CENTRE FOR MONITORING ELECTION VIOLENCE
මැතිවරණ ප්‍රචණ්ඩක්‍රියා නිරීක්ෂණ මධ්‍යස්ථානය
தேர்தல் வன்முறைகளைக் கண்காணிப்பதற்கான நிலையம்

Hate Speech and Divisive Language During the Parliamentary General Election 2020

This report provides an account of the incidence of hate speech and divisive language observed by the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) in the campaign for the Parliamentary General Election 2020. It details notable incidents of hate speech and divisive language, and trends in them throughout the campaign period. It also highlights a public awareness campaign CMEV has undertaken addressing hate speech and divisive language.

Notable incidents of hate speech and divisive language

The following is a list of notable incidents of hate speech and divisive language CMEV has recorded during the election campaign:

1. Mahiyanganaya, Badulla, June 20 – Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya (OPPP) Badulla candidate Ambale Ratana Thero commented during a campaign meeting that Muslims and Tamils are conquering the country while depriving Sinhalese of their freedom of movement around the country

2. Ampara, Digamadulla, June 20 – Akhila Ilankai Tamil Mahasabha (AITM) candidate Karuna Amman claimed that he is more dangerous than the coronavirus because he once killed 2-3,000 Sinhala soldiers in one night at the battle of Elephant Pass. His comments received wide circulation and condemnation across the country

3. Batticaloa, June 22 – A number of posts were shared online by Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) supporters criticising Thamil Makkal Viduthai Pulikal (TMVP) Batticaloa candidate M Mangala Shanker. Most of the posts fabricated per previous work, tarnishing her image on the basis of working for NGOs and being a woman.

4. Kaduwela, Colombo, June 26 – Comments were made by Colombo Independent Group 24 candidate Dan Prasad to vote only for those who protect the Sinhala Buddhist kingdom and not those silent Sinhala leaders who allow the country to be destroyed just to keep their votes

5. Padiruppu, Batticaloa, June 27 – Widely circulated comments posted on a Facebook group about ITAK Batticaloa candidate Shanakiyan Rajaputhiran insulting him and saying his mother was a Sinhala servant for M.L.A.M. Hizbullah and Tamils should not vote for him because of this

6. Dambulla, Matale, July 7 – Dambulla Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) mayor Jaliya Opatha made a number of sexist insults and false allegations against United National Party (UNP) Councillor Nilakshi Jayawardena at two separate press conferences

7. Vanni, July 7 – SLPP Vanni district candidate Janaka Nanda Kumara made comments at an event that Tamil and Sinhala people in the district are suffering because it is being controlled by Muslim politicians who are only providing benefits to Muslims. He further stated that since the Vanni district has a majority Tamil population, it is not suitable for it to be ruled by Muslim politicians.

8. Kotte, Colombo, July 8 – Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya candidate Athuraliye Rathana Thero made comments warning Muslims that if they make any more trouble Buddhists will have to take up "non-violent arms" against them.

9. Kurunegala, July 10 – Kurunegala former MP and SLPP candidate Johnston Fernando speaking to Muslim voters made a veiled threat that he counts all ballot boxes in the district after voting so there should be as many votes from Muslims for the SLPP as applause for him at event. This was in the context him further saying that "If we attack we will attack without fear. And if you come into conflict with us we won't let it go," Which implies a threat of violence.

10. Kurunegala, July 10 – Prime Minister and SLPP Kurunegala candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa made disparaging comments about SJB leader Sajith Premadasa and his wife being childless

11. July 20 – A number of Buddhist monks, including some Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya candidates, said that if Tamils demanded devolution then "a river of blood will flow in the North and East" in reaction to the release of the ITAK manifesto.

Trends in hate speech and divisive language

- ***Hate speech was evident at relatively low levels at the start of the campaign*** – Compared to previous elections, hate speech was lower at the campaign's start, partly because national political leaders were not making any hate speech or divisive remarks and there were no significant ethnic issues being debated during the campaign. The COVID-19 pandemic situation, which has already delayed the election and has imposed restrictions on parties and candidates for campaigning, also prevented political discourse from being infused with hate speech to a very high level.

- **Hate speech and divisive language is likely to spike towards the end of the campaign** – Despite the above, hate speech and divisive language has been increasing as the campaign heads to its final stretch. This is because of the perception that the race is tightening, and also as competition between candidates within particular electoral districts becomes more intense.

- **Hate speech and divisive language on public social media platforms is lower than during the previous Presidential Election 2019** – This may be as a result of social media platforms more proactively removing hate speech and misinformation that is reported and monitored by them. Since the last election, a number of social media platforms including Facebook have made certain changes to their policies and procedures on hate speech. A number of the large Facebook groups that were spreading hate speech content also no longer seem to be operative. Note that this assessment does not apply to content shared on gossip sites or privately online (for instance, posts sent on WhatsApp and Viber).

- **Hate speech and divisive language is most prevalent at the ground level** – most instances of hate speech can be observed at door-to-door canvassing and small pocket meetings partly because there is less scrutiny at that level. The campaigning restrictions due to COVID-19 which have greatly reduced large public rallies, printed materials and posters has also intensified ground-level campaigning targeted at small numbers of voters, which provides a certain insulation to any hate speech that is being expressed.

- **Hate speech and divisive language at the ground level is less likely to get reported** – This is because the targets of such language are deterred from reporting incidents, especially where it concerns intra-party conflicts because such targets would be more fearful of recrimination from the party establishment

- **Hate speech and divisive language is expressed by certain political parties' candidates more than others** – Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya (OPPP) candidates and certain SLPP candidates openly campaign on ideas that the Sinhalese people are threatened by rising numbers of Muslims; that they need to be "controlled"; and that Tamils are attempting to divide the country (see incidents #1, #4 and #8 above). a Some OPPP candidates are openly campaigning saying they are looking for "Sinhala votes only". Akhila Ilankai Tamil Mahasabha (AITM) and Thamil Makkal Viduthai Pulikal (TMVP) contesting in Digamadulla and Batticaloa districts express anti-Muslim sentiment that Muslim voters have 'stolen' Tamil land to win votes from Tamil voters.

- **Hate speech and divisive language between minority communities is common in certain areas** – in areas with existing conflicts between various communities regarding land, resource distribution or government services, electoral contests play out as zero-sum games for claiming (or reclaiming) land, resources and services, and hate speech and divisive language is inevitably deployed in such contexts. This can especially be observed in particular areas in the Batticaloa, Digamadulla, Vanni and Puttalam districts between Tamil and Muslim communities. Certain Sinhala politicians also use such conflicts to further pit minority communities against each other (see incident #7 above)

- **Hate speech online and on the ground mirrors what happens at the national level** – When high level and well-known politicians and public figures use hate speech or divisive language, and it is consequently covered extensively on the media, this leads to an uptick in hate speech on online platforms (usually people sharing and endorsing such comments, and defending them against detractors) and on the ground level (as it can be seen as giving 'permission' for such rhetoric to be used locally). The uptick in hate speech and divisive language suggested above will particularly be driven if and when such high-level figures make divisive remarks in the campaign's final stretches

- **Competition for preferential votes drives hate speech against female candidates** – numerous female candidates across the country are facing intense scrutiny from within and outside their parties. The work backgrounds and past associations of such candidates are leveraged in misogynist ways to denigrate them, insinuate that they have bad character and suggest that they are unsuitable for office (see incident #3 above). Party leaders and establishment figures rarely condemn or reproach such allegations, which leads to them continuing unabated.

CMEV/CPA Public Awareness Campaign on Hate Speech During Elections

CMEV and the Civic Media Unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) commenced a public awareness campaign on hate speech and divisive language during the election. Whilst there have been public awareness efforts on identifying and countering hate speech in general in Sri Lanka previously, there have so far not been ones focusing specifically on elections and election campaigning. The project aims to produce a series of trilingual infographics to be posted on CMEV's and the Civic Media Team's citizen journalism platforms *Groundviews, Vikalpa* and *Maatram*. The infographics will identify particular incidents of hate speech and divisive language and break them down into why such language can be considered hate speech, whom it harms, and its overall impact.

Below are the infographics that have been produced and disseminated so far. The campaign will run through the election campaign and for a period afterwards, as it is expected that incidents of hate speech and divisive language in the electoral context will continue to proliferate after the election too. This was especially observed following the Presidential Election 2019, when the results of the election which were geographically and apparently ethnically distinct generated intense levels of hate speech directed at Tamil and Muslim voters in the Northern and Eastern provinces.