

26 September 2023

**Press Statement: A referendum should be guided by a well-informed electorate, not short-term political expediency!**

On 20 September 2023, the People’s Majlis passed a resolution to direct the Elections Commission to hold a public referendum by 30 October 2023, on changing the existing system of government. The resolution was approved by 35 members, following the approval of the resolution by the Committee of the Whole House.

Following the submission of this resolution to the Elections Commission, the Commission announced that they had discussed holding the referendum by 29 October 2023. Given the electorate, political parties, civil society organisations and the media are currently engaged in preparing for the second round of the 2023 Presidential Election that will take place on 30 September 2023, there is very limited time for the planning and implementing of targeted voter information and awareness programs for a system reform referendum. This compressed timeline does not give enough time for voters to properly deliberate options in the system of government which are proposed in the referendum.

Any referendum on changing the system of governance must ensure that the electorate have a comprehensive understanding of what the proposed systems are, the resulting impacts on governance mechanisms, as well as the modifications necessitated to the legal framework by a system change.

We call on the People’s Majlis, Elections Commission and relevant stakeholders to:

- Implement a comprehensive and nation-wide voter education and awareness programme that clearly define the proposed systems of government,
- Allow adequate time and resources for robust public debate on the merits and ramifications of any change in the system of government be given before a referendum is taken,
- Organise meaningful, participatory, and inclusive public engagements in the process, especially with youth and first-time voters, prior to and following the referendum.

Holding a referendum is a resource-intensive exercise that should not be guided by short term political expediency, but by a well-informed electorate. In expediting this process, institutions must consider their mandate to ensure public funds are spent responsibly and dedicate sufficient time to ensure not just the thorough and inclusive dissemination of information, but ultimately, an earnest and meaningful consultation that reflects the will of the voters.

-ENDS-

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