

21<sup>st</sup> October 2020

**People's Rights Group (PRG), a rights based advocacy and lobbying group focusing on human rights violations in Sri Lanka expresses its concern over the Government of Sri Lanka's move to arbitrarily impose limitations on the establishment of Muslim places of worship.**

In a circular (No MRCA/W/1/2020/01) referring to decision No WB/8598/2020 of the Waqf Board of Sri Lanka (a government body), the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, which is headed by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, announced on the 30th of September 2020, new and arbitrary regulations on the establishment, construction and registration of mosques.

The regulations outline new but vague criteria for establishment, construction and registration of new mosques. It is discriminatory as it specifically targets Muslim places of worship, where no such regulations are known to exist for the establishment of places of worship of other religions. The circular lists a number of criteria including the Muslim population in the area, the distance between the proposed mosque and other mosques, the distance between the proposed mosque and other places of worship, without however, specifying what the population or what those distances should be in order to be registered as a mosque, thereby leaving room for arbitrary interpretations.

PRG is concerned that such arbitrary regulations that restrict the freedom of worship targeting a particular minority community infringes several human rights including the right to freedom of worship, the right to peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of expression and the right to equal treatment before the law, as well as several provisions of the Sri Lankan Constitution that upholds the abovementioned rights.

Sri Lanka's recent history is fraught with attacks against freedom of worship, including violent attacks on mosques and places of worship of other minority religions. Apart from the well-known Easter Sunday attacks on churches, many mosques have suffered violent attacks, vandalism and destruction as well as abandonment due to threats. Christian places of worship, particularly those belonging to non-Catholic denominations have also consistently suffered. Many such attacks take place under the leadership, or instigation of extremist Buddhist groups. Perpetrators are rarely prosecuted. In recent years Buddhist extremist groups had called for restriction of Muslim places of worship and religious education. PRG fears that the circular issued by the DMCA feeds into that agenda.

PRG calls upon the Government of Sri Lanka to guarantee to all its citizens belonging to all faiths the freedom of worship, the freedom of peaceful assembly and all other freedoms and human rights that it has committed to uphold in its Constitution and in international instruments it has ratified.

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