

The Friday Forum

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President Mahinda Rajapaksa
President of Sri Lanka
Presidential Secretariat
Janadhipathi Mawatha
Colombo 1

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Anti-Muslim Hate Campaign: The Government Must Act Decisively

Dear President Rajapaksa,

The Friday Forum urges you to act immediately and decisively to counter the increasingly venomous and strident anti-Muslim hate campaign launched by a few extremist groups claiming to represent the majority Sinhala community. As you are aware, this campaign has intensified over the past several months. The country has witnessed attacks against mosques, and the circulation, on social media, public posters and web-sites, of obscene and vituperative messages that are offensive to religious beliefs. It has witnessed anti-Muslim public rallies and processions, including a call to boycott Muslim business establishments.

In any situation in which there are efforts to incite communal tensions, the primary responsibility of removing such threats and reassuring the community under attack is with the government. The people elect the President and other representatives in the expectation that they will ensure an environment in which all citizens can live assured of their human rights including equality, personal security, dignity and religious freedom. Failure of a government to provide this is a serious breach of its responsibilities and has, in the past, had tragic consequences for our country and our people.

In a plural society hate campaigns against a specific community must be taken very seriously by the government and the people and viewed in the wider context of our historical, sociological, economic and foreign policy realities. The possibility of violence against a particular community, and the dangers of ethnic cleansing are very real. The horrors of the 1983 ethnic riots constantly remind us how human life and personal security mean nothing, when there is incitement to communal violence and hatred. Hate campaigns inevitably result in a deep sense of fear and vulnerability among members of the targeted community, giving rise to a fear psychosis. Such a situation not only deeply harms that community, but also imbues a whole society with suspicion and propensity to communal violence.

We welcome that you clearly spoke against those who incite communal intolerance at the recent Independence Day celebrations held in Trincomalee. Yet, the government headed by you has not up to now taken decisive and concrete measures to stem the current hate

campaign or to reassure the Muslim community of its rightful place in our society. This is difficult to understand in light of your own assurances and that of the government on the urgent need to forge a lasting peace after ending the destruction and suffering of thirty years of fratricidal war.

The silence of the government, and a mute response in the face of the hate campaign against the Muslim community, particularly though the misuse of media is a violation of both national and international law, Such misuse sometimes justified as respect for freedom of speech and expression only encourages those who incite communal disharmony and violence. The government has recently decided to prohibit sterilization programmes for consenting adults undermining family planning and reproductive health policies that conform to national public health and treaty commitments. This decision, while unacceptable in itself, can also be perceived by the public as concession to the anti-Muslim lobbies.

The aggressive assertion of identity by any community creates tensions in a pluralistic society. If there are problems over issues related to any religious group, for instance, the recent “halal” certification issue, these need to be looked into dispassionately and responsibly after careful verification of the facts. The public must also be provided with accurate information with a view to defusing and not exacerbating tensions.

We urgently call on you as elected Head of State to address the nation denouncing the current anti-Muslim campaign and its sponsors and detailing the measures the government will take to deal with the hate campaign against Muslims. Only such steadfast and resolute action, rising above narrow identity politics, can safeguard the peace and further an environment of communal harmony and security in our country.

Jayantha Dhanapala

Professor Savitri Goonesekere

On behalf of Friday Forum, the Group of Concerned Citizens

Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala, Professor Savitri Goonesekere, Rt. Reverend Duleep de Chickera, Dr. Deepika Udagama, Professor Arjuna Aluwihare, Ms. Shanthi Dias, Ms. Anne Abayasekara, Mr. Lanka Nesiya, Mr. Faiz-ur.Rahman, Dr. Jayampathy Wickramaratne, Mr. Ahilan Kadirgamar, Mr. J.C. Weliamuna, Mr. Javid Yusuf, Mr. Danesh Casie Chetty, Ms.Damaris Wickremesekera, Rev. Dr. Jayasiri Peiris, Dr. A. C. Visvalingam, Professor Camena Guneratne, Professor Ranjini Obeyesekere, Dr. Upatissa Pethiyagoda, Dr. Devanesan Nesiya, Mr. Chandra Jayaratne,

cc. Secretary to the President

Secretary Defence & Urban Development

Inspector General of Police

Attorney General

Chairman, Human Rights Commission