

PAFFREL, CMEV hand over draft Bill to Minister Mustapha

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The Peoples' Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) together with the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) yesterday handed over a draft Bill aiming to limit election campaign spending to Local Government and Provincial Councils Minister Faiszer Mustapha.

PAFFREL Executive Director Rohana Hettiarachchi speaking to the Daily News said it was a result of discussions held within the Cabinet Subcommittee appointed to look into the amendments to the Local Government Act.

"We had wide consultations with the Elections Commission (EC), political parties and civil society organisations to draft the Bill," said Hettiarachchi who has also sent a draft to all Members of Parliament for consideration.

Minister Mustapha, he said had agreed to present the Bill to Cabinet and to Parliament for approval. The minister will discuss the Bill with the President and Prime Minister soon, he said.

One of the key changes the Bill has proposed is to have all candidates open a separate bank account

when contesting an election and have all funds for a campaign directed to it.

"Candidates have to audit the account and submit its accounts to the Elections Commission after the election. There should be a mechanism for the Elections Commission to monitor the accounts prior to that too," Hettiarachchi said.

PAFFREL and CMEV have proposed that the EC set a maximum limit a candidate can spend depending on the population of his/her electorate. They have suggested that Rs. 50 per voter be allowed for Local Government elec-

tions and Rs. 100 per voter for Parliamentary elections. "Every five year period, the EC can review this limit," he said.

The Bill has proposed that limits be placed on the types of businesses that can donate to campaigns and to decree the maximum amount a donor can make to a campaign.

"This is not an easy thing to do. Even if we do manage to make it law, it will be difficult to implement the law.

The Election Law states that candidates cannot distribute any form of gift among voters, but we know through experience

that it happens anyway," the PAFFREL Executive Director said.

Hettiarachchi said the Bill was a positive step in the right direction.

Campaign finances have been a controversial issue for political parties with the Prime Minister stating that there needed to be a control and transparency in political financing. Increasing expenditure during elections also means that only the rich or those who are able to raise large amounts can contest for public office, he said.

"A Local Government member would earn a maximum of Rs. 500,000 for

his full term, but he would spend around Rs 1-10 million to get elected. It is not surprising that there is corruption," Hettiarachchi said.

PAFFREL and CMEV are determined that a Bill on campaign finances be passed and said that if Minister Mustapha failed to present it to Parliament, they could lobby the MPs to present it as a private member Bill.

"We have 26 MPs who have pledged to stand for clean politics, so hopefully, one of them will do this. This is not a perfect Bill, but it is a good start," Hettiarachchi said.