

A joint Statement from the North-East and the South on the Economic and Political Crisis in Sri Lanka

The Crisis Affects All, But...

We, the civil societies and grassroot movements from the North-East and the South are deeply concerned about the events unfolding in the island. The economic and political crisis will get worse before it gets better, as reported. We are deeply worried about the humanitarian crisis for which the island is not prepared. There are no lessons that can be learnt from the past for the crisis is unprecedented. However, despite the fact that we all struggle to make the ends meet, irrespective of our ethnic and religious affiliations, racial oppression against the non-Sinhala nations/communities (Tamils, Upcountry Tamils and Tamil speaking Muslims) remain intact. This is a crucial factor that has been tormenting us for decades. Even though there is a call for unity made by all sides to overcome the crisis, both the Rajapaksa regime and a majority of protestors agree on one thing; the military victory over the Tamil people. Many do not want to acknowledge that it is this triumphalist mentality that gave the current regime immense power via franchise. Such power even makes them unaccountable for the economic wars that affect all of us today.

Democracy: Parliament, Peoples' Resistance and Repressions

The optimism with which the Sri Lankans took to the streets, began with demanding the government to address the economic crisis immediately, secondly demanding the change of regime (changing the president) and moved toward demanding structural change, including abolition of executive presidency, repealing PTA, vesting the parliament with power, etc. The debate on making structural change through the constitution has started, and holding the perpetrators accountable, we feel, is a gesture that should be sustained. We strongly believe that accountability should be measured not only against corruption, but also against human rights violations. These violations should not be reduced to mere individual cases, but also to attacks on distinct communities. As the protests escalate throughout the island, the people of the island are not naïve not to understand how protests were dealt with in the past in the North-East and FTZ, Rathupaswala, fishermen, Digana-Kandy in the South, to name a few. It is not a new knowledge that the Rajapaksas have the history of unleashing violence to suppress the protests as they did in the past. Repressive measures used in the past and present in the North-East would be repeated even in the South, using the military, we fear. Mahinda Rajapaksa's recent address signalled such repression by referring to the resistance of the Sinhala oppressed classes in the 1970s and 1980s as well as of the Tamils for decades. Right to protest is fundamental to democracy. It is not a crime. Instead it enhances democracy. Those who reduce democracy to the parliamentary system make a mockery of democracy and deprive people of their fundamental democratic rights.

Criminalizing Resistance: A Common Experience of the Oppressed

A lasting solution to the current crisis can be reached only by addressing the root cause of the problem. Blame game has been the card recently played by the incumbent Prime Minister of the country, and is used again to find protesters as the scapegoat for the crisis

in the future. According to him because of protests we lose dollars! The military victory and racism have been, used again to polarise the national communities in Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister openly accused not only the Tamils who resisted the state due to historical oppression, but also the Sinhala oppressed classes in the early 70s and late 80s who rose against the regimes. The elitist parliamentary system was glorified while criminalising peoples' resistance both in the North-East and South. Armed resistance was solely held responsible for the mass atrocities committed by the state security forces while absolving the culpability of the respective regimes (1971:SLFP; 1987-1989: UNP in the South and both SLFP and UNP and other parties who propagated racism and protected the unitary state against the Tamils for decades).

Even though the blame has been put on the armed resistance, for the oppressive regimes and states the means of resistance do not matter. Repression has been unleashed against both nonviolent and armed resistance. In fact, armed resistance evolved due to repression of nonviolent resistance. We would like to state that these regimes have committed a crime against humanity against the Sinhala oppressed classes in 1971 and 1987-1989 and unleashed a genocidal process against the Tamils for decades which reached its climax in 2009 in Mullivaikkal in view of protecting the unitary state structure. We believe it is absolutely necessary to recognise the interrelations between the distinct struggles of the peoples in the North-East and South for us to form a formidable resistance to both authoritarianism and racial state structure.

War Against the Tamils and Economic War Against All

Rajapaksa regime's continuous reference to the military victory has not been questioned for many years in the South. Playing the card of winning the war is the last resort used in order to win the hearts of the people in the South. The security forces have been glorified in order to protect the Rajapaksa regime's political agenda. Giving into this racist ideology is to let the Rajapakas control the majority. Manoeuvring the Sinhala population through this supremacist narrative of war victory seems to fail now in the face of the deepening economic crisis that deprives people of food and medicine. In essence, we would like to state that glorifying the security forces for winning the war and protecting the rights of the oppressed is contradictory. The armed forces have been utilised all the time by the respective regimes against the resisting peoples, both in the North-East and South. The armed forces have always served the interests of the regimes and the state.

Discriminatory policies and practices that oppressed 'Tamil Other' led to Tamil national resistance which was met with a brutal war that killed thousands while displacing millions. The resistance of the Sinhala oppressed classes was also met with brutal repression. Painting resistance as the root cause of the current crisis serves nothing but the political agenda of the family clan that leads the regime. We should never forget that they are the vanguards of racial oppression which is entrenched in the history of Sri Lanka. This racial ideology has been constantly used to tame resistance arising from the Sinhala masses. The more the Sinhala masses hold on to the racial ideology and the unitary state structure the more they allow their regimes to deceive and torment them.

The successive constitutions and constitutional amendments have always been shaped by the Sinhala majoritarian point of view, primarily to repress the non-Sinhala communities, especially Tamils. Ultimately the character of the state has also been

determined through this. The Sinhala constituency has been shaped by the unitary character of the state that determines how the country's resources and the economy should be managed. It also gave the cultural/political space to the power holders to manoeuvre the collective psyche of the Sinhala population to be indifferent to the gross mismanagement of the economy and the financial corruption. We need to acknowledge the fundamental connection between the political structure and the economic realities of the present.

Tamil right to Self-determination and the Sovereignty of the Island

The genuine aspirations and demands of the Tamils do not pose a threat to the sovereignty of the island, but enhances it. The highest moment of the sovereignty of the island was the 2002 peace process when the space was created for shared sovereignty between the two main national groups. This would have changed the British-made unitary political structure which has become a military-strategic location for the major powers in the world in the Indian Ocean region. There is a hard-cold truth about the military victory that the majority of Sinhalese do not want to accept. Had not the EU banned the LTTE – under the demand of the USA – the pathway to the military victory could not have been created. Let us not forget that the master plan to execute the war was given to the security forces by the US Pacific Command which stayed for a month in 2002 in Trincomalee harbour. Sri Lanka has become a battle ground between China and USA, the latter being supported by India. Its independence can be maintained only by a shared sovereignty between the Sinhalese and Tamils. Had the 2002 peace process succeeded this economic crisis would not have happened. Let us not forget that the Rajapaksas borrowed sovereign bonds in the height of war. As they were not held accountable for the mass atrocities committed against the Tamils they were also not held accountable for borrowing international capital recklessly that bankrupted the country to the extent of depriving babies of their milk powder, people who are sick of their medicine, etc.

For the Tamils the demand for structural change includes the very character of the state structure - the unitary nature of the state structure. Sri Lanka has to be a pluri-national state that is to be respected and enshrined in the constitution. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Up Country Tamils and other communities make up the pluri-national country of Sri Lanka. Tamils constitute a distinct people with the inalienable right to self-determination. The sovereignty of the Tamils cannot be compromised for geo-strategic or geo-political interests. The unitary character of the state has served nothing but the military-strategic interests of the USA/UK axis. The Tamil national resistance is the biggest challenge to this imperialist agenda. Furthermore, Sri Lanka shall remain a secular country that guarantees the freedom of all peoples and religions. To be secular does not mean to be anti-religious which is a Euro-centric view. To be secular can mean (in an Indian constitutional sense) to be pluralist which fosters the best in every religious tradition. Under the unitary state it is the fundamentalist strand in religion that has been promoted as opposed to its liberating thrust. Only a secular pluralist state can facilitate saving religion from religious bigotry.

The current historical context has bestowed us with a historic opportunity where peoples reinstate their sovereignty which vests only with peoples. This opportunity should be seized in order to find a lasting solution so that history does not repeat itself.

Militarization and Economic Crisis

Today the island wide outcry is that corruption needs to be investigated and those responsible should be legally tried. Successive governments allocated massive budgets and other resources to the war in the North-East. In the name of war, corruption became a political culture. Even after the military victory the governments continue to allocate a high percentage of the budget to the armed forces and national security. Draining its resources and reserves led to the current situation which had been predicted in history. Intensely militarising the North-East further exhausts the resources of the state and consumes a highly significant percentage of the budget which should have been spent on securing the basic needs of the starving masses. The Eelam Tamils have been advocating demilitarisation of the North-East since the formal end of the war. We should demand that high costs of militarization should be slashed rather than selling state and public sectors as well as natural resources to the multi-national entities. Furthermore, those who hold the Rajapaksa regime accountable for corruption, and the previous and present regimes complicit in the Easter Sunday attack should not separate these crimes from the mass atrocities committed against the Tamils. Without realising these interconnections of crimes talk about a 'system change' makes no sense.

Structural Changes: Transformation of the State and Regime Change

The current protests have created space for us to realise the absolute necessity to oppose both the corrupt regime and the racist state structure. This implies that a mere change of regime is not the ultimate solution, though advocated as a temporary measure. The Rajapaksas should go. There is no argument about it, but seeking to address the root cause of the problem, amidst the demands of the South, such as abolition of the executive presidency being the primary demand, vesting parliament with power rather than consolidating power in the president, and the rest, should not be separated from changing the state structure that oppresses Tamils and Tamil speaking Muslims. We strongly resist the opportunistic agenda that proposes 'let us send Rajapaksas home first and then address the Tamil issue later'.

We submit that the war that took place and the crimes that continue to be committed against the Tamil people are directed against the Tamil people's political aspiration for self-determination and collective existence as a nation. The war and the continuing crimes seek to weaken Tamils as a people. Therefore, our self-understanding is that the totality of the crimes points to a genocidal design. In this sense, there is a direct link between the issues of accountability and justice and the search for a political solution that recognises the Tamil people's aspirations for self-determination. It is only by recognising the Tamil right to self-determination the genocidal process can be stopped. Given the above we reject approaches that suggest that the search for a political solution has to be delayed to pursue accountability and justice. Search for political justice should not be replaced by the pursuit of juridical justice. An honest

approach to accountability and finding a political solution to the Tamil national question, combined, is the key to sustainable peace and justice in Sri Lanka . The system change that the South is talking about cannot be separated from the transformation of the state that the Tamils have been demanding. Unity between all peoples of the island can be built only by a common platform that recognises the distinct, but interrelated struggles of Sinhala and Tamil/Tamil speaking Muslim peoples. Demands for regime change and structural change of the state that recognises Tamil right to self-determination should be made together.

Signed by

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2. Christian Solidarity Movement, Colombo
3. Eastern Regional Council, Church of the American Ceylon Mission
4. NAFSO
5. Kithusara Group, Colombo
6. Muslim Town Federation, Akkaraipattu
7. Volunteers for Life, Mannar
8. Commission for Justice & Peace of The Catholic Diocese of Jaffna
9. Shramabimani, Seeduwa
10. Women's Action Network, Mannar
11. Janawaboda Kendraya, Negombo
12. Jesus Today Collective, Colombo
13. Mannar Association for Relief and Rehabilitation
14. Thamil Thesiya Valvurimai Iyakkam, Mannar
15. Federation of Community Based Organisations, Mannar
16. Tamil Civil Society Forum, North-East
17. Church of the American Ceylon Mission, Eastern Region, Batticaloa
18. Child Development Initiative, Vavuniya
19. Interreligious Forum, Batticaloa
20. Civil Society Initiative, Batticaloa
21. Women's Voice, Interreligious Committee, Batticaloa
22. Youth Representative, Interreligious Committee, Batticaloa
23. Peace Commission, Church of the American Ceylon Mission
24. Civil Society Forum, Amparai
25. Tamil Heritage Forum, Mullaitivu
26. Ilavalai Deanery of Priests, Jaffna
27. Islands Deanery of Priests, Jaffna
28. Freedom Fellowship, Colombo
29. Vanni Mission, Church of the American Ceylon Mission, Kilinochi
30. Thalam, Trincomalee
31. White Peacock Organisation, Batticaloa
32. Methodist Church, Kalmunai