



THE NEED TO REBOOT RECONCILIATION IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

May 19th 2017, Colombo, Sri Lanka: The eighth anniversary of the end of the war draws attention to the progress made and prospects for meaningful reconciliation. At the expense of the multi-faceted challenge of transitional justice and reconciliation, attention, in recent years, has focused heavily on the last stage of the war, in particular the allegations of international crimes against both sides, the demand for accountability, the modalities and the mechanism in respect of it. Consequently, many Sri Lankans remain deeply divided and aggrieved on account of the decades of structural injustices, political violence and other egregious failures of governance by successive governments and non-state actors.

Worryingly, over two years into the present government, the full realization of governance reforms is under severe challenge and reconciliation increasingly elusive. In such a context, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) urges the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to launch a programme of action to expedite realisation of the promises made in 2015 on constitutional reform, transitional justice and governance. It must be a truly national programme, capitalising on the unique feature of the victorious coalition of 2015 as the largest and broadest in our post-independence history. This design and execution of this programme of action should be treated as a matter of the utmost national priority with the support and participation of the public galvanized, accordingly.

Over the years Sri Lanka has missed several opportunities for conflict transformation and peace building. The opportunity for reconciliation presented by the end of the war was ignored by an authoritarian and triumphalist regime with no interest in addressing the grievances of victims and affected communities. Instead, it sponsored and presided over unprecedented levels of militarization, corruption, nepotism, disregard for dissent and free speech, attacks on minorities and the entrenchment of the culture of impunity. Promises to investigate past abuses resulted in tokenistic efforts of appointing commissions of inquiries and investigations, which failed to provide answers to the thousands of our fellow citizens searching for truth and justice.

January and August 2015 saw significant numbers of Sri Lankans rejecting this authoritarianism by voting in an unprecedented coalition government promising a new and democratic political culture and a genuine process of reconciliation. More than two years after, the prospect for change is fast diminishing, with little to show in the public domain by way of tangible change. Despite some early progress such as the enactment of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution and Right to Information legislation, many Sri Lankans continue to be left out of key processes that define their future and that of the country. The persistent protests by

victims and affected communities across Sri Lanka is a sign of the many areas requiring urgent attention and the growing perception that this government is no different to previous ones. Recent months have also evinced a near shut down of citizen engagement in policy reform, increased secrecy in the drafting of legislation and policies accompanied by the introduction of legal frameworks with disastrous implications for rights protection and due process. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of reconciliation, this government has yet to engage with a cross section of society on a policy aimed at reconciliation and coexistence. In doing so it will be confronted with and hopefully comprehend, the complexities and challenges associated with it. Moreover, the initial enthusiasm for confidence building measures such as land releases and the addressing of issues of enforced disappearances has stalled, with the Office of Missing Persons yet to be established. None of the mechanisms promised in 2015 to address transitional justice have been established to date.

There is no easy prescription for the deep divisions and mistrust caused by decades of violence and injustices. Reconciliation is a long and messy process that must examine, acknowledge and recognise the painful and divisive past. It is a process that requires visionary leaders willing to take risks and transcend narrow and self-serving positions, steering citizens through tumultuous times and in the process, building trust between deeply divided communities. The ambivalence by sections of the governments towards the full implementation of reforms and reckoning with the past is, perhaps, not surprising, considering the exigencies of coalition government. But in a post war context where ambitious promises were made, the apparent absence of leadership transcending this and the squandering of a unique opportunity for reform, is indeed both disappointing and disturbing. The onus is on President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe to champion what was promised and reenergise the reform project. Inaction and apathy now will dash the hope of meaningful reconciliation and pave the way to greater authoritarianism.