

## POLITICAL THUGGERY RAISES ITS HEAD ANEW

"Do you truly and fully accept the right of others to criticize your party and your policies? And the right to support other parties and other policies?"

was the first question addressed by CRM to political parties when seeking commitments on civil liberties at the time of a general election.

The Civil Rights Movement is appalled at the reappearance on our political scene of violence which has resulted in several deaths and many more injured. What is most horrifying is that these are not the actions of extremist terrorist groups, of which Sri Lanka has certainly had its fill. They are the result of clashes between supporters of the major parliamentary parties which claim to be wedded to democratic ideals, and which, it was hoped, whether in their role in government or in opposition, would now help restore that faith in the democratic process which had been seriously eroded in recent years.

There can be no excuse or justification for political thuggery, CRM is aware of and has documented many instances of such violence committed, instigated or condoned by the state during the last regime. The present government pledged to end that era. During recent months CRM has felt increasingly alarmed at a series of violent clashes between UNP and PA supporters and has been seeking more information about them. Their context has ranged from co-operative society elections, the affixing of posters and banners, the disruption of meetings and rallies of political parties, and attacks on political activists including in their homes. They include reports of incidents at Anamaduwa, Kuliyaipitiya, Matale, Anuradhapura, Piliyandala and Matugama. There were also the clashes amongst UNP members themselves at Maligakanda.

The most recent killings in Negombo however make it necessary for defenders of civil liberties to raise their voices with no further delay. These incidents include the killing of a PA supporter and another and an attack on a church service commemorating the 50th anniversary of the UNP at the end of August, the shooting dead of four UNP members and a bystander last Friday 20 September, and the killing of a further UNP activist—a Pradeshiya Member—the next day.

Such events, as well as denying the very right to life itself, place in jeopardy the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, which are the bedrock of democracy. This is precisely why CRM gave priority, in its document quoted at the beginning of this statement, to the genuineness of the belief of political parties in the right of their opponents to enjoy these freedoms. (This was followed, in the context of election time, by a number of consequential questions, the first of which was what measures they planned to prevent post election violence by their supporters). The Working Committee of CRM, which discussed the current situation at a recent meeting and decided to issue the present statement, stresses the importance of these basic freedoms once again.

CRM calls on all democratic parties to make a public reaffirmation of their commitment to non violence and to make it known in uncertain terms to their own supporters that acts of thuggery, and taking the law into their own hands, whatever the provocation, will not be tolerated.

CRM also calls on the police, on whom so much depends at this crucial juncture, to uphold the rule of law, and to perform their duty effectively and impartially, irrespective of whatever pressures to the contrary may be exerted on them from whatever source.

CRM finally emphasizes the particular responsibility that lies upon supporters, members and leaders of those in power, and the Head of State Sri Lanka's recent political history has regrettably proved again and again that persons who enjoy or think they enjoy political patronage often feel they can break the law with impunity. This dangerous mindset has to be eliminated from our political life once and for all. In this context CRM expresses its dismay at the alleged speech of the President as reported in the Lankadipa of 17 September, parts of which could be construed as a condonation of violence.

In the view of CRM this recent spate of killings and thuggery, though extremely serious, is not irreversible, and a spiral of retaliatory violence still can and must be prevented by prompt and effective measures to restore and protect the right of free and peaceful political expression. ■