

**Statement by Mrs Isabel SANTOS,  
Chair of the European Parliament Election Observation Delegation  
for the Presidential Elections in Sri Lanka**

(18 November 2019)

Ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Isabel SANTOS. I am the Chair of the Delegation of the European Parliament to the presidential elections of Sri Lanka. It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak to you.

The Delegation of the European Parliament is composed of five parliamentarians from five European countries, belonging to four different political groups.

The European Parliament, the only directly-elected body of the EU, represents over 500 million European citizens. We are committed to strengthening democracy all over the world. Election observation is one of our key foreign policy instruments in this process.

We have observed this presidential elections, integrated in the European Election Observation Mission of the European Union, led by my friend and colleague, Marisa MATIAS. I thank her very much for her work and cooperation.

We **fully endorse the preliminary findings and conclusions** of the Observer Mission of the European Union she leads.

I would like to underline, before I comment on the elections, that the EU attaches great importance to its partnership with Sri Lanka.

The European Union financial support to Sri Lanka, for the period 2014-2020, will amount to over 210 million Euro. We have also given special support for rural development, trade assistance, or humanitarian aid when the country has suffered natural catastrophes. The Union is the largest trade partner of Sri Lanka. We remain committed to the country and, most importantly, to its citizens. This is why we are here today.

During the electoral mission, **we met with several Presidential candidates or their representatives**; with diplomatic missions, civil society organizations and national media representatives. We also met with the **Election Commission**.

Everywhere we went we received an exceptionally friendly reception, which we greatly appreciated.

On **Election Day**, we observed voting in Colombo, Matara and Puttalam. **We welcome the high number of Sri Lankans that went to vote and the general peaceful environment**. We witness very well organized elections. In this regard, we **commend the work of the Election Commission and the staff of the polling stations**.

We have read reports of intimidation and instances of violence that occurred during Election Day. This is worrisome. Yet not the general tone of the elections. These cases should be brought before the electoral authorities and addressed as soon as possible.

Allow me, now, to make some comments **beyond Election Day**.

) We believe that the advancement of democracy in Sri Lanka would greatly benefit from more **transparency**. I am speaking about the urgent need to adopt national regulation on campaign financing. This issue has been referred to us by most of

our interlocutors. And rightly so. Citizens have a right to know how much are parties and candidates spending in their campaigns, as well as the origin of the resources. This lack of rules results in an **uneven playing field between candidates**. We hope that a solid legal reform, in line with past recommendations of the European Union, can be adopted ahead of the next parliamentary elections. We call on candidates to this presidential election to give example by disclosing their information for the campaign.

) We have noticed that **campaigning activities** are very restricted by law, compared to other countries. This, in our view, limits the capacity for politicians to reach out, to get closer to citizens and communities. Broadening campaign activities would help citizens and communities to engage more.

) We also believe that Sri Lanka's democratic system needs to ensure more **openness and inclusiveness**. Citizens and communities should be able to engage more in politics, if they so wish. Especially women and minorities. **Politics is a noble task, but it cannot be limited to an elite or to a particular group.**

) We saw a large number of **women representing political parties** in the polling stations we visited (also as polling station workers). This is a good sign that needs to be **followed by a larger presence of women in the national parliament**. Leading democracy in the region, as Sri Lanka is doing, also means advancing on equality between women and men. It is essential for the prosperity of any society.

) In addition, any democratic society needs **open debate and exchange of ideas**. This is essential for citizens to take informed decisions. Media presence of candidates and parties, as we have observed, is extremely unbalanced. Many interlocutors have expressed to us their concern over this issue. Including political representatives. **The electoral authority should have effective tools to ensure**

**a level playing field between parties and candidates, especially in relation to private media**, so that all voices are heard.

) We are particularly worried about the spread of **fake news and even hate speech of political nature in social media** during the campaign. Facebook being the most used social media platform during the campaign. This is a problem which not only affects Sri Lanka, but many countries in the world. **We call on social platforms to take responsibility once and for all**. They must be more proactive and agile in detecting and removing contents of this nature. They need to abide by the highest standards and not hide behind national laws, or the lack of them. At the same time, political parties must denounce and distance themselves from such practices. Citizens' media literacy and fact-checking tools, should be developed.

I would like to conclude my remarks underlining that it was very moving to see Sri Lankans' side by side in exercising their democratic rights. No matter their origin, their religion, or social status. This is a sign that Sri Lankans' want to work together. That reconciliation is possible. And that citizens and communities want to preserve the spirit of concord they have collectively achieved in the last years. Politicians and leaders need to understand this and act to unite the country.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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