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இலங்கையின் பிரதம மந்திரி
Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

18 June 2020

MEDIA RELEASE

Parliamentary Election 2020

(Translation of the text of a speech made by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa on Thursday, 18 June 2020)

Venerable members of the Maha Sangha, clergymen of all other faiths, Hon. Ministers, former members of Parliament and friends,

After the Presidential election of 16 November 2019, we will be able to convene a new Parliament only in August 2020. The 19th Amendment provision which forbids the dissolution of Parliament until the lapse of four and a half years and the Covid-19 pandemic have together brought about a situation where the whole country has been in a transitional stage for nine full months. We have never before, experienced a situation like this in our political history. This Parliamentary election is essential to complete the change that the people of this country initiated at the Presidential election last year.

This election is a democratic right that we won with great difficulty. The yahapalana political parties tried to get this Parliamentary election delayed by petitioning courts but the Supreme Court did not permit that to happen. You will recall that the yahapalana government arbitrarily delayed the local government elections for three years and made it impossible to hold the provincial councils elections. The people now have the democratic right to elect a government of their choice.

One thing that was proved during this prolonged transitional period after the presidential election was that like the government led by me between 2006 and 2014, the present government led by President Gotabhaya is also capable of prevailing over apparently insurmountable odds. That was proved by the way the spread of Covid-19 was brought under control. There are other Asian countries like Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan that have successfully controlled the spread of Covid-19. There have been no Covid-19 related deaths in Vietnam. Four deaths are reported from Hong Kong, and Seven from

Taiwan. Sri Lanka has had 11 Covid-19 deaths. New Zealand has also managed to keep Covid-19 deaths at 22.

It should be borne in mind however that Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan learnt many lessons from the 2003 SARS epidemic, and that experience helped them to control Covid-19. However Sri Lanka has been able to control Covid-19 successfully without significant experience in combatting these virus related respiratory diseases such as SARS or MERS. Our health services, armed forces and all those involved in the Covid-19 control operation deserve the highest praise for what they have achieved. This achievement was made possible by the correct political leadership provided by the President.

We will be facing this election, with a major achievement which has brought us to the notice of the entire world even during the transitional period after the presidential election. The people are only too well aware of what would have happened to this country if the Covid-19 pandemic had hit Sri Lanka when the yahapalana cabal was in power.

After winning the presidential election, we had to face many difficulties as a minority government. Due to the 19th Amendment, the defeated party was able to maintain an artificial majority in Parliament until the beginning of March 2020. They used that majority to undermine the government at every turn. When we tried to get a Vote on Account passed to pay suppliers for fertiliser and medicine provided to the previous government, the yahapalana political parties blocked it. When suppliers are not paid, a shortage of fertiliser and medicine naturally ensues. That was how the defeated yahapalana cabal sought to undermine the new government.

The formation of the 2015 yahapalana government was a result of foreign and local conspiracies. Their defeat in November 2019 however, did not put an end to such conspiracies.

Within the first two or three days after the new President took office, we noticed odd stories appearing in the media. One news story said that pedestrians crossing the road without using marked pedestrian crossings will be fined by the police. Another story said that all the beggars in Colombo would be rounded up and sent off to camps and that all those begging on trains will be arrested. These were all false reports. The new dispensation that had just assumed power did not have the time to discuss such low-priority matters. What the conspirators expected from such proaganda was to put it into

the minds of the public in a subtle way, that an authoritarian President had come into power and the people will have to obey the rules to the letter.

Within days of the President taking office, there was the well publicised drama alleging that an employee of a Western embassy had been abducted, harassed and questioned. Reports about this first appeared in the foreign media. The Sri Lankan public got to know about it only later. All this was designed to create a certain impression about the new dispensation in the minds of Sri Lankans as well foreigners. But the President adroitly defeated all these conspiracies. Investigations showed the Sri Lankan people and the world that the story about the abduction of a Western embassy employee was a total fabrication.

All demonstrators marching to surround the Presidential secretariat were allowed to get to their destination unhindered, thus giving the lie to the propaganda that a rigid, authoritarian rule had commenced under a former military officer. All such groups of demonstrators were given a hearing, some were even served refreshments. No demonstration was broken up with the use of tear gas, water cannon or baton charges. With this, the attempt to paint a picture of authoritarian rule evaporated.

Just as normal life resumed after bringing the spread of Covid-19 under control, a small group of agitators in defiance of a court order, tried to hold a demonstration in front of the American embassy over an incident that had taken place in the USA. They were all bundled off to be produced in courts. Following this single incident all those who had been engaged in propagating falsehoods during the 2015 presidential election campaign came out in force to condemn what they referred to as state repression.

An actress who got caught red handed directing a video where she pretends to have been injured and hospitalised after an alleged assault in 2014, and another long haired individual who said that it would have been better if he had been thrown into a drain soon after birth to save him the pain of living in a country ruled by the Rajapaksas, were once again seen in public after a lapse of five years.

The yahapalana government from 2015 to 2019 was preoccupied with fighting off demonstrators with tear gas, water cannon and baton charges. On most days of the week, Lotus Road near the presidential secretariat resembled a battle field. You will recall that a baton charge on a demonstration by disabled ex-armed forces personnel resulted in one disabled ex-soldier losing an eye. The agitators in front of the American embassy who were recently hauled off to courts by the police were themselves frequent recipients of the yahapalana government's tear gas, water cannon and baton charge hospitality on

Lotus Road. Those who never said a word about the way the yahapalana government responded to demonstrations are now making a hue and cry about this single, minor incident that took place under our watch.

As a government, we are not happy with the manner in which that demonstration was dealt with, and we have said so publicly. Those involved in this incident were professional agitators who know how to provoke the police. Even after a police officer read out the court order banning the demonstration, the agitators claimed they were not shown any such order. The police also should not allow themselves to be provoked in that manner. These agitators need images of scuffles with the police on the streets. That's what ensures their livelihood.

Except for that isolated minor incident, our opponents have no allegations of repression to make. Some argue that we treated the Colombo agitators and those who attended the funeral of the late Mr Thondaman differently. Arumugam Thondam was the leader of the Up-country Tamil community. When we imposed curfew in the Nuwara Eliya district to prevent large numbers of grief stricken people from attending the funeral of their leader, the people of that area cooperated. Holding a demonstration in Colombo in defiance of a court order, over an incident that had taken place in the USA which has no relevance to Sri Lanka, is an entirely different thing.

The people should be vigilant about what is said by the yahapalana camp during this election campaign. When we decided to provide an allowance of Rs 5,000 to those who were unable to go to work as a result of the curfew imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19, the yahapalana presidential candidate said Rs. 5,000 was not enough and that every family should be given Rs. 65,000 per month. After somebody apparently told him not to make such foolish statements, this amount was brought down to Rs. 20,000. What did these people who wanted us to give Rs. 65,000 to each family do when they were in power?

You will recall that after the presidential election and before the Covid-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka, demonstrators used to turn up almost daily in front of the presidential secretariat just as they did during the yahapalana government. Most of those demonstrators wanted the employment they had obtained from the yahapalana government made permanent. Those demonstrators had come to the presidential secretariat not to find fault with us, but to curse the previous government. Those youthful demonstrators were caught on camera telling the yahapalana minister who had given them dud appointments not to come back to Hambantaota. We now see that the

yahapalana minister concerned has in fact abandoned Hambantota and is now contesting from Colombo.

The forthcoming parliamentary election will give the voting public an opportunity to chose proven ability over yahapalana lies and deception. In order to safeguard the progress made in controlling the spread of Covid-19, I request all candidates to be mindful of the election related guidelines issued by the health authorities and also to conduct an environmentally friendly and exemplary election campaign.

Thank you

May the blessings of the Triple Gem be upon you, God Bless you.