



Paths To Peace

June 2024

Championing Religious Freedom: A National Advocacy Journey

Religious leaders, NGO representatives and NPC staff met in Vavuniya for a national level advocacy meeting with political leaders. Participants included MP S. Noharathalingam and representatives from several Tamil political parties. The session aimed to advance the project's goals by fostering collaboration and engagement across various sectors. Mr. Noharathalingam, along with other party representatives, emphasised the critical importance of religious freedom and promised to take the issue to the national policy making level. A Religious Freedom Charter developed by NPC in discussion with members of the Inter Religious Committees in 20 districts was handed to the political leaders.

The participation of NGO representatives underscored the collective commitment to advancing religious freedom. Their engagement, along with the insights shared by political and religious leaders, was essential for achieving the outcomes of the advocacy initiative, paving the way for sustained efforts and continued collaboration.



The session also laid the groundwork for long term impact. By bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders, it underscored the collective commitment to religious freedom as a fundamental human right. The promise of incorporating religious freedom into national policies offered hope for a more inclusive and respectful society.

Issues of religious freedom in North and East were highlighted. Ms. Kirushnaveny Ruban, who is a Christian but not a Catholic, said that although the community had been resettled, people still lacked a place of worship. Efforts to secure a location have been hindered by the requirement for permission from both the Hindu and Catholic communities as mandated by government officials. This was a violation of the right to religious freedom. The lack of consideration for this fundamental right was troubling and required urgent attention and resolution, she said.

Empowering Women Leaders

The second phase of the Women Organized for Inclusion through Community Engagement (WOICE) project will commence in July in the districts of Badulla, Kandy, Kegalle, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Polonnaruwa. Funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), this phase will build on the successes of its predecessor, focusing on empowering sub-national women leaders and fostering solidarity for collective advocacy at the national level.

It will capacitate and mentor new and existing women leaders, empowering them to represent excluded communities in local and national dialogues. By creating a super group of women activists and expanding the network across new districts, the project seeks to amplify women's voices in policy and reform processes.

Phase 2 is strategically timed during the election cycle to counter exclusionary discourse and ensure that voices socio-economically and ethnically marginalised groups such as the Malayaha community are heard. The project will employ new approaches based on participant feedback, enhancing local level women's participation in national reform discourses.

The goal is to foster a sustainable cadre of empowered women leaders who can drive meaningful change at both local and national levels. WOICE Phase 2 aims to reshape policy narratives and promote inclusive governance by bolstering women's participation in reform processes.

Encouraging Active Citizenship

Stakeholders in NPC's Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy project funded by the EU and implemented in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, including People's Action for Free Elections and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) and the Center for Communications Training (CCT), had an orientation meeting to discuss the objectives of the project.

Representatives from each organization including finance teams, project officers and administration team members were given a comprehensive understanding of the project's scope, an overview of the action plan, financial guidelines and steps for effective Monitoring and Evaluation.

The orientation underscored the collective commitment to fostering democratic processes and active citizenship across the country. Participants engaged in insightful discussions, exploring strategies to enhance electoral integrity and civic engagement. The event not only strengthened collaborative efforts but also set the stage for impactful interventions in the areas of elections and democracy.



Providing a Voice for Marginalised Communities

Research to identify the shortcomings in public services that the Malaiyaha community faces, under NPC's Sustainable Peace through Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery project funded by Freedom House, revealed several pressing issues highlighted through the voices of the community members.

The research focused on ten areas in the Ratnapura district where the Malaiyaha community predominantly resides.

A field visit was conducted to verify the data gathered during the research and to carry out interviews and gather material for a video documentary portraying the challenges faced by the Malaiyaha community.

One of the critical issues was the lack of land ownership. A villager from the Noragalla Estate said, "The plot of land where I live is seven perches. I want to buy this plot. I have paid the necessary amount monthly from my salary. I completed the payment in 2016 but I still have not been given the title to my land. I need to get permission from the estate authority to do anything on my land. There are more than 20 families with the same problem on this estate. If we are citizens of Sri Lanka don't we have the right to live with our identity?"

Language barriers hinder the Malaiyaha community's access to essential services. A pregnant woman from the Madampawatte said, "We received the applications for poshana malla for pregnant women in Sinhala. I speak Tamil so how can I complete the application in Sinhala? I have to find someone who knows Sinhala. If the documents are filled in Tamil, the application is rejected. If we go to a government or private bank we have to fill in the information related to our account in Sinhala. The documents are available in Sinhala and Tamil but if we fill them in Tamil, we are told to fill them again in Sinhala. When I ask someone else to fill the document, I feel ashamed. Others think I can't write."



A former Pradeshiya Sabha member from the Noragalla Estate spoke on health care access. "This province does not have a registrar who can work in Tamil. Officers writing in Sinhala make mistakes when members of our community go to write their names. When the names are wrong, we have to make a lot of effort to confirm the correct name. There used to be a maternity clinic officer in this area but no longer. Mothers with children and pregnant women face severe difficulties when going to the clinic," he said.

The absence of Tamil speaking and writing registrars and maternity clinic officers exacerbates the difficulties faced by the Malayaha community, particularly for mothers who rely on these critical services.

There is an urgent need for systemic changes to address the gaps in public service delivery to the Malayaha community. Ensuring land ownership, eliminating language barriers and improving healthcare access are fundamental steps towards fostering an inclusive society.

The next step is to share these findings with relevant government officials. By engaging with policymakers, necessary reforms can be made while ensuring that the voices of the Malayaha community are heard at the highest levels to bring about a more inclusive and equitable public service delivery system.

Creating a Better Decision Making Process

An orientation meeting for government agents and university coordinators under NPC's Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER) project supported by SCOPE/GIZ was held in Colombo as a platform to provide those involved with a comprehensive understanding of the project. It was also an opportunity for them to discuss the conducive environment they could create to work together and the problems they could focus on in their own areas.

The research presented by Shashik De Silva, representing the Association of Social Sciences, as well as findings by the Sri Lanka Barometer team, served as the basis for constructive debate and discussion.

Many pertinent ethnic and cultural issues were highlighted during these discussions from the need for revival of the thovil culture to the displacement and improper relocation of the people in the North that has led to ethnic tensions. These issues will be researched by the students, assisted by academics who will be assigned as mentors, and the findings will be forwarded to government agents who will gain insight from the research in taking decisions, creating a link between academia and the government sector.



Promoting Truth and Accountability

NPC's People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) initiative, which aims to promote truth telling and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, held a series of sessions for stakeholders in Kandy, Kurunegala and Ampara to create an accountable and inclusive transitional justice process. Participants included state officials, women and youth leaders and religious leaders from the NPC network.

L.R.N. Madushani, a member of a Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC), stressed the need for meaningful participation from marginalised and vulnerable communities, particularly ethnic minorities and women. "For reconciliation to be genuine, our justice process must include the voices of those who have been silenced," she said. This focus on inclusivity was essential for fostering a reconciliation process that genuinely reflected the experiences and needs of all communities.

Hakeem Aswer, an LIRC member, highlighted concerns about the ability of current measures to hold human rights abusers accountable. He pointed to the critical role of international support in reinforcing these efforts. "Effective accountability requires not only strong mechanisms but also the backing of the international community," he said. His comments stressed the importance of global solidarity in ensuring that justice mechanisms were strong and credible.

The discussions highlighted significant gaps between recommendations and their implementation. B.N.W.M Wanninayake from a District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) pointed out that while the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) offered comprehensive solutions for war victims, many of its recommendations had not been acted upon. He expressed skepticism about the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission, questioning its potential effectiveness without concrete steps to address past recommendations.

Y.D.T. Kulawansa, an LIRC member, discussed the potential of the 13th Amendment to address ongoing issues through the devolution of powers. "Decentralising power to local communities can help resolve ethnic tensions and empower people to make decisions about their own land and lives," he explained. This perspective suggested that localised decision making could be a key component in addressing the roots of conflict and fostering long term peace.

The sessions brought forward an unified message: the path to reconciliation required a comprehensive and inclusive approach. By ensuring that marginalised voices were heard, strengthening accountability mechanisms and implementing past recommendations, there was a clear framework for building a more just and equitable society.



Election Gives Historic Opportunity to Resolve Ethnic Conflict

Sri Lanka is witnessing a positive transformation of electoral politics in relation to its long standing ethnic conflict that commenced with the economic collapse of 2022. The notion that the country required a “system change” was promoted by the student-led protest movement that publicly eschewed racism and upheld the rights of equal citizenship in their slogans. In a manner inconceivable in the past, the three main candidates for the presidential election in October appear to be outbidding each other in support of the 13th Amendment to the constitution and devolution of power to the provinces. This is an aspect of the change that has taken place in contrast to the politics of the past when narrow ethnic nationalism was used to foment violence and harvest votes.

The National Peace Council appreciates the stance taken by Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa that he will support the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. The devolution of police and land powers has not taken place since the adoption of the 13th Amendment in 1987 on the grounds that this would pose a threat to national unity and sovereignty. NPC holds that such fears have no basis 15 years after the end of the civil war and the non-implementation, indeed violation, of the constitution should cease. A rational analysis of the powers devolved under the 13th Amendment such as that undertaken by independent scholars such as Prof Arulanantham Sarveswaran would make this clear.

We are also happy that the NPP candidate Anura Kumara Disanayake has affirmed that he would support the implementation of the 13th Amendment and the provincial council system in the event of being elected to the presidency. This is a remarkable change in position from the oppositional role of the JVP which was once a fierce opponent of the 13th Amendment. We also appreciate the consistent position taken by President Ranil Wickremesinghe on the issue of devolution of power and his pledge, shortly after being elected president, that he was in favour of the implementation of the 13th Amendment including the devolution of police and land powers.

A bipartisan and multi-party consensus on resolving the ethnic conflict has long eluded Sri Lanka. Government leaders in the past who signed agreements with Tamil leaders were unable to deliver on their promises due to opposition from rival political parties that sought to exploit ethnic nationalist fears. Civil society can join the national effort to secure a consensus on arriving at a political settlement through its own initiatives such as the initiative of Diaspora members and Buddhist monks who have agreed on a joint set of principles in the “Himalaya Declaration” to resolve the conflict in an equitable and sustainable manner. Such initiatives could evolve into the formulation of a new constitution with all party and civil society participation.

The National Peace Council believes that the present time is opportune for a pledge to be taken together by the prospective candidates at the presidential election to support the implementation of the 13th Amendment and take forward the larger reconciliation process whatever the outcome of the presidential election. The president and government will then be able to focus on how they would stabilize the current economic crisis, build a stronger safety net to protect the most vulnerable, unlock the country’s growth potential, and address governance and corruption issues.

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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

June 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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