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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Religious Freedom Survey Findings Revealed

As part of its on going intervention on inter religious coexistence, NPC commissioned a survey, conducted in the 25 districts of the country, to capture the level of freedom each community enjoys to practice its religion.

The participants of the survey were religious leaders from all five religious groups, government officials, police and local community leaders from the five main religious groups, who were asked about the status of religious freedom in their respective areas.

The results of the survey, which was carried out by Dr Pradeep Peris and his team under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF), were presented partners, NGO representatives and diplomats.

Speaking at the launch of the survey report, NPC Chairman Dr Joe William said that although religious coexistence was to be found in many parts of Sri Lanka, there had been several incidents disturbing it. He said the survey would give an idea of the actual situation and would be used to promote greater religious coexistence and respect for pluralism and the rule of law.



NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera said members of NPC's District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) were at the forefront to implementing ideas such as pluralism, respecting rule of law and promoting religious coexistence.

For 10 years, DIRCs had worked at district level with religious leaders and empowered them to engage in conflict resolution activities. Now work was also being carried out at divisional levels with the four pillars - religious clergy, government administration, police and civil society - Dr Perera pointed out.

Presenting his findings, Dr Peris said that the participants had spoken about their experiences, perceptions and fears. They were asked about their feeling on religious freedom in the country and also in their own areas.

He said the main objective was to help NPC's work on inter religious dialogue. There were certain dilemmas and puzzles that were revealed and NPC should analyse them and come up with solutions, he pointed out.

Key findings of the Religious Freedom Survey:

- Most local leaders believe people live peacefully helping each other and 27 per cent say people live peacefully but there is little interaction among some religious communities. Five per cent of local leaders feel there is some tension between religious communities. People in the Kurunegala District and the Eastern Province did not feel communities lived peacefully.
- Sixty two per cent said there is no obstacle to practicing their religion in the country but 27 per cent said they could not always practice their religion freely. More than one third said their religion cannot be practiced freely in the country – 50 per cent Muslims, 40 per cent Christians and 35 per cent Hindus.
- In their own area where they live, 83 per cent said there is no obstacle to practicing their religion, showing that fears about religious freedom is felt on a national level rather than through everyday life experiences. A high percentage of people in Batticaloa, Ampara, Trincomalee, Jaffna and Kurunegala districts said they could not always practice their religion freely.
- The main reasons for religious freedom people experienced in their areas are that there had not been any obstacles in the past, the community respects all religions and there is a good understanding among religious leaders. The law enforcement mechanism is not seen as a contributing factor.
- Among the insecurities experienced by religious communities is conversion of their religious community to other faiths, which is largely a concern of Buddhists, Hindus and Catholics. In the districts of Mannar, Batticaloa, Ampara, Kandy, Matale and Hambantota, the level of insecurity over their own culture is high.
- Communities are insecure about the future of their power status, freedom to practice their religion and their demographic strength in the future. Buddhists are most concerned about their demographic strength while Muslims are the least concerned. Hindus harbour the highest level of insecurity about their future. People in the districts of Batticaloa, Ampara, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura and Kalutara are most insecure about the future of their respective religions.

Religious Freedom Should Be Protected from Political Intrusions

An important finding with regard to religious freedom and inter religious tolerance that came out of NPC's research into the state of religious freedom in the country is that it already exists in substantial measure within the community. What is needed is to protect it from politically motivated intrusions from both within and more so from outside the community.

As mentioned in the key findings of the survey, when asked about religious freedom in the areas in which they live, the great majority of respondents claimed that they could practice their religion freely. For example, 83.5% stated there is no obstacle at all to practice their religion in the area they live. However, these same respondents also believe that the situation in the country as a whole is more precarious for religious freedom.

It showed that the communities harbour various insecurities about the future. Even as they feel that they enjoy freedom in the present, they are very concerned about the freedom to practice their culture and religion, and their demographic strength in the future. They also felt that the sense of security that they experience is enhanced where there is a good understanding between the religious leaders in their area.

The main reasons for this would be the fact that the religious leaders are better able to intervene as community leaders in any internal breakdown of social harmony. Sri Lanka is fortunate to have the basic ingredient for social cohesion, which is the willingness of people to readily engage with those of other communities and to take them as opportunities to be hospitable to those from outside who have come into their midst.

But Sri Lanka also needs to go further. The people cannot control interventions that came from outside and more powerful than they. What is needed therefore is a national level leadership that permits each ethnic and religious community to have the freedom and rights to live as empowered citizens and to protect their own spaces. Each ethnic and religious community needs to be given the space, freedom and security to grow and flourish.

Dr Jehan Perera



Constitutional Reform Explained at National Symposium

A National Symposium attended by more than 250 members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), NGOs and civil society and trade union representatives was conducted in Colombo to discuss current political issues.

It was supported by the Civil Society and Trade Unions Collective under NPC's project, Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

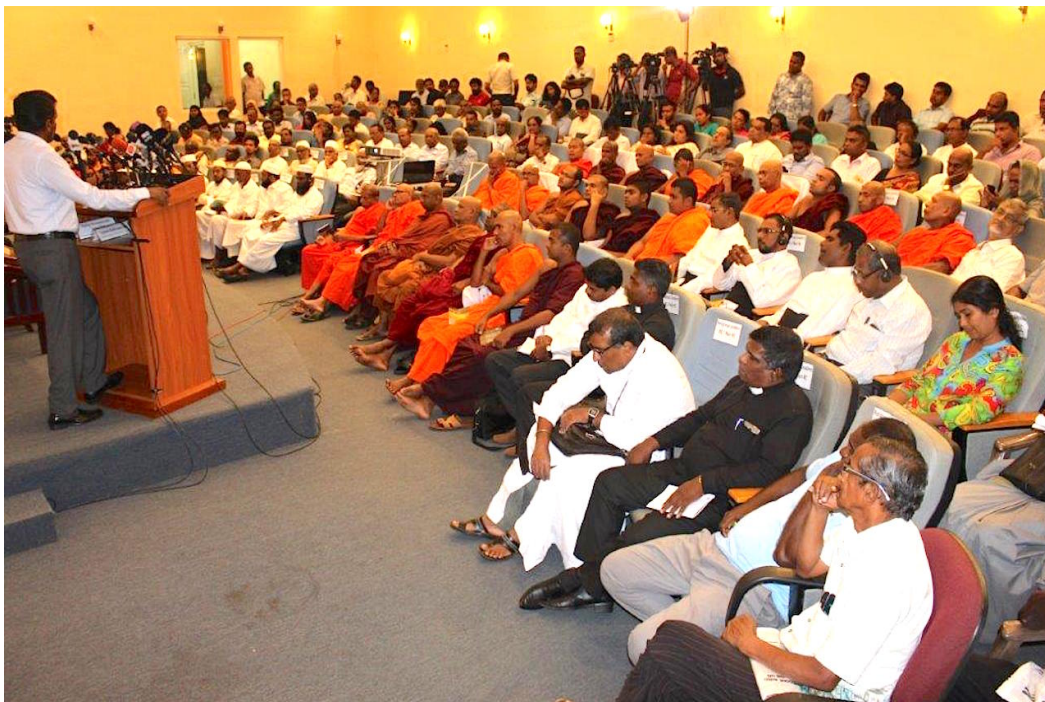
Some political parties and academics have been speaking negatively about the draft interim report on Constitutional reform produced by the Steering Committee in the Constitutional Assembly. Positive views on the report were not portrayed in the media, so it was decided to hold a symposium to discuss the various aspects of the interim report.

The main speakers were Parliamentarians Dr Jayampathy Wickramaratne and M.A. Sumanthiran. Academics, civil society leaders and trade union leaders also presented their views on the document.

Dr Wickramaratne explained that the report was not a draft Constitution but carried a set of proposals under the different components to be included in the Constitution.

He pointed out that some people were only focusing on certain words without looking at the content of the report, which emphasised that Sri Lanka was to be a unitary state.

Other speakers at the symposium were Ven. Dambara Amila Thero, Senior Lecturer at the University of Jayawardhanapura Professor Sarath Wijesuriya, NPC Chairman Dr. Joe William, lawyer J.C. Weliamuna and National Leader of Trade Unions Collective Saman Ratnapriya.



Constitutional Reform Discussed at Grassroots Level

Several project orientation meetings and town hall meetings were held in districts across the country under NPC's project, Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

Project orientation meetings were held in Vavuniya, Ratnapura and Moneragala while town hall meetings were held in Moneragala, Kurunegala and Ratnapura.

COMPACT is a two-year extension of NPC's Initiating Multi-level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project that ended in September last year.

The project seeks to use the experience gained by members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in preventing and solving ethnic and religious conflicts that arise in their areas. Solving unresolved issues that were identified under the IMPACT project is a focus of the project, which is being implemented in 16 districts and targets new beneficiaries including local level politicians and youth parliament members to address the problem of diminishing space for liberal and plural values.

Another focus was to foster discourse on the process of conflict transformation with national level religious leaders, professionals, academics and journalists. These are preliminary interventions aimed at using the space that has opened up to discuss the reconciliation from a pluralistic perspective.

The project orientation meetings were attended by religious leaders, youth parliament members, government officials and members of DIRCs. They discussed the scope and activities of the project as well as the current political situation and Constitutional reform.

The town hall meetings were attended by members of civil society organizations. Among the topics discussed were the proposed new Constitution and wrong interpretations of it and the value of a pluralistic society. In Moneragala and Kurunegala, it was decided to organize public meetings to explain the steering committee's interim report on the new Constitution.



Conflict Assessment at Community Level

Community conflict assessments were carried out in two villages in the Buttala area under NPC's project, Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE). Community facilitators and civil society representatives trained by NPC did the assessments using Participatory Rural Appraisal tools.

The assessments were done to identify the current and potential conflicts, development measures that would bring social cohesion at the local level and the existing local capacities in implementing the measures.

One problem that was identified was that when there were conflicts at the national level, they could serve as triggers for violence among different ethnic and religious groups in the area.

Another issue was in a village in Buttala where the Tamil community was a marginalised group with no access to education in the Tamil language. Many were domestic workers in Sinhala households. They did not have the facilities to practice their own religion or culture.

As solutions to these problems, it was decided to undertake inter religious activities and cultural events to bring different ethnic and religious communities together. Youth clubs will be reactivated to engage young people in reconciliation activities.

University Students Educate Peers on TJ

Students of the Sabaragamuwa University organized a Transitional Justice (TJ) campaign to educate other students about TJ and make them a part of the process of building durable peace in Sri Lanka.

The students had been already trained on TJ under NPC's project, Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-lasting Peace in Sri Lanka. About 45 student leaders reached around 600 students in all faculties of the university and explained to them the importance of TJ and how it helped in the peace building process using leaflets and other written material.

The final event, attended by 500 students, included a stage drama on TJ, a quiz competition and a drawing competition.



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.

Political Leaders Must Respect Independent Institutions

President Maithripala Sirisena and senior members of the opposition including former President Mahinda Rajapaksa have harshly criticized the Constitutional Council and the Human Rights Commission. Their accusations range from failing to favourably consider the President's nominations to the judiciary, to causing the collapse of public administration, to putting obstacles in the path of the government's campaign to root out criminal activities and the narcotics trade and to even being culpable for the death of Sri Lankan soldiers on a peacekeeping mission. The National Peace Council is concerned that the unreasonableness of these criticisms erodes the commitment to basic principles of good governance.

Underlying these criticisms is likely to be the frustration of elected politicians that their power is being restricted and their political goals and personal whims and fancies do not prevail. The Constitutional Council is primarily aimed at depoliticizing the state and public service and ensuring the Rule of Law prevails. In their original formulation in the 17th Amendment the setting up of these institutions was approved without dissent by parliament, which included those leaders who now denounce it. The independent commissions whose members they appoint are meant to restrict the power of politicians to interfere into the judiciary, police, elections commission, and investigations into bribery and corruption to mention some of them.

The background to the establishment of the Constitutional Council and the independent commissions in 2000 was the negative experiences of abuse of power by successive government leaders and the need to set up a system of checks and balances to curb that power. This was reaffirmed by the 19th Amendment which was passed in 2015 with President Sirisena playing a leading role and thereafter justly claiming credit for this vindication of good governance. In particular, the Human Rights Commission and Police Commission, play a crucial role in protecting the citizens from the arbitrary actions of the state and to ensure that it acts in an enlightened manner. Their independence from the government needs to be respected.

The National Peace Council calls on our political leaders to appreciate the work of the Constitutional Council and independent commissions without trying to reverse the good governance gains they have brought to the country. We call on the President and all political leaders of our country, to ensure that an enabling environment be provided to independent commissions like the Human Rights Commission to perform their duties without undue political interference. We believe that the President and government are duty bound to support and respect the independence of such institutions, which must be explicit in their words and actions.

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