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SRI LANKA | President Urged to Uphold Election Pledge on Religious Harmony

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) urges President Maithripala Sirisena to uphold his election pledge to ensure religious harmony and to adopt measures to ensure the promotion of freedom of religion or belief.

President Sirisena secured 51.3 percent of the votes in Sri Lanka's presidential elections Jan. 8 and will lead a coalition government formed of key opposition parties, which reportedly has strong support from the minority Tamil and Muslim communities.

In addition to promising an end to nepotism and corruption, President Sirisena also pledged to ensure religious harmony by establishing institutions and mechanisms amongst religious leaders to work for religious coexistence and against extremism. There are plans to abolish the 18th Amendment to the country's Constitution, which changed the limits on the re-election of a president into office, and to establish an independent commission to secure the impartiality of institutions such as the judiciary and police. Reform of the country's justice system would improve protection for the most vulnerable in society.

Sri Lanka has come under international pressure for its poor human rights record under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, in particular following the country's long-running civil war which ended in 2009. The former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, called on the government of Sri Lanka to address the resurgence of hatred and violence against religious minorities. In March 2014, the UN Human Rights Council voted in favor of an inquiry into human rights violations committed during Sri Lanka's civil war. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, which monitors acts of violence and threats against Christian churches, reports that incidents of religious intolerance and violent attack increased from 52 in 2012 to 103 in 2013.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "In his manifesto, President Sirisena acknowledged the need to protect religious minorities from the threat of violence from extremist groups and we welcome his commitment to ensuring religious harmony in Sri Lanka. We encourage the new Government of Sri Lanka to prioritize measures to address the violence and discrimination suffered by its religious minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, and to guarantee freedom of religion or belief for its citizens."