

President's Media Division

Address by His Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the 72nd Independence Day celebrations

Most Venerable Maha Sangha,

Other Religious Dignitaries

Hon. Prime Minister

Hon. Speaker

Hon. Chief Justice

Hon. Ministers, Ministers of State and Members of Parliament

Hon. Governors

H. E. the Ambassadors and High Commissioners

Secretary to the President and all State Officials

Chief of Defence Staff and Commander of the Army

Commander of the Navy

Commander of the Air Force

Inspector General of Police

Director General of the Department of the Civil Security

Distinguished Invitees

War Heroes

All Sri Lankan brothers and sisters

Beloved children

Sri Lanka is a Unitary State. It is a free, sovereign, independent and democratic Republic. On this occasion when we celebrate 72 years of Independence after nearly 500 years of imperialist colonial rule, I address you as the Head of the State with a pledge to further strengthen your freedom. I pay tribute to all Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Malay and Burgher leaders who dedicated themselves to achieving and ensuring this Independence.

Every citizen living in Sri Lanka has the right to live freely and securely. We will always ensure their right to think freely, hold independent opinions, and express themselves without any hindrance. We will always respect the right of any citizen to follow the religion of his or her choice. Every citizen has the right of free association and of free assembly. We will always defend the right of every Sri Lankan citizen to participate in the political and governance processes through his or her elected representatives. We consider all these as rights of human beings that no one can challenge.

There are several domains that need to be maintained in equilibrium for democracy to function properly. Maintaining the balance of power between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary is very important in this regard. There needs to be a clear consensus on the responsibilities of the central government and decentralized authorities in the devolution of power. The responsibilities of the civilian and military establishments need to be clearly understood, and we must always remember that citizens have individual as well as collective rights. Coordination between the State and the public is integral to this.

Following Independence, every leader who came to power in this Republic was elected through universal franchise. As the current Head of the State elected through the popular vote, I am ready to work with the utmost dedication for the betterment of the country and its people during my term of office.

In a democracy, when the leader is elected following a legitimate process, he becomes the President of all the people of the country. During his term of office, he must serve the entire Sri Lankan people. He is not bound to serve only the interests of the people who voted for him. I have the vision that I must serve as the leader of the country looking after all citizens rather than serve as a political leader concerned only about a particular community. As the President today, I represent the entire Sri Lankan nation irrespective of ethnicity, religion, party affiliation or other differences.

A strong executive, a legislature and an independent judiciary is essential for the well-being and advancement of any democratic society. If, for whatever reason, there is a loss of public confidence in any of these key institutions fundamental to the functioning of a country, that can give rise to anarchy within the country. Therefore, all such stakeholders must perform their role with the powers they have been granted for the welfare of the country and for protecting the sovereignty of the people with a national vision.

I am committed to working towards fulfilling the needs of the people of this country. That is my responsibility and my duty. I do not envisage public officials, lawmakers or the judiciary to impede my implementing this commitment. I not only respect your freedom, but I will work towards improving it and guarantee the political and economic freedom in a truly democratic country.

Some limitations on the freedoms of the people have arisen because of the way public administration has evolved over time. Those rules and regulations that have been enacted without adequate study and coordination have led to the public facing considerable harassment and inconvenience. This has led to various irregularities and corruption. Losses to the public in terms of time, resources and livelihood opportunities are enormous.

We must re-examine the need to obtain licenses for things that affect the day-to-day lives of the people. We must refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the majority of the people; instead we must swiftly enforce the law against the minority who transgress it. We must give our people the opportunity and real freedom to live law abiding, disciplined and virtuous lives.

Outdated laws, regulations, taxes and charges that prevent people from freely undertaking self-employment, traditional industries or businesses need to be revised swiftly. We will work towards removing unnecessary restrictions imposed on the public to better ensure their right to live freely.

Sri Lanka is a country with an ancient history. It is a country that has been nurtured by the Buddhist philosophy, and a country that has been a haven for people of all ethnicities and religious beliefs. During my term of office, I will guarantee the freedom of all persons to follow the religion of their choice.

In the Buddhist philosophy, our leaders always have been advised to ensure a lawful, just and fair governance where no citizen is discriminated. I am committed to protecting and nurturing the Buddhist philosophy of this country during my tenure.

The public will only achieve true freedom when social and economic inequalities are minimized. All citizens within a Unitary State should have equal rights.

Even today, there is a large gap between the haves and have nots in our society. The facilities that are available in our urban centers are lacking in rural areas. Education facilities are not equal in all areas. Healthcare facilities are not equally dispersed. Job opportunities have not spread to all regions. These inequalities are not due to racial or religious reasons. These are common problems that the country faces. In strengthening the ability for people to live freely, we must first address the economic problems that affect the public. That is why the eradication of poverty is a priority of our Government.

Thirty years of conflict and various other factors have delayed the progress of development in our country. We can no longer afford to waste time. We will act to accelerate our development activities in line with new trends in the global economy by making appropriate use of our country's unique geographical location, natural resources and human resources.

An efficient and corruption-free Public Service is essential for the development of a nation. The public administration and governance must function in a proper manner so as to grant people the maximum benefit of their freedom. The entire public administration must accept responsibility for this.

If due to terrorists, extremists, thieves, thugs, extortionists, women and child abusers, there is impediment to ordinary life of the people, then the people will not be free. We have paid special attention to strengthening the National Security and Public Security. We will not allow extremist organizations that pave the way for terrorism to further function in the country.

Parents will not be free until their children are liberated from the drug menace that has spread throughout the country. The public will not be free as long as there is corruption in state institutions. Therefore, we will strictly enforce the law to eliminate all social hazards that can impact ordinary social life. The reforms required to increase the efficiency of the law enforcement agencies in order to accomplish this are already being carried out.

I wish to fully strengthen the freedom of people to think and to write freely. It is then that visionaries and quality works of art will be created. My government is always ready to tolerate and accommodate opposing views. The media has complete freedom today. We have ensured that everyone has the right to freely express themselves.

Social media can pose new challenges to democracy. Spending more time online, often with complete strangers, creates situations where people are misled by false information resulting in their swiftly believing the worst of those who bear different views.

I request everyone to act in accordance with one's conscience. Always think about the country. Think about your fellow citizens. Without thinking only about political requirements, think carefully about whether your actions and your words will benefit or harm the country. However, if your conscience tells you that the government is moving in the wrong direction, you always have a duty to point this out boldly.

We must always respect the rule of law. The public will get real freedom only when the law is fairly and equally applied. My government has taken steps to change the culture of political interference in legal matters.

We have many challenges ahead of us. We need everyone's support for the efforts taken by the government to overcome them. The Policy Statement I placed before you comprises an action plan that will allow us to overcome the challenges before us. It is our expectation to create a prosperous nation through this. Only the present generation can realize this hope on behalf of future generations. I request all Sri Lankans to join with us in accepting this responsibility that history has bestowed upon us.

I wish you all a prosperous future !