

CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT

February 4th 2018 marks 70 years of Sri Lanka's independence. The upcoming anniversary will be celebrated, similar to the years before, by the state and some sections of society with pomp and pageantry. However, despite Sri Lanka being a formal functioning democracy with enviable social welfare indices, our post-independence history has been punctuated by struggles for justice and equality and armed insurrections against the state. These were met with brutal state repression, restrictions placed on civil liberties and violations of human rights. Tens of thousands were killed or unaccounted for and many more displaced and disappeared. The State's failure to recognize and uphold individual and collective rights has resulted in a deficit in democratic governance and a deeply divided society. Thus, it is imperative that Independence Day celebrations are tempered by a sincere attempt to reflect on post-colonial failings and our aspirations for a more just, fair, peaceful, and inclusive society.

Despite seven decades of independence, grievances among victims and affected communities are many, as attested to at present by continuing protests across the country on a number of issues including militarization, the occupation of land, enforced disappearances and prisoners' rights. On a daily basis, communities face the challenge of a deeply entrenched security state, a pervasive military presence with ongoing violence, threats, surveillance, and ineffectual law enforcement. Progress on releasing political prisoners has been slow and unsatisfactory. Human rights defenders and journalists continue to face threats, intimidation, and other restrictions. Impunity for crimes committed by state agents or politicians is rampant and truth, justice and redress for victims remain elusive in many cases. Discriminatory laws, practices and violence on account of religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities or gender are common place and we continue to witness attempts to curtail civil liberties through flawed attempts at replacing legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The change in January 2015 was projected as a victory for democracy with the ambitious promise of a new political culture, a vindication of civil society struggles in this regard. A new constitution, mechanisms for transitional justice, a government free of corruption and committed to good governance, were promised. But we continue to be faced with numerous challenges including financial scandals, weak and politicized institutions that impede accountability and transparency and challenges to coexistence and reconciliation. While legislative and constitutional reforms—such as the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the Right to Information Act—and some confidence building measures must be welcomed, further reforms are necessary if independence is to be truly enjoyed by all citizens.

Whilst we mark this important milestone in Sri Lanka, we take the opportunity to reiterate our demands for a political solution to the National Question, respect for human rights and civil liberties, protection of all numerical minorities, upholding the rule of law, ending impunity and discrimination and ushering in genuine peace, reconciliation and sustainable development.