

Uphold the People's Right to Franchise

19 February 2023: We, the undersigned, are deeply concerned by reports on the continuing pressure applied on the Election Commission to postpone the local government elections, scheduled for 9th March 2023. It has also become clear that this pressure originates from sections of the government, particularly from its executive branch.

We vehemently condemn attempts by certain powerful sections of the political and bureaucratic elite to undermine the people's franchise, sovereignty, and representative democracy in the guise of the economic crisis. While noting the socio-economic challenges posed by the economic upheaval, we must rally together to counter initiatives to undermine democratic processes, people's franchise, and popular sovereignty. We note that mismanagement of the political front by undermining the democratic process can only deepen political instability. It will in turn impact adversely the recovery from the present economic crisis.

We wish to remind the President, the government, and public servants of their constitutional obligation to extend the fullest support and cooperation to the Election Commission to fulfil its constitutional duty of conducting free and fair elections and concluding the local government election as scheduled. We therefore earnestly urge the President and the government, public service officials and others to refrain from any action or inaction that would subvert the democratic process. Upholding the people's right to franchise is particularly crucial against the backdrop of an exceptional citizen mobilization where the Sri Lanka's citizen demonstrated their awareness of their democratic rights and are robustly engaging in holding the political and bureaucratic elites accountable. In such a context it is crucial to take note of the demand for parliamentary elections and holding the long overdue provincial council elections.

We also wish to remind the country's political leadership that playing with the people's franchise and democratic rights for partisan gains has in the past caused huge political and social costs. The United Front government in 1975 manipulated the constitution and the judiciary to stay in power for two more years only to suffer an unprecedented electoral disaster in 1977. A few years later, the United National Party government of 1977 manipulated the constitution in 1982 to extend the life of the parliament for another full term through a referendum, instead of holding the constitutionally due parliamentary election. This blatant constitutional and institutional manipulation to legalize an unconstitutional and illegitimate political ambition soon plunged the entire country into a protracted violent conflict, causing unprecedented political instability and suffering to the people. Sri Lankan citizens are still struggling to recover from the social, economic and political aftershocks of that most arbitrary act of political manipulation carried out by a government leadership for narrow, selfish and partisan gains.

In fact, holding the local government elections and allowing the citizen's protests will even function as a crucial pressure valve, enabling the people of Sri Lanka to peacefully release their anger and outrage caused by the mounting economic hardships.

Thus, considering Sri Lanka's past experiences and recent developments, we, as citizens of Sri Lanka in whom sovereign powers are reposed, demand the following:

- We demand that the President and the government refrain from acting in a manner that subverts the legally mandated and constitutionally valid local government election scheduled by the Election Commission.

- We remind all members of the public service to fulfil their constitutional obligation of facilitating the local government election as scheduled, without allowing themselves to commit illegal acts under undue and unethical pressure.
- We urge the international community to encourage the government to guarantee that the Sri Lankan citizens exercise their right to franchise without any hindrance. Such steps should be sequenced with initiatives at strengthening the rule of law and fundamental freedoms of Sri Lankans.
- We appeal to the citizens of Sri Lanka to be vigilant of their democratic and sovereign right to franchise. Any efforts to undermine fundamental rights and the rule of law must be robustly and peacefully challenged by the citizens.

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