

Paths to Peace

A monthly newsletter from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

NPC Launches Voter Education Campaign

As the country heads for a general election on August 17, NPC launched a voter education campaign focusing on corruption and the ethnic conflict.

The campaign is educating people on the issues of good governance and transitional justice, and motivating people to come out and vote intelligently, as well as urging the public not to vote for candidates who are corrupt or violent or racist.

The campaign, funded by the British High Commission, is being specially targeted on the rural community. The messaging has been done in consultation with community leaders to make it relevant to rural needs.

NPC is working with its local partners, particularly the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), to meet with local political representatives, organise pocket meetings and to distribute handbills and posters calling for people to vote for decent candidates.

Nine educational campaigns have been organised in the Galle, Matara, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ampara, Batticaloa, Puttalam, Jaffna and Mannar districts. Religious leaders, community leaders, district level civil society representatives, and members of DIRCs are participating.

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Despite Sri Lanka's high literacy rate and the presence of many newspapers, radio stations and television stations, most rural people do not have access to thought provoking and analytical news items. As a result, they are not fully informed of the facts and are not exposed to diverse opinions. Often media campaigns on good governance and human rights are targeted to more urban and educated audiences.

Towards a Shared Future

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Handbills and posters have been printed and arm bands prepared with messages urging people to vote and to choose ethical and upright candidates who favour good governance and a fair solution to the ethnic conflict.

Panel discussions led by DIRC members are being broadcast on state radio to reach the rural population.

The poster messages:

- *I, We, You. All of us, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim are Sri Lankan citizens. Vote for those who protect all and preserve racial amity. Do not give your vote to those candidates who foster racial division.*
- *The loss in the Petroleum Corporation for 2011-13 was Rs 190 billion (from the COPE report). In a country free of corruption you will have less costly fuel for your vehicle, less costly gas for your kitchen, reduced cost of living and reduced bus fares.*
- *17 August 2015 will be the day that the people's court will have power. This is your day to use your vote to mete out punishment to those who are corrupt, abuse power, rape and are racist.*
- *Mothers, this is the time to create a society that protects girl children and respects women.*

On the ethnic question, most candidates are afraid to take a position on the subject of devolution and the issues connected with the transition process required for reconciliation for fear of losing the majority Sinhala vote. However, this is an issue that needs an urgent solution if Sri Lanka is to move on to build a fair and equitable society.



Handbills Highlight Key Issues

- Prosperity in a country free of corruption (economic development for all)

The economy must not favour only a few but should benefit the masses. Corruption and inefficiency in the allocation of resources must stop. The economic gap between the urban and rural areas must be reduced.

- Establishing independent institutions as checks and balances

There needs to be a system that puts a stop to corruption, where the system in place is active and stronger than individuals.

- Government administration free of political influence

There needs to be a system that puts a stop to abuses of power. The police must have the ability to stop the drug trade and illegal activities. The legal system must be independent and punish wrongdoers.

- Post-war accountability and reconciliation

The truth of what happened during the three decades of the war must be known to the people, and accountability sought, with reconciliation rather than punishment as the primary goal. There needs to be appropriate compensation and reparation to enable the conflict affected populations a fresh start in their lives.

- Rights of ethnic and religious minorities

There needs to be a fair sharing of power between the ethnic and religious communities through the devolution of power. This needs to also include mechanisms for power sharing at the level of the central government in a manner that recognizes the plural nature of our society. Speech that incites hatred or violence against those of other ethnic or religious communities needs to be prohibited by law.

- Civil society criteria for political leaders

It is the role of civil society to educate voters to select good candidates. The March 12 Declaration formulated by civil society and signed by the political parties provides eight criteria to select suitable candidates.

The forthcoming general election is a pivotal one for Sri Lanka. It is an opportunity to define the path our country will take. This path should be one that all ethnic and religious groups can take together as one people. During the election campaign civil society activists need to highlight the problems that should be solved for the country to march forward.



Healing Activity Held in Trincomalee District

NPC's Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto project, implemented with the financial support from FOKUS Women, held its final healing activity for the Trincomalee district.

The activity in Trincomalee was an outcome of a process starting from identifying the partner organisation to training of trainers at district level. This was followed by training 26 grass root level women. The women then identified their district level issues, voted to give priority to one, created a Core Group of nine members, confirmed the healing activity and thereafter implemented it.

Some of the main issues raised by the women were inadequate psychosocial support, lack of truth about the conflict and the post conflict situation, enforced disappearances and the lack of compensation. During the follow up meeting other issues raised were increased child abuse, lack of national languages being used and bigamy.

At the Core Group, the women decided to contribute to psychosocial support by sharing their stories and grievances and creating a support network.

NPC wanted this effort to be sustainable and invited Father V. Yogeswaran of the Centre for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (CPPHR) to tell the women that they could seek legal advice and psychosocial support from his organisation.



“Although is not possible for women who have been so traumatised and victimised to heal completely with the activities that we were able to provide, there are two positive aspects that came out of the process - one is that we created a network and support system among the women who earlier would not have connected on this level and the other is that we put them in touch with a local organisation to provide legal advice and psychosocial support.”

Lakmini Jayathilake
Project Coordinator

News From The Field

Some 110 Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils, including religious leaders representing Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, attended an Iftar organised by Matara DIRC and the Matara Divisional Secretariat.

The programme included a presentation on the significance of Iftar by a Moulaviya (a female Islamic leader) and a talk by NPC board member Professor M.S. Mookiah on the importance inter ethnic and inter religious harmony.

The DIRC and the Divisional Secretariat decided to organise the event to enable all communities in the area to participate and rebuild trust among them. There had been tension in the area due to a conflict in Isadeen town in Matara.

Muslims in Isadeen town wanted to build a mosque but the Sinhalese in the area said there was no permission to build it. The Muslims said they had got permission from the Matara Municipal Council. The Sinhalese said the land originally belonged to the Sinhala people while the Muslims claim it was theirs.

Despite several meetings held by DIRC with the Grama Niladhari, government officials, Municipal council members and religious leaders to discuss the matter, the tension remained.

The Iftar was helpful in creating a harmonious environment for all communities to come together.

“When we went to school, Sinhalese and Muslims studied together. There was no problem between us. We become good friends. Now it seems that some extremists are trying to spoil society and create divisions among communities. Therefore it is necessary to build relationships among different communities. It will be helpful if we can raise awareness of each other’s cultural practices.”

**Mosque Secretary
Isadeen Town**



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.

Manifestos For Peace

The rampant violence that engulfed the Tamil people 23 July 1983 and days that followed discredited Sri Lanka internationally and signalled the braindrain among the Tamils that would impact the future economic and political trajectory of the country. It also led to a costly and brutal war that lasted until May 2009, tore up the fabric of society and undermined the national economy.

Underlying both the anti-Tamil pogrom and the protracted war stemmed grievances of the Tamil people and the failure of their attempt to draw attention to them in a peaceful and non-violent manner. However, 32 years later, conditions in Sri Lanka have changed so that a political solution has become a viable prospect. The experience gathered in the work done by the National Peace Council for over two decades convinces us that our fellow citizens are now more willing to accept, and commit themselves to, a political solution that ensures justice and security to all.

During the past six months we saw an encouraging reduction of the fear psychosis in society and positive steps taken towards the reintegration of the ethnic and religious minorities into the mainstream of society. However, the early dissolution of Parliament on June 26 due to the political deadlock between the government and opposition means that many of the unresolved issues that existed prior to the presidential election continue to be present for exploitation by racist extremists.

In this time of commemoration of Black July, public attention is focused on the forthcoming general elections. Election campaigns provide an invaluable opportunity for public education. We call on our political leaders who seek genuine change in the country to bravely and honestly address the key issues that Sri Lanka as a country needs to resolve.

From the perspective of the National Peace Council there are several key issues impacting the future of the country that relate to relations between the ethnic and religious communities which require attention by the political parties in their election manifestos and in their campaign statements. These are:

- The issue of post-war accountability and reconciliation. We believe that the truth of what happened during the three decades of the war must be known to the people, and accountability sought, with reconciliation rather than punishment as the primary goal.
- There needs to be appropriate compensation and reparation to enable the conflict affected populations a fresh start in their lives, with the institutional reforms to sustain this change.
- The rights of ethnic and religious minorities need to be guaranteed and protected both through the rule of law and the manner in which future generations are educated to respect the diversity and pluralism in our country.
- Speech that incites hatred or violence against those of other ethnic or religious communities needs to be prohibited by law.
- There needs to be a just political solution in which there is a fair sharing of power between the ethnic and religious communities through the devolution of power, but also including mechanisms for power sharing at the level of the central government in a manner that recognizes the plural nature of our society.

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