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Over 20 NGOs against the re-introduction of the anti-conversion law

HRWF co-signed the call to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka organized by the International Religious Freedom Roundtable

H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa
Prime Minister's Office
No: 58, Sir Ernest De Silva Mawatha,
Colombo 07.
Sri Lanka.
info@pmoffice.gov.lk

18 March 2021

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned, are a collection of individuals and organizations that advocate for human rights and religious freedom around the world. We represent diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds but are united in our goal of promoting religious freedom or belief for all.

We recognize the value of each individual's freedom to follow their conscience, which is why we are concerned about Your Excellency's statements on introducing anti-conversion laws into the country and plans to restructure the constitution of Sri Lanka to accommodate a law that would strip individuals of their freedom of speech and conscience.¹ We raise our concerns now because of a recent report that the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs is currently drafting a legal framework for the implementation of anti-conversion laws.²

Sri Lanka is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and is therefore bound to the commitments it promised to uphold since 1980. International law is clear that anti-conversion laws are frequently incompatible with the core principles of freedom of religion or belief. The Constitution of Sri Lanka draws directly upon the language of the ICCPR in establishing a national right to religious freedom. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has reported that anti-blasphemy, anti-apostasy and anti-conversion laws, "often serve as platforms for enabling incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence against persons based on

¹ Arjuna Ranawana, *Mahinda raises controversial Anti-Conversion Bill issue*, *Economynext* (3 March 2020)

² Pamodi Waravita, *New laws against unethical conversions* (18 February 2021), <https://www.themorning.lk/new-laws-against-unethical-conversions/>.

religion or belief.³ Restrictions on fundamental freedoms such as religious freedom must pass the test of legality, proportionality and necessity. No anti-conversion law has yet passed this test.⁴

Religious freedom has tangible social benefits beyond simply the spiritual. Religious freedom promotes [economic growth](#) and social harmony by encouraging acceptance of others. Conversely, anti-conversion laws often have negative social consequences. While we denounce any conversions obtained by force and violence, anti-conversion laws are often written in a way that is overbroad and ambiguous, enabling accusations against religious groups based on mere worship, sharing one's faith, and performing charitable works. They encourage false accusations and cause unrest by emboldening intolerant and extremist actors. By contrast, religious groups very frequently provide moral, social, emotional, and physical advantages for the individuals, their families and communities.

In light of the above we respectfully urge the government of Sri Lanka to keep its promises to its citizens and to the international community by ensuring the longevity of religious freedom and tolerance in Sri Lanka. We humbly ask that the government retract its decision to reintroduce an anti-conversion law which would instead undermine religious freedom and religious harmony. While forced and coercive conversion is abominable, anti-conversion laws have been proven to restrict legitimate religious freedom and target religious minorities. Sri Lanka must ensure that each individual be free to make their own conclusions and decisions about the divine.

We therefore urgently call on the government of Sri Lanka to:

- Abandon the introduction of an anti-conversion law.
- Ensure that all religious minorities are able to practice their religion or belief freely and without discrimination.
- Promote tolerance between religions by upholding Articles 10 and 14 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, and Article 18 of the ICCPR, including the freedom to adopt or leave a religion or belief.
- Introduce religious freedom roundtables for religious leaders to discuss the issues affecting their communities in an open, free, cooperative and constructive manner.

Signatures

Organizations

ADF International

Advocates International

Alevi Philosophy Center

³ UN General Assembly, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, (28 August 2017), A/72/365, para 27.

⁴ UN General Assembly, *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*, (13 August 2012), A/67/303, para. 44.

Association for Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam

Center for Pluralism

Christian Freedom International

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

GAFCON Suffering Church Network

Human Rights Association for Victims of Coercive Conversion Programs

Human Rights Without Frontiers

International Christian Concern

International Human Rights Committee

International Organization to Preserve Human Rights (IOPHR)

International Society for Peace and Justice

Jubilee Campaign

Minh Van Foundation

The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church of America

Saint Nicholas Freedom Group

The Observatory for Freedom of Religion and Conscience (Spain)

The Orthodox Public Affairs Committee

The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church of America

Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

Individuals

Anuttama Dasa

Global Minister of Communications

International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

Father John Anderson

Saint Nicholas Freedom Group

Paul Diamond

Barrister

Mike Ghouse

President

Center for Pluralism

George Gigicos

Co-Founder & Chairman

The Orthodox Public Affairs Committee

Lauren Homer
President
Law and Liberty International

Farahnaz Ispahani
Senior Fellow, Religious Freedom Institute and former Member, National Assembly of
Pakistan

Farahnaz Ispahani
Global Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Author and Former Member Pakistan
Parliament.

Nasim Malik
General Secretary
Human Rights Committee

Jorge Marquez
Pastor and founder of the Church "Mission Life for Nations
Uruguay

Faith J. H. McDonnell
Director of Advocacy,
Katartismos Global

Scott Morgan
President
Red Eagle Enterprises

Hans Noot
Director
Gerard Noodt Foundation for Freedom of Religion or Belief
