



# Paths To Peace

July 2024

## Research on Factors Guiding Voter Preference in Elections

A research study is being conducted in the 25 districts to understand the factors that influence voter preference in elections. This initiative is part of NPC's Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy (ACED) project and aims to identify the elements that guide voters' choices during elections.

The study, led by two academics from the University of Colombo, uses a dual component approach: a conjoint analysis and a general information survey. The conjoint analysis (a survey-based advanced market research analysis method that attempts to understand how people make complex choices) aims to understand how voters value different attributes of candidates and policies by presenting participants with hypothetical scenarios involving various candidate profiles. The general information survey collects demographic and psychographic data from participants to provide context to the findings from the conjoint experiment, helping to understand the general voting patterns and preferences of the electorate.

The ACED project is collaborating with four organisations to facilitate this project and ensure its execution at the field level: The Centre for Communication Training (CCT), the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW), People's Action for Free and Fair Election (PAFFREL), and Women and Democracy (W&D) in the Maldives. These organisations are involved in activities to support research and promote democratic engagement among the citizens. CCT has been engaging with local stakeholders and organising meetings to facilitate the process. Initial activities included meetings with the Assistant Commissioner of Elections, NGO coordinators, district and divisional Youth Services officers and the administrative officials. PAFFREL held national level consultation meetings to revise the voter education toolkit.



# DIRC Assists Bathalagoda Estate Workers to Get Land Deeds

Kurunegala District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC), under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, facilitated a forum for state officials and the media to discuss the problems faced by people in Bathalagoda Estate in Kurunegala to mitigate the conflict, aiming at resolution through legal means rather than confrontation. The programme was conducted with the objective educating the estate community on land rights, human rights and child protection.

The estate community is one of the most marginalised communities in Sri Lanka, who face structural violence on daily basis on education, health, employment and representation. While there are some development interventions, there is low awareness on these interventions among the community, particularly on peace building and human rights.

The management of the Bathalagoda estate suddenly instructed workers residing there to vacate without providing a reason for their decision, resulting in a conflict between the management and the workers whose lives revolve around estate. The management has sold over a 100 acres of the estate, including the estate workers' cemetery.

The discussion was attended by the Divisional Secretary, Planning Director, Social Integration Officer, Social Development Officer, NGO Coordinator and Grama Niladarai representing Ibbagamuwa. The TV channel Swarnavahini and the print media covered the workers' issues.

Kurunegala DIRC distributed handbooks, posters and flyers to create awareness on human rights and supported efforts to find a volunteer lawyer to continue a legal case against the estate management over land rights. It also found NGOs to provide financial support for the legal action. After these discussions, the estate management decided to transfer ownership of land to the estate workers through freehold deeds, marking the culmination of a year long effort involving estate workers, management, state officials and Kurunegala DIRC.

## Freedom of Expression Portrayed Through Art

An art competition and exhibition to create community awareness citizens' rights such as freedom of association, expression and assembly was held under NPC's project Protecting Civic Space in Sri Lanka in Kurunegala.

The event was organized by the Kurunegala Human Rights Organization in collaboration with the Civic Space Protection Committee and the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat. About 72 participants from all ethnic communities participated in the art competition and exhibition, which was judged by a panel of artists, teachers and government officials.

Participants created 55 paintings related to the themes of freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, which were then exhibited. Certificates were awarded all participants of the drawing competition with special certificates to the five best art works. Leaflets, bookmarks and key tags on protecting civic space were distributed to attendees.





# Truth Telling Crucial to Transitional Justice Process

NPC's PUJA People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project conducted meetings in Kalutara, Kegalle, Monaragala, Galle and Hambantota for District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) and Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs), organic formations, master trainers and state officers to promote truth telling as an essential component of the transitional justice process.

A consistent topic was the call for an independent, impartial truth commission free from political interference. Participants stressed that achieving true transitional justice required equal financial and property justice for all victim families with full compensation for damages as assessed by law.

By bringing together diverse voices and emphasising the importance of an independent truth commission, the sessions underscored the collective commitment to achieving justice, healing and reconciliation. The journey towards transitional justice is complex and challenging but with continued efforts and unwavering dedication, a unified country was within reach.

Rohana Galabada, an LIRC Member from Kalutara, emphasised the importance of transitional justice in addressing conflicts, analysing causes, identifying parties and victims, compensating damages and preventing future conflicts.

Fathima Fazeena, a youth representative from Kalutara LIRC, highlighted the need for social cohesion through diversity, saying that, "Two lands should be avoided in the same country and social cohesion must be built through diversity."

Kalutara LIRC member P. K. Silva noted the emotional benefits of the truth telling process for victims, offering them a sense of validation and closure. Upali Jayaratne, another LIRC Member from Kalutara, emphasised the commission's power to shed light on past human rights abuses and historical injustices, preventing future violations and ensuring accountability.

E.M.S. Edirisinghe from Kegalle LIRC spoke about addressing past traumas, noting that some victims may be too traumatised to participate in the process. Master Trainer Sujith Wijesinghe said the truth commission should critique political consequences and shortcomings, not just focus on a particular time period or ethnic group.

State official D. Mahinda Jayawardana from Kegalle highlighted resistance to healing and reconciliation efforts at the grassroots level due to negative views held by influential leaders.

D. Madushan from the Galle LIRC pointed out the need for educating both decision makers and grassroots communities about existing laws and social conditions to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation.



# Bridging the Gap in Public Service Delivery

A meeting organised under NPC's Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery project funded by Freedom House brought together government officials from the Ratnapura District and Divisional Secretariats to discuss the issues faced by the Malaiyaha community regarding public service delivery.

Findings of research that identified the shortcomings in the public services received by the Malaiyaha community through service delivery institutions carried out by 10 government officials following the advanced certificate course on pluralism and inclusive service delivery at the University of Sabaragamuwa were presented at the meeting.

Facilitated by Mr. Ravindra Palliyaguru, a senior lecturer from Sabaragamuwa University, the session underscored the need to address promoting inclusive service delivery. The research findings identified existing shortcomings and the steps needed to bridge the service delivery gap for the Malaiyaha community.

Language barriers was an obstacle affecting the community's access to essential services. Damayanthi Samarakoon, a researcher, highlighted this issue with an example from Madampawatte Estate where a pregnant woman said she could not fill out a form in Sinhala to get a nutritional supplement.

She also said that at banks, account related documents were available in Sinhala and Tamil but filling them out in Tamil led to rejection, highlighting the feelings of inequality and marginalisation perpetuated by language barriers.

"The Malaiyaha community is often afraid of interacting with officials but there's no need for this fear. Our goal is to provide public services to all communities including theirs. However, when Tamil speaking individuals from this community visit our institutions, they usually bring someone else for support. This practice can lead to them receiving additional monetary benefits from their companions," Divisional Secretary of Pelmadulla Divisional Secretariat said.

He emphasised the need to bridge the gap in public service delivery and assured the community that they were ready to serve it effectively. Raising awareness about the employees and services provided by the government offices was crucial, he added.



# Spreading the Word on Community Harmony

The Bandarawela Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC), established in 2022, has made significant headway in promoting religious harmony and coexistence in the region. The committee, composed of religious leaders, government officials, civil society members and journalists, has been working to foster understanding and cooperation among different religious communities.

Recognising the need to educate the public about their mission and services, committee members participated in a radio interview on the Uva Praja Radio Service to speak about the committee's work and the support it offered the community. The programme, recorded in Sinhala and Tamil, was streamed live on YouTube and Facebook, ensuring wider accessibility.

The broadcast highlighted the committee's advocacy activities, focusing on the teachings of religious leaders about harmony and mutual respect. Emphasising that no religion competes with another, the leaders pointed out that all religions promoted similar values of peace and coexistence. As part of its outreach, the committee has been organising district and local level programmes focusing on the role of women in religious freedom, which have provided a platform for women to discuss their rights and roles in a religious context, aiming to further gender equality in religious practices.

The objectives of the committee are to inform people about its commitment to religious freedom and coexistence and to intervene in potential conflicts to prevent escalation with representatives from various community sectors, working together to reduce conflicts and promote harmony.

Committee members spoke on their key achievements and initiatives including:

- Implementation of interfaith exchange programmes within religious establishments to promote brotherhood and peace among school and Dhamma school children;
- Programmes aimed at minimising misunderstandings between ethnic groups and fostering unity among children under the theme fostering unity to move forward as a nation;
- Identification of marginalised communities, encouraging the government to promote religious coexistence and laying the foundation for reintegrating youth through the establishment of youth and sports societies;
- Collective efforts of religious leaders from all faiths operating as a unified group in religious establishments.

The committee members emphasised the importance of continuing the awareness activities at the grassroots level and participating in media initiatives to promote religious coexistence in Bandarawela.





# Trust in Government's Commitment to Democratic Process Crucial

A Fundamental Rights petition is pending before the Supreme Court requesting a postponement of the presidential election until a determination is made on the length of the president's term of office. The National Peace Council welcomes the Supreme Court's decision to consider the case as soon as possible. We believe the continuing uncertainty about the holding of the presidential election is deeply harmful to the country in every aspect. It undermines faith in the democratic process in which free and fair elections that are held regularly is an indispensable element.

The unfortunate reality in Sri Lanka at the present time is that elections to two tiers of government, the local government and provincial councils, are overdue, the former by more than a year and the latter by over five years. Although parliamentary elections are not legally due until next year, we believe that general elections to obtain a fresh mandate ought to have taken place two years ago when public protests forced both the then president and government to resign and indicated a withdrawal of the mandate to them.

The National Peace Council notes that President Ranil Wickremesinghe has, on several occasions, confirmed that the presidential election will be held on schedule. The position that presidential elections are constitutionally due this year has also been reiterated also by the Elections Commission. As a veteran politician the president would understand acts done without transparency to delay elections for whatever reason are bound to take the country to a situation of unrest which will turn back all the gains of the past two years. The president will not be oblivious to the tragedies thrust on Sri Lankans as a result of postponing elections in the past.

The uncertainty about so fundamental an issue as elections also serves to undermine both domestic and international trust in Sri Lanka's stability. There needs to be truth, consistency and transparency in governance which is crucial to maintaining belief in the stability of society so that investments made today can yield positive outcomes in the future. This is crucial to the economic recovery that the president has committed himself to. If Sri Lanka is to avoid repeating the crises of the past, tinkering with the constitution to postpone elections through the parliamentary majority or a particular interpretation of the law must be prevented forthwith.

*Media release issued on 07.07.2024*



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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

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# Failure To Abide By Judicial Decision Undermines Rule Of Law

Much to the consternation of law abiding people the government has announced its decision not to act on the Supreme Court interim order restraining Deshabandu Tennakoon from functioning as the Inspector General of Police. Despite the ruling by the highest court in the land, the government insists that the Police IGP will continue to hold office.

Delivering a special statement in Parliament, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena stated that the Supreme Court cannot change the approval granted by the Constitutional Council to appoint the current IGP and therefore the IGP continued in his position. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has declared his candidacy in the upcoming presidential election, has stated that he will not appoint an acting IGP as this may lead to election petitions being filed against him.

The present governmental stance undermines the foundational principle of parliamentary democracy, which relies on the separation of powers among the presidency, parliament, and the judiciary. These three branches of government are designed to function as a system of checks and balances, preventing the abuse of power by any single branch.

The government's refusal to implement the Supreme Court's judgment is not only reckless and irresponsible but also a direct threat to the rule of law. By disregarding judicial decisions, the government sets a dangerous precedent that could erode public trust in the legal system and encourage similar behavior among elected officials at other levels of government.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher John Locke, asserted that "wherever law ends, tyranny begins." Similarly, the 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Montesquieu emphasized the necessity of separating governmental powers to prevent despotism: "There is no liberty if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive." Regrettably, the government's current actions contradict these timeless principles and threaten the balance that sustains Sri Lanka's democratic system.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to change its stance in the national interest and abide by the Supreme Court's judgment to preserve the integrity of the country's democracy and the rule of law. They may submit their appeals through channels as provided by law without rejecting the order of the court. Political maneuverings to circumvent Supreme Court rulings are unacceptable.

*Media release issued on 27.07.2024*



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**National Peace Council of Sri Lanka**

*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.*

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