



Statement on proposals to set up structures to address truth, unity and reconciliation in Sri Lanka

08th January 2024.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) notes the publication of two bills in recent weeks, which could impact reconciliation and related issues in Sri Lanka. The first one titled [Office for National Unity and Reconciliation Bill](#) (the ONUR Bill) is presently before Parliament. The second is the publication of the [bill for the Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka](#) (proposed commission) gazetted on the 1st of January 2024. At the outset CPA notes that nearly fifteen years after the end of the war, Sri Lanka faces numerous challenges that have perpetuated the root causes of the conflict and impunity in our country. CPA firmly believes that efforts towards reconciliation must address the demands of the victims and initiate reforms aimed at genuine reckoning with Sri Lanka's history. Both bills fail to address these concerns, and with it missing an opportunity at reconciliation, accountability and reform that is fundamental if Sri Lanka is to have lasting peace and stability.

A consideration of the ONUR Bill raises concerns on the role of the Office in “assisting and guiding” community level organisations in carrying out projects related to peace and reconciliation. This is a concern in a context when victims have little or no confidence that the government has a genuine interest in forming a cohesive national unity policy. The Bill should not be an excuse to legitimate and impose the Government's narrative of reconciliation and should not be used as a tool to stamp out alternative narratives and undermine the voices of victims.

The second proposal, the proposed commission, also raises questions as to whether such a commission is required since successive governments of Sri Lanka have failed to implement the recommendations of [past commissions](#). As such, with Sri Lanka's history of commission fatigue and accountability deficit, this latest initiative holds little promise of addressing the demands of the victims.

In addition, both these efforts are being introduced at a time when concerns of ethnonationalism and land grabs are on the rise. CPA has continuously [monitored](#) these issues and is concerned of exacerbating triggers for conflict that threaten co-existence and urge the

government that priority at present should be at implementing confidence building measures than subjecting victims and affected communities to more structures that merely add to the long list of commissions, committees and other state entities that make ambitious promises but fail to address the root causes of the conflict.

Furthermore, CPA has consistently noted that Sri Lanka faces a crisis of accountability. The lack of genuine efforts at accountability resulted in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopting several resolutions that recommends concrete action to secure justice for victims of human rights violations and economic crimes and address impunity. The structures proposed by these two Bills fall well short of Sri Lanka's obligations in terms of these UNHRC resolutions. The growing list of [emblematic cases](#) & numerous setback with accountability in Sri Lanka has strengthened calls for international accountability, further exposing the lack of real commitment towards justice in the country.

CPA also notes that these bills are introduced when Sri Lanka is to be discussed at the UNHRC in 2024 and that these and other measures are likely to be used by the government to convince the international community of some progress with reconciliation. This is far from the truth when Sri Lanka is facing heightened ethnonationalism, continuing human rights violations and exacerbating inequalities, with the response by the state seeing a crackdown on dissent, arbitrary arrests and detentions that raises questions of legality and due process and increasing militarization. The introduction of the [Online Safety Bill](#), the [Anti-Terrorism Bill](#) and other measures are some examples where Sri Lanka's space for dissent is fast shrinking with fears of increasing authoritarian and militarized trends that erode the rule of law and threaten Sri Lanka's fragile peace. In such a context, CPA urges the government to withdraw these bills and initiate a process at genuine confidence building measures and reform that addresses the multiple challenges confronting Sri Lanka.

Further comments on the Truth, Unity and Reconciliation Bill are forthcoming.