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## **Media Release**

### **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND THE PEOPLES' OPTIONS**

In a few months' time this country will once again make decisions on the political leadership that will guide the destinies of the nation. This is a pivotal point in regard to the direction and manner in which our country will develop in the near future.

#### **1. CONTEXT**

We must recognise the reality that we face a multiplicity of crises, bereft of political leadership with appropriate commitment, integrity and skills to resolve them. We are trapped in religious and ethnic divisions with serious implications for peace and stability. Unprincipled and foolish fiscal policies, partly to enable the abuse of public property and to enrich politicians and bureaucrats, and short sighted approaches to election outcomes, have jeopardised the fiscal health of the nation. Unwise and inept handling of foreign policy has contributed to our small nation running the risk of falling victim to the new form of colonisation recently experienced in Africa and South America. We have experienced the breakdown of law and order, and lost faith in the effectiveness of institutions entrusted with law enforcement and administration of justice. We as citizens have often failed to inform ourselves adequately of government policies and actions, and demand accountability from politicians elected by us, to act in the best interests of the nation.

Despite all this Sri Lankan citizens have regularly asserted their right to change governments and begin a process of rectifying past mistakes and rebuilding the nation.

The last election of 2015 is often dismissed with contempt on public platforms of the Joint Opposition. We, and especially young people who will vote for the first time, must not be misled by the political rhetoric of a group that supported an illegal and unconstitutional grab for power in 2018. The vote for a change of government in 2015 was the response of a majority to the abuse of power, extrajudicial abductions and killings, interference with the judiciary and other institutions, that took place during the previous decade. The election of 2015 offered a promise of change.

Our disappointment and anger at the failures of the current government must not result in a rejection of the small gains on democratic governance that have been made. Most importantly, we must not permit our anguish at the government's failures on national security to reject democracy itself as a form of governance. We must not elect through a democratic exercise of our vote, a political leadership that will sacrifice democratic norms in the name of promoting national security. The history of the world and our own recent experience shows that repression and abuse

of authority under the guise of strong leadership only brings more violence and conflict to nations, destabilizing the economy, and obstructing peace and progress. “Strong leadership” without respect for democratic institutions, the rule of law and our rich diversity as a people will not ensure stability for economic development or the resolution of internal social and political conflicts.

## **2. THE CANDIDATES**

When the public and private sectors appoint persons to important posts it is customary to carefully scrutinize the credentials of applicants. Should not we as citizens of this country adopt a similar approach? Do we not have then have a right and a duty to make our choice after carefully considering whether those who ask for our votes and expect to lead the nation as President measure up to such scrutiny?

- (a) We must clarify the stand of each and every candidate on the abolition of the Executive Presidency, which has been a public demand and has been promised over and over again to the nation at the time of presidential elections.
- (b) President Sirisena has been Executive President for well over four years. Has he given the leadership that was expected of him when he secured a stunning electoral victory in 2015? What do we think of the manner in which he has violated the constitution and undermined national security issues? Can we expect him to act differently in the future, and do we think he is qualified to seek another term in office?
- (c) Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe is known to have given leadership in regard to some changes that have benefited the country in the last four years. However, we must scrutinize his contribution in regard to fulfilling the mandate given to him when he assumed office. The decision of the Supreme Court in late 2018, underlined the critical importance of democratic governance and gave him another chance to fulfill these promises. Did we see the expected change in governance? Despite the many official Commissions appointed and their findings, the public still has questions in regard to his conduct in relation to what is commonly referred to as the "Bond Scam." He has not explained to the country his dealings with Arjuna Mahendran or with Minister Ravi Karunanayake. The latter's conduct in relation to his dealings with Arjun Aloysius were the subject of serious censure in the findings of the Commission of Inquiry. Are we satisfied with Mr. Wickremesinghe's response to grave issues of national security, corruption and criminal justice under his watch as Prime Minister? Did he give the expected leadership to fulfill his commitments on constitutional reform? As party leader, is he fulfilling his responsibilities at this critical time, and building consensus on a UNP presidential candidate, with respect for norms of democratic decision making?
- (d) Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapakse is the candidate nominated by the SLPP. We have for the first time a candidate seeking presidential office who has been “anointed” publicly as a family

member chosen by the head of his own family rather than by a political party. What implications does this have for us, and for his political leadership?

For the first time we also have in Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapakse a Presidential candidate who has several cases against him pending in the courts of Sri Lanka and in the USA. The cases in both jurisdictions are civil cases, but they are based on very grave allegations of corruption and abuse of power, torture and complicity to murder, when he was the Secretary of Defense in the Mahinda Rajapakse administration. Emblematic cases such as the execution of prisoners gunned down in the Welikada jail, and the Thajudeen case (considered an accident, but now clearly proven to be a horrendous case of a cover up of torture and murder) occurred under his watch as Secretary of Defense. We are now asking questions in regard to the conduct of the Secretary of Defense and the IGP under this administration, under whose watch the tragic Easter Sunday violence occurred. Is it not appropriate for us to also scrutinize Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapakse's record as Secretary of Defense? Facts in the public domain on his application for Sri Lankan citizenship and voting at the 2005 presidential election, are being currently challenged as electoral fraud and violations of laws and regulations. In view of the broad scope of immunity from prosecution that an elected President will enjoy, any current legal proceedings may not be completed. If all these issues are ignored in his candidature this will seriously affect the credibility of the justice and law enforcement system.

- (e) Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayake is the nominee of the JVP. We are told that his manifesto is being finalized with the support of an expert committee. This is encouraging. We need to scrutinize that manifesto in relation to the stand on the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment to abolish the Executive Presidency which the JVP pioneered recently. We also need clarifications on his approach to managing the economy. Are there policy commitments that the repressive and violent approach to dissent of an earlier era has been rejected once and for all?

These are all issues we must reflect on, when we vote at the next Presidential elections. We as citizens cannot afford collective amnesia that blocks out memory. Similarly, political parties must convince us with concrete policy commitments and programmes rather than empty politicized promises. Let them know that there is still a discerning Sri Lankan public with the power of the vote.

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*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.*