

It is with great pleasure that I speak to you as a deputy chairman of the Constitutional Assembly today to extend a very warm welcome to all of you who are present here for this conference on constitutional reforms.

During a time when Sri Lanka is striving to revive after three decades of conflict, the present Constitutional reforms were embarked as an attempt to move forward towards a progressive development agenda for the country that would set the framework in place for the socio-economic advancement and political, cultural and national cohesion. The Constitution is the Supreme Law of a nation which embodies fundamental principles and entrenched rules governing the conduct of the nation state establishing its concept, character and structure. In other words, a Constitution is considered as the foundation of a nation's self-identity.

The grant of universal suffrage and peaceful changes of government in 1931 paved way for constitutional democracy in Sri Lanka, and as a result the first formal constitution which was commonly known as the Donoughmore Constitution was adopted. Donoughmore Constitution gave relatively more authority to the native elected representatives over internal concerns than the previous reforms brought to establish constitutional governance by the British rulers.

The Soulbury Constitution of 1946, which was adopted at a time when the local political leadership bargained for political independence from the Colonial rule during the Second World War, established a parliamentary democracy in the country. On 4<sup>th</sup> February 1948 Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain

which was granted subject to a dominion status. With the growing political dissatisfaction over the dominion status the native political leadership sought to break completely free from the British rule, and adopt a domestic Constitution in 1972. The 1972 Constitution described Sri Lanka as a free, sovereign and independent republic and recognized that it drew its authority from the sovereignty of the people.

With the change of government in 1977 a new constitution was proposed through a Parliamentary Select Committee and adopted in 1978 as the Second Republican Constitution of Sri Lanka. Over these 39 years since its adoption the 1978 Constitution has been amended for 19 times out of which the sixth, thirteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth amendments are of considerable political significance.

Now we are making an effort once again to enhance constitutional democracy of our nation by trying to reach a consensus for one Constitution that is acceptable for all communities living in this country also taking into account the socio-political changes and developmental needs of the country. The current constitutional reform process is an effort towards introducing a constitution based on an extensive public consultation process and with the popular support of all political parties in Parliament. We are very fortunate to have with us today, His Excellency Dikgang Moseneke, the former Deputy Chief Justice of South Africa and Judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, who has graciously agreed to share his experiences with the South African Constitutional Reforms process on “reaching a consensus on the Constitution”.

Over the past months since the inception of this significant task the steering committee has been deliberating on issues of foremost importance to be addressed in the Constitution. The Reports of the Sub-Committee have been tabled before the Assembly and are already in the public domain.

This Conference is an effort to bring together key government officials, civil society and stake-holders from all over the island and to engage in creating awareness with regard to the nature, developments and way forward in the Constitutional Reforms process.

The afternoon session will feature a number of presentations by key officials and academics closely involved in the process.

The last item on the Agenda will feature an open forum with a Q & A session for participants to get clarification from Members of the Constitutional Assembly.

Along with such interactive sessions, I trust that this conference will be a very informative and interesting program for all of you while providing the greatest opportunity for all of us to move forward towards a widely accepted Supreme Law for our country. In conclusion I must state that we are all very fortunate to be present here together today at this important event organized by the Constitutional Assembly Secretariat which brings together opinion leaders and key stakeholders from diverse sectors to gain greater understanding of the on-going constitutional reforms.

Thank you all once again for being present here today.