

The Friday Forum

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Media Release

VOTING IN THE ELECTIONS 2020: FOR PUBLIC OR RULERS' WELFARE?

On August 5th 2020, we as citizens will choose the people who may join the President in governing this country for the next five years, if a Parliamentary system of governance under the present 1978 Constitution continues. Parliament has not functioned for 4 months- well beyond the limit set by the Constitution- so we do not know what will happen after the elections, and how or when Parliament will meet.

We have exercised 'people power' and cast our votes at Elections many times. It is our experience that those we elect to public office tend to forget us and our needs and concerns soon after they take office, often with fanfare and publicity. This election is a defining one, conducted at a time when the country is facing the double crisis of a debilitating debt burden, and an unprecedented economic and public health crisis. It is therefore important to reflect on our current situation, and cast our votes to help achieve the kind of governance that will hold our rulers accountable to us, and provide primacy of place to citizens' well-being, when they exercise their powers.

The Friday Forum identifies the following issues as of critical concern to all of us:

1. We can have strong party affiliations. Many will have decided the party of their choice. But all of us, both party loyalists and independent voters, must decide whether we want to cast our votes at this critical juncture, for persons WITHOUT a record of serious crime, financial corruption, incompetence, and selfish abuse of power, while holding public office?
2. In 2009 we saw an end to a 30 year armed struggle. But have we resolved the hard issues that contributed to this violence? There have been many committees, commissions and expert committees, many of them appointed by the Prime Minister. He supported arrangements for power sharing, and gave public assurances in this regard. We must ask ourselves whether we should vote for persons who do not understand the need to respect the diversity of our people. Can this country afford to encourage ideas in governance that promote violence and discrimination against minority communities? Must we not support candidates for public office who will support finding real solutions acceptable to all? Can we afford conflict when we face new economic and public health crises like those we face today?
3. For 30 years the people and political parties agreed that the office of the Executive Presidency of 1978 amassed to itself too much power undermining other public institutions like Parliament and the Courts. We have seen how during long years, these two institutions have been undermined. Upto 2019, we wanted to abolish the Executive Presidency and introduce a system of governance that gave authority to a Prime Minister and a Cabinet that were responsible to an elected Parliament. We also looked for Courts that were independent of the Executive. That was why ALL Parties passed, by a 2/3 majority in Parliament, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

This 19th Amendment has flaws and must be modified. But now we have a new discourse which is asking for a 2/3 majority to give MORE powers to the President, and indeed change completely the structures of governance, so that the President will exercise extensive powers. We must ask ourselves whether this new system with concentration of power in one individual, is the form of government we want to introduce through a 2/3 majority and Constitutional reform.

We have had no Parliament for the last 4 months and have no idea how funds have been spent, without authorisation by Parliament. We have witnessed how the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty, has enabled many persons accused of serious crimes in our Courts, to obtain bail, stand for election, and hold high office in the government. The recent destruction of a cultural heritage site has been ignored by the Cabinet because holding anyone accountable will have political repercussions. Is it satisfactory that the public service and public institutions are no longer accountable, and ad hoc decisions determine important matters relating to the economy (eg the MCC agreement), the environment- including the human /elephant conflict, public health issues, and the destruction of public property such as heritage sites? These decisions impact on all our lives, but we cannot hold anyone accountable because our public institutions have been destroyed by the unfettered exercise of political power. Do we need accountable, strong public institutions or the concentration of extensive powers in an Executive President?

4. A new agency, the military has moved out of its traditional role and is taking on all the responsibilities of civilian institutions on public administration, and even the Police. We have Military Task Forces which exercise significant powers, and exclude the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers. They report directly to the President. We have governance according to gazette notifications that allow investigation of persons for spreading false information on Covid-19'. The army also has been made responsible for 'de-radicalising' those with 'extremist ideas' in their custody, under the Prevention of Terrorism law. Others, including politicians who advocate violence against minorities in the community, continue to do so with impunity. What implications does this type of governance by Presidential gazettes have for public administration, and for our personal liberties? Fundamental rights including media freedom and freedom of expression are protected both by the Constitution and the Right to Information law.

Do we want this 'new normal' of unchecked power, 'authoritarian leadership' and militarisation to facilitate or ensure economic growth and the sustainable development of our country?

5. Administration of Justice without fear or favour is in our collective interest. Do we not want governance that ensures the independence of the judiciary from political interference? Increasingly, we witness selective justice- some people prosecuted in the courts while no questions are asked about the conduct of others. They are not held accountable for their conduct, despite Commissions of Inquiry and prolonged investigations. Should we not vote for and demand, a strengthening, rather than undermining of institutions responsible for the administration of justice in our country?

Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, Dr. Radhika Coomaswamy, Dr. A.C. Visvalingam, Mr. Tissa Jayatilaka, Prof. Ranjini Obeyesekere, Prof. Gameela Samarasinghe, Mr. Faiz-Ur Rahman, Prof. Arjuna Aluwihare, Dr. Gedreck Usvatte-aratchi, Bishop Duleep de Chickera, Prof. Camena Guneratne, Mr. Chandra Jayaratne, Rev. Dr. Jayasiri Peiris, Mr. Priyantha Gamage, Ms. Shanthi Dias, Mr. Daneshan Casie Chetty, Ms. Manouri Muttetuwegama and Mr. Prashan de Visser.

The Friday Forum is an informal group of concerned citizens pledged to uphold norms of democracy, good governance, rule of law, human rights, media freedom and tolerance in our pluralist society.