The course, funded by Freedom House, will deliver conceptual knowledge as well as work related methodologies to the frontline government officers so that they could provide a better service to the public who receive these services. The course content covers inclusive service delivery, nonviolent communication for service delivery, service delivery in a plural society, frontline service delivery and field practicum.

The government officers who attended the first day of the lectures have shown a keen interest. One of the academics who delivered the lectures said that many officers were enthusiastic and that the sessions were more interactive than expected.

The final implementation of the project has been delayed due to strikes in university system and the economic crisis. NPC expect to conclude the project at the other three universities - Jaffna, Ruhuna and Eastern - within the next few months.

# Sharing Experiences and Challenges of DIRCs

A progress review meeting was conducted for NPC's partner organizations and DIRC coordinators under the Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project. Discussions on the economic crisis and the outlook for the future were facilitated by Chief Executive Officer of Advocata Dhananath Fernando and Export Development Board Chairman Suresh de Mel. Participants were shown ways to improve the local economy and how to find resources for growth.

Coordinators of 17 District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) presented their achievements during 2022 and demonstrated how project activities had impacted their communities. They also shared the challenges they had faced during the implementation of the project and how they had overcome these challenges.

A Hambantota DIRC member shared one experience where a teacher at a school was harassing another teacher who was of a different ethnicity. Some parents and students were also treating the teacher badly. A DIRC member spoke to the people concerned and after that the matter was resolved and the teacher was no longer under threat.

Several workshops were conducted under PACT for capacitating local women leaders, youth and government officials. A workshop on pluralism was held for senior government officials from the Badulla District. An official dealing with disaster management said he had undertaken several projects to resettle people who were displaced due to the natural disasters but that now he understood he had to consider people's feelings, their wants and needs before resettling people who were leaving their homes where they had lived for many years and going to live in a different area.





# Felicitation For Ms. Kesuma Saddak

An event was organized to appreciate the work of Ms. Kesuma Saddak, programme officer of Misereor, in upholding of human rights and fostering of inter-ethnic and inter-religious reconciliation and for her support for NPC.

Ms. Saddak was felicitated by Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project Manager Saman Seneviratne, who presented her with a token of appreciation. PACT is funded by Misereor.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said that Ms. Saddak had been part of NPC's development for the past seven years. He said that NPC's present stability was an outcome of the funding that Misereor brought in year after year. Dr. Perera recalled how Ms. Saddak had wanted to get to know NPC's work at first hand when she first made contact with the organization and had travelled to Polonnaruwa to participate in an inter religious committee meeting. She was always receptive to discussing new issues and changes within Sri Lanka and NPC's approach to dealing with them.

Dr. Perera thanked Ms. Saddak for her flexibility in enabling NPC to use Misereor funds to best advance the objectives of the project they were funding. An example was how Misereor authorised the repurposing of project funds during the Covid lockdown for the emergency purchases of food rations that were distributed through the inter religious committees to orphanages, elders homes, disabled people and to needy families identified in collaboration with government administrators.

Ms. Saddak's presence will be greatly missed although she has promised that Misereor will continue to support NPC.



# Protecting the Freedom to Protest

NPC conducted a training of trainers workshop under its Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project for 73 master trainers and 12 district coordinators in Colombo on protecting civic space focusing on freedom of association for participants from Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala, Kandy, Kalutara, Badulla, Batticaloa, Monaragala, Matara, Ratnapura, Jaffna and Kegalle.

Participants at a panel discussion were of the opinion that although the protesters who were involved in the aragalaya of last year were no longer active, they would rise up again when necessary. Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda, Prof. T. Jayasingam, Dr. Jehan Perera, Dr. Pradeep Peiris, Sumadhu Weerawarne, Swasthika Arulingam and Nawaz Mohammed were the panelists at the discussion.

The programme began with a speech by NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera who shared some thoughts on freedom of association, community citizenship and the present social context. Senior Researcher Shashik Danushka Silva then explained the research findings on understanding civic space in Sri Lanka.

Two sessions were facilitated by Dr. Pavithra Jayawardane of the University of Colombo on the status of civic space and two sessions were facilitated by lawyer Nuwan Bopage on the legal framework of the freedom of association.

An analytical tool for understanding intervention in community dynamics was introduced by Mr. Silva and participants developed an intervention plan. They were trained on how to analyse a common problem in their community in terms of freedom of association.

## Book on Lessons Learnt From the Peace Process

A book by NPC chairman Dr. Joe William on The Peace Process in Sri Lanka after the Ceasefire Agreement from 2002-2008: Systemic Conflict Transformation and its Application to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka was launched in Colombo. The book analyses the successes and the failures of the peace process and the lessons learnt through the lens of systemic conflict transformation theory.

Political scientist Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda noted that the book had been carefully researched. He said that the systemic conflict transformation analysis that Dr. William had undertaken for his PhD research at Bradford University, UK, had shown that without structural change there could not be a changed outcome. Prof. Uyangoda complimented the author for being a practitioner who had based his analysis on both theory and practice.

Strategic management expert Peter Rezel observed that the book was the fruit of over three decades of work at multiple levels in the field of peacebuilding that both preceded and superseded the ceasefire period. The vast experience of the author as an activist, practitioner and academic, his lived experiences and his passionate commitment to the cause of peace was reflected throughout the book. Others who spoke included Prof. M. S. Mookiah and Peter d'Almeida.

The book is published by the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka and is translated into Sinhala and Tamil.

# Examining Conflict Transformation and the Peace Process

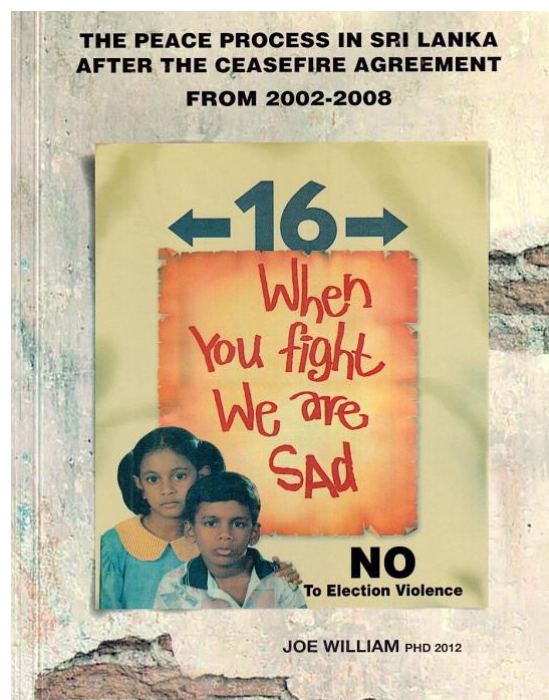
The book by NPC chairman Dr. Joe William entitled *The Peace Process In Sri Lanka After The Ceasefire Agreement From 2002-2008: Systemic and its Application to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka* is about applying a specific conflict resolution theory, Systemic Conflict Transformation (SCT), an assessment of the background to the conflict since independence and the difficulties encountered by the Norwegian-sponsored peace process from 2002 to 2008.

It attempts to show the way peace has to be forged at many different levels than only to deal with the immediate causes that led to the conflict in the first place. It sees the systemic approach by placing the conflict at the center of gravity in the conflict system.

Insights from systems analysis provides a deeper understanding of the development of deadly conflicts. This approach is not a panacea but offers a relatively unexplored path that points towards policy recommendations. The research is original from the perspective of its analysis based on SCT principles on why the Norwegian facilitated peace process failed and to what extent can SCT theory enable the peacebuilding community to be mobilised.

Chapter 2 titled *Conflict Resolution and Systemic Conflict Theory* provides a brief sketch of some of the best known conflict resolution models, highlighted to introduce the concept of SCT, which is the sub-focus of the research in analysing the Norwegian-facilitated peace process in Sri Lanka.

Chapter 3 gives an illuminating background to the conflict, which helps set the context and the key actors providing a historical overview of the post-independence political processes that generated and sustained the Sri Lankan conflict concluding with the events leading up to the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA). This is followed by an examination of the different stages of the peace process from 2002 to 2008, its collapse and ends with the abrogation of the CFA.



The chapter also provides an interesting analysis of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism and its ideological role in the conflict debate. One other significant issue highlighted is the history and status of Muslim communities. The focus is to grapple with issues that could potentially move to a conflict transformation process, shift root and proximity causes of conflict to interaction and independence, and to help focus analyses on solution rather than just reflecting on problems and options for change. Systems Thinking thus becomes a very powerful way of uncovering root causes because it illuminates the non-obvious interdependencies among complex organizational and external factors. Thinking systemically helps people recognise how they are in part responsible for the problems they are trying to solve. They can learn how their well-intentioned actions often produce unintended consequences that actually reduce their effectiveness in the long run.

Chapter 4 titled Systemic Analysis of the Peace Process from 2002-2008 is the substantive core of the thesis where a systematic analysis of the peace process from 2002-2008 is provided. The chapter identifies security, political social and economic factors as the underlying and contributing factors to the conflict, citing the nature of the state, its political culture, the institutional framework of policy, uneven development patterns and conflicting patterns not been affected by the process. The chapter describes these aspects in great detail including issues of human rights violations by both sides of the conflict, regional and geopolitical interests, failed attempts at constitutional change and the ethnicisation of political institutions.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide a study of the NPC and the role it has played in peacebuilding, especially in supporting the peace process using systems thinking. The chapters show the principles and strategies adopted by NPC in peacebuilding interventions. In some ways the study shows NPC's evolution of its approaches and strategies which currently emphasises pluralism, trust building and addressing the political roots of the conflict.

While summarising the essence of the book, the final chapter suggests and expands on possible ways forward, which include the need to address the right people; not to come up with a single model to deal with the complex dynamics of the process of conflict and peacebuilding; the need for a confluence of interventions and political transformation and compromise; empowering communities and the adoption of systemic thinking. Finally, it appeals for the promotion of social healing and moving beyond the area of academic research and also to heed to the voices emanating for justice from thousands of unmarked graves dotted across the island as a result of conflicts over the past three decades.

This book is ahead of its times by a decade when activists of the aragalaya proposed a system change that aimed to address the lead up to the systems breakdown experienced in 2022. The strength of the book is that it provides an objective assessment of the realities of the period under review and the lessons learned, which can be applied by the tens of thousands who congregated in Galle Face Green and elsewhere in 2022, especially university students and others.

The book is translated into Sinhala and Tamil and is an essential resource for those working towards promoting systems change at the national level and rooted in shared goals to achieve lasting improvement to solve social problems facing Sri Lanka at local, provincial and national levels, which has so far eluded us. It will also be of great value if this thesis could be updated in a future edition as a book and structured and formatted accordingly with the insertion of a subject index and author index.

*Peter Rezel*



# Uncertainty Over Local Government Elections Must End

Uncertainty over the postponement of local government elections continues to grow. Recent statements by government leaders and debates in parliament show them openly expressing the view that elections at this time would not be conducive to either economic growth or advantageous to them, and so ought not to be held. This follows the postponement of local government elections scheduled for March 9 due to the failure of the government treasury to release the required funds for the elections. It is important that government departments should cooperate with the Election Commission when it has declared elections as mandated by the Constitution.

Two landmark rulings of the Supreme Court have sent a clear message to the country at large that the elections should take place without delay. The National Peace Council is particularly distressed at the open calls being made within parliament to government departments to disregard the court orders on the grounds that they breach parliamentary privilege. The open questioning and mockery of democratic processes by government members that is taking place at all levels was not expected under the leadership of so experienced a parliamentarian as President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The sovereignty of the people, and their right to elect their representatives at all levels of government through free and fair elections, and respect for the judiciary, constitute the foundations of democracy. The failure to uphold the rule of law and the system of checks and balances would severely undermine democracy, the country's international credibility and the national interest. NPC appeals to the government to expedite the electoral process by heeding the decisions of the Supreme Court and abide by the new date of April 25 as set by the Election Commission for the local government elections to be held.

The National Peace Council is heartened by the joint initiative of civil society organisations to bring the opposition political parties to one forum to uphold the principle of timely and free and fair elections and to convince the government of the need for elections. Leading representatives of all the main opposition political parties came together to sign a "Public representatives pledge to protect the right to vote" at a meeting convened by the Civil Society Collective for Protecting the Franchise. Although the political parties represented widely different ideologies and ethnic affiliations, they stood without any division on the issue of upholding the democratic franchise.

We want the government to heed the voice of the opposition parties and civil society organisations on this issue of the franchise and not be isolated as that would not be conducive to the political stability and economic recovery it seeks. The government's development strategies require the willing cooperation of the rest of political society which is unlikely to be secured without timely elections being held as guaranteed by the Constitution. The government also needs to show respect to judicial decisions and to constitutional provisions related to the rule of law that are essential for investor confidence, both national and international, without which the prospects for economic recovery will be a chimera.

*Media Release issued on 10.03.23*



*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.*

## Transformative Process Needed for National Reconciliation

There have been media reports of a ministerial delegation visiting South Africa to undertake a study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the reconciliation process that took place in that country over two decades ago. The South African reconciliation process, and its Truth and Reconciliation Commission in particular, have gained worldwide recognition for being a pioneer in dealing with human rights violations and war crimes that took place in the course of the struggle against Apartheid.

An important feature of the South African TRC was its openness and transparency. The public hearings held by the TRC ensured that South Africans became aware of the violations that had been committed during the apartheid years. The National Peace Council (NPC) believes that such a commission could provide Sri Lanka with renewed hope in terms of peace and reconciliation for those who have been affected by gross human rights violations. It is hoped the TRC will enable families of the missing to have the opportunity to learn about the fate of their relatives, who went missing during the war and leftist insurrection.

The reconciliation process should be a home grown one which is organic to Sri Lanka. If the process is organic, then it will not be rejected inasmuch as a human body will reject an organ which is foreign. NPC believes that Sri Lanka should venture beyond retributive justice and restorative justice. While the criminal justice system uses retributive justice as a form of deterrence this has not provided protection against the repetition of crime. Restoring society to the pre-war period is not adequate to achieve reconciliation, neither is punishing those involved as it can polarize society in a manner where there is no organic social consciousness of guilt. NPC believes that the transformative approach of the South African model is more suitable than the retributive justice process which is not suitable for ethnic conflicts or large scale conflicts.

The challenge will be to find solutions that are in line with Sri Lankan values and forms of justice that are accepted by the Sri Lankan people along with the rejection of violence. Accordingly, NPC believes that it is necessary for the TRC to be representative to instill confidence in the victims. It is of paramount importance that the members of the commission are selected via a consultative process as was the South African TRC where its members were selected through an open countrywide nomination process and publicly interviewed by an independent selection panel comprising representatives of all the political parties, civil society, and the religious bodies in the country. Hence those studying the TRC process need to ensure that a transparent process emerges in the establishment and implementation of a TRC in order to achieve peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

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