

Women's Rights Activists Condemn Violence and Question State Response

As activists engaged in the struggle for women's rights, justice and equality for all across Sri Lanka, we strongly condemn the recent spate of violence against Muslim communities, and the communities' homes, shops and places of worship.

As citizens in a country in only its 9th year after the military end to a protracted ethnic war, where we are just beginning to understand the imperative for truth-seeking, reparations and reconciliation, we are deeply saddened and angered to yet again see minority communities brutally victimized at the hands of majority-ethnic group-led mobs. The urgent need to address the root causes of such violence is clear, as is the fact that real political will be needed to do so.

We are dismayed that such incidents have continued to take place over several days in several locations, despite the government's duty to ensure the safety of all citizens. We are particularly concerned that continued violence has been reported regardless of the curfew imposed. This is unacceptable and brings into question the measure of political will, professional commitment and motivations of those in charge of law and order.

We understand that some arrests have been made. However, since the chief instigators of racial hatred in this country are continuing to incite violence with impunity, the government's response is wholly inadequate.

We have seen successive governments which have, at best, kept silent, and at worst, orchestrated incidents large and small against ethnic minorities, driven by those with a militant ethno-religious nationalist agenda.

The former government has many things to answer for, including its insidious, deliberately weak response in the wake of the Aluthgama riots in 2014¹. Many people voted for regime change in 2015 to ensure that widespread impunity resulting from deliberate state complicity and inaction would be dealt with decisively, and law and order reinstated. The state's silence and inaction at this moment repeats a pattern from the past and is similarly something we believe the citizens of this country will and must condemn immediately.

State of Emergency

In Sri Lanka right now, the government has decided to declare a State of Emergency (SoE).

We take this decision most seriously and question it with grave concern. In the past, both in Sri Lanka and in neighbouring countries, the effects of SoE declarations by governments have

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27864716>

demonstrably eroded human rights and democracy. Governments have often used SoE to arbitrarily arrest and detain citizens and place citizens under surveillance.

Ample laws and mechanisms are already in place to respond to situations exactly like this. We are concerned that the state has not shown sufficient resolve to enforce and ensure the rule of law and contain the violence. The decision to declare a SoE instead, raises doubts about the priorities and intentions of the state, and reiterates our concern that it is an unnecessary and misconceived decision in a highly volatile time.

A SoE increases the vulnerability of all citizens, but particularly of those persons and groups who are not recognized as equal citizens in the eyes of the state and its instruments of law enforcement.

Internet Shut-Down

We are shocked and troubled by the government's orders to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block certain internet-based social networking and messaging platforms, which make up a vital portion of citizens' everyday communications.

While we understand concerns around the potential of online tools and platforms for spreading malicious misinformation and for groups of perpetrators to organize, it is undeniable that such a shutdown of platforms is an ill-conceived response and a clear violation of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Internet-based platforms, while not without their problems, have proved themselves significantly useful, especially in times of crisis and disaster.

With around 6 million + active internet users around the country, out of which approximately around 4.5 million are users of Facebook², it can no longer be denied that internet-based platforms are used widely in Sri Lanka, by many diverse people. Online spaces have proven especially important for women, ethnic and sexual minorities and other historically marginalized groups, in exercising their right to freedom of expression.

The adverse repercussions of an internet shut-down far outweigh the gains. There is no evidence to show that internet shut-downs help to prevent acts of communal violence before or while they are happening.³ Instead, internet shut-downs serve to disconnect citizens from journalists and other bearers of important information, as well as from each other, which can have disastrous consequences for public safety in times of crisis.

² <http://www.digitalmarketer.lk/internet-usage-statistics-in-sri-lanka-2016-updated.html>

³ <https://uk.lush.com/article/we-need-talk-about-internet-shutdowns>

It impedes our right to freedom of expression. It prevents us from exercising our right to information. It limits our ability to respond collectively as a society to crisis and tragedy. It obscures, if not erases the narratives of victims of violence, and restricts our capability to bear witness to the injustices being enacted against fellow citizens.

End to Impunity

As those engaged with women's struggles for rights and justice, we are concerned by the impunity and entitlement with which violence is still enacted against minority and non-normative groups and persons of this country. We are concerned that what we are seeing are the troubling effects of the continued militarization of our society, combined with entrenched patriarchal ethno-religious nationalism, which, due to impunity, has been allowed over time to flourish.

We demand that those we elected to govern our nation demonstrate leadership, publicly condemn the instigators and perpetrators of the violence -- regardless of their position or standing in society -- and ensure that all responsible, both for the acts of violence and the instigation of violence, are brought to justice. We call for zero tolerance of hate speech, instigation and violence against any and all minorities. We call on the state to act swiftly to restore law and order, to revoke the State of Emergency and to restore the use of internet-based services for all citizens.

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