



CPA Statement – 73 Years of Independence

February 2021, Colombo, Sri Lanka: On the eve of Sri Lanka's 73rd Independence Day, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) conveys its grave concern with the state of ethno-religious relations and threats to democratic institutions in Sri Lanka. These concerns arise within a context of unprecedented challenges due to a global pandemic, heightened authoritarian and militarized governance, entrenched impunity and increasing threats to fundamental freedoms. It is a climate where the space for dissent is fast shrinking due to new levels of surveillance, incitement, and the targeting of minorities. CPA notes the spate of arrests and detentions of writers, lawyers and media personnel including Hejaaz Hizbullah, Ramzy Razeek & Ahnaf Jazeem to name a few such cases, where due process guarantees are undermined and questions as to the real motivation for such arrests have been raised. CPA is also deeply concerned with the arbitrary decision to impose forced cremations for Covid-19 deaths, a cruel policy decision void of any scientific basis that directly impacts and marginalises the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Compounding these worrying developments is the rising influence of Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalism in state policy. This is evident in the [influential role](#) played by several leading Buddhist clergy as well as systematic efforts to change the ethnic demography in the North and East of the country that could lead to long term implications for electoral politics, coexistence and reconciliation.

Independence Day provides a valuable opportunity to understand the key failings of successive governments post independence. Particularly, failings in relation to building a peaceful and stable country with shared prosperity for all its citizens. Over the past year, not only has the government displayed no efforts to improve ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, but government policies have actively exacerbated ethnic tensions and marginalised communities. The government's failure in this regard is driven by its mistaken belief that it represents only those who voted for it and the inability to recognise the very political conflicts that underpinned the armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

CPA further notes the targeting of those who were instrumental in investigations, prosecutions and other initiatives to address accountability and transparency over the past years. A recent development in this regard is the report of the Presidential Commission on political victimisation that raises serious concerns on the integrity of ongoing and past judicial processes. Whilst the government is moving swiftly to implement the recommendations of this Presidential

Commission on political victimisation, very little has been done to implement even limited recommendations of previous commissions on past abuses and violence. It is also deeply worrying that [a new Presidential Commission was appointed](#) in January to investigate, inquire into and implement the recommendations of previous Commissions “in line with the present Government policy”. This will only add to the already long list of such Commissions with little to no prospect of genuine action.

This is the first Independence Day held amidst a pandemic and a time to look beyond the pomp and pageantry to review the disturbing ground realities. CPA notes that the above challenges are worsened by an economic crisis that has highlighted the structural inequalities and hardships faced by many Sri Lankans. These economic and social challenges require urgent attention. To date, there is no comprehensive plan to address structural issues with the official rhetoric more focused on setting up task forces, giving prominence to former and serving military officials and ad-hoc assistance schemes.

Independence Day is also held in the backdrop of a [hard-hitting report](#) by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) which documents numerous violations and notes the dismal efforts at addressing Sri Lanka’s legacy of past abuses. The report contains a list of recommendations to the Government of Sri Lanka, Member States and the United Nations, indicative that only limited progress in addressing human rights, justice and reconciliation is possible in Sri Lanka within the present context. In light of this report and other [documents](#) that speak to the worrying developments in Sri Lanka, the primary burden is on the Government of Sri Lanka to act in a responsible manner to address these concerns, rather than resort to diplomatic posturing which is counterproductive to all segments of Sri Lankan citizens. If the government is unwilling or unable to act in a manner that protects the rights of all its citizens, CPA urges the Core Group and Member States to introduce a strong resolution that reflects on the findings of the OHCHR report with steps taken to address ongoing violations and reckon with past abuses. Such an initiative is key to support human rights, the rule of law, accountability and reconciliation within Sri Lanka.

Thus, despite the celebrations this week, the situation in Sri Lanka is of serious concern. Historic mistakes are being repeated with the misguided belief that the outcome would be different on this occasion. As usual much noise will be made revolving around the UN Human Rights Council process but the rhetoric is likely to be designed to distract and deflect. CPA urges caution with promises that are likely to be made and the need to focus on the real dangers at play in the country. The trends noted here must not be ignored. And it is time for all to robustly and peacefully challenge any threats to Sri Lanka’s fragile democracy.