

Alumni Statement on the Future of Jaffna College

We, the undersigned alumni of Jaffna College, are gravely concerned about the future of Jaffna College as the intransigence on the part of the Board of Directors to introduce key reforms in the governance and administration of our almamater has begun to cripple the everyday life of the College. We are disappointed that the Board of Directors of Jaffna College lost the opportunity to bring about the reforms prescribed by the Trustees in their letter dated 5 January 2017 and subsequent communications to the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Jaffna College through the year.

The Trustees of Jaffna College Funds were unequivocal in their position that the College required some far-reaching reforms in the areas of management, financial administration and recruitment. The alumni associations of Jaffna College all over the world unreservedly endorsed those reforms in the statements they issued in 2017. The Trustees also requested the Board to have serious and sincere consultations with various stakeholders of the College such as the alumni, teachers and parents in making the school and its governance more inclusive, democratic and transparent. To the best of our knowledge, the Board has not shown any genuine interest in initiating such conversations on these matters with any of these groups.

The responses and proposals for reforms sent to the Trustees by the Board of Directors were not shared with the Jaffna College Alumni Association. Based on the Trustees' letters to the Chairperson of the Board which were shared with the alumni and others, we can reasonably conclude that the Board is unwilling to bring about any major reforms that would lead to greater democratization and transparency in the school and the Board. It appears that some cosmetic changes have been proposed and some documents related to the future management of the school have been submitted. But we are still unaware of the content of any of those documents and whether the Board implements what it has pledged in its submissions.

Despite the changes demanded by the Trustees, alumni and the people of Vaddukoddai and neighboring communities in their statement to the Trustees recently, teachers and administrators continue to use the school for their private businesses such as catering and photography.

At least two non-academic staff were appointed to work in the Daniel Poor Library of Jaffna College recently. The administration did not follow proper procedure in making these appointments. Further, one of these new appointees has been asked to substitute for a teacher in the primary school who is away on maternity leave. We have time and again pointed out that those who teach in the Primary School must possess qualifications in primary education. But the Board and the administrators of the College continue to downplay this requirement when assigning teachers to the primary classes.

Even this year's timetable demonstrates that the administrators who are responsible for subject allocations have assigned various subjects including English, Geography and Science to persons who are not appropriately qualified to teach those subjects.

Based on one of the responses by the Trustees to the Chairperson of the Board, we infer that the Board is not keen to have an external member from the Ministry/Department of Education on the

recruitment panel and wants the entire recruitment process to be handled by internal members of the College and the Board. We believe having an external member on the recruitment panel is essential to ensure a fair and transparent process is followed when new teachers and employees are recruited to the College.

Although the newsletter sent to the alumni in 2017 states that old students are welcome to view the minutes of the Board meetings kept in the Principal's office, the Principal recently informed some alumni who approached him to go through the minutes that they should get the Chairperson's permission to view the minutes.

A meeting of the Executive Committee of Jaffna College Alumni Association (JCAA) was held on the 3rd of March 2018 at Jaffna College. Mr. Kangaratnam Sugash (Alumni Representative to the Board) handed Mr. S.J. Niroshan (President, JCAA) a copy of the current constitution of the Board of Directors of Jaffna College which the former said was given to him by the Principal a few months ago. As the Trustees and many other stakeholders of the College are aware, the alumni of Jaffna College had been asking for a copy of the constitution of the Board of Directors since 2008. Mr. Velupillai, who was the Alumni Representative to the Board in the late 2000s, sent a letter on the 27th of June 2008 to the then Chairman, Secretary and the Principal of Jaffna College requesting a copy of the constitution. His letter was contemptuously ignored. We have it that he walked out of one of the Board meetings in protest.

Since the end of Mr. Velupillai's term, two others have represented the Alumni on the Board. A copy of the constitution was given to the present Alumni Representative only in 2017, more than nine years after the original request was made. That it has taken more than nine years for the governing body of a school well-known for its democratic traditions to release its constitution to one of its own members is utterly shocking and disgusting. It demonstrates the extent to which fundamental democratic norms have been violated by the Board of Directors, especially its leadership.

In a letter dated 28 June 2008, Mr. Velupillai informed the Chairman of the Board that Article VI, Clause 7 of the 1989 constitution had been violated. This clause states that "[n]o elected member of the Board of Directors shall be eligible for more than two successive terms, excepting those who, as head of their Church, represent that Church on the Board of Directors." The Trustees should look into this allegation. We are concerned about the legality and constitutionality of all the subsequent decisions made by the Board.

We continue to believe the changes proposed by the Trustees are vital for Jaffna College, if it is to become an educational institution that upholds such values as transparency, accountability, truthfulness and democracy. The actions of the current Board demonstrate indubitably that such changes are not possible under a constitution that grants excessive powers to the Bishop of the JDCSI and the JDCSI's nominees to the Board. We are thoroughly convinced that the membership of the Board should be radically diversified if the reforms proposed by the Trustees are to become effective and have any constructive impact on the affairs of the College and the Board.

We are particularly concerned about two clauses in the constitution of the Board of Directors of Jaffna College which have led to the erosion of democracy, transparency and accountability in the running of the institution; one has been in existence for several decades and the other, we learn, was introduced recently, after the consecration of the Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel Thiagarajah as the fourth Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India.

1. The Diocesan Council of JDCSI shall elect five members to the Board of Directors
2. The Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India [...] shall be the Chairperson of the Board by virtue of office

There is clear evidence that the authority the JDCSI nominees and the Bishop derive from these two clauses has been abused in the recent past. For instance, the JDCSI nominees appear to have chosen members from their own Church as the Board's nominees to the Board. As a result, JDCSI members made up nearly 80% of the Board in some years.

The minutes of the Board meeting held on the 7th of September 2013 indicates that three of the four Board nominees at the time of the meeting, namely Dr Thayalini Thiagarajah (the Chairperson's wife), the Rev. V. Pathmathayalan (a JDCSI priest) and Dr C.V. Selliah, were members of the JDCSI. The fourth member, Ms. Vijula Arulanantham, although a member of the Church of Ceylon, is a legal associate of Mr. M. A. Sumanthiran, who represents the Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel Thiagarajah in several legal disputes that the latter and the JDCSI have been embroiled in. These personal and business relations among the JDCSI members point out that there is a serious incidence of conflict of interest here.

We acknowledge that historically the American Ceylon Mission, the South India United Church and later the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India have had more representatives on the Board than those of the other Protestant Christian denominations and that almost all the past and present administrators of Jaffna College held membership in one of these churches.

We remember with gratitude the service of the past leaders and members of these Churches and bodies who played a pivotal role in shaping the vision of Jaffna College as a progressive Christian educational institution that was committed to social justice. However, the current leadership of the JDCSI and its nominees to the Board have failed to address some of the deep-rooted problems in administration and recruitment that have been plaguing the institution for the past few years. In fact, they are responsible for some of these malaises and the deterioration of the College and its infrastructure.

The alumni of Jaffna College are of the view that as an institution that values accountability and democracy highly, our school should no longer be under the authority of a Church whose leader and members have failed in their duty to ensure transparency, justice and fair play. We would like to see our school make a historic departure from a constitution that grants enormous and unchecked authority to the JDCSI and its Bishop. However, in view of the historical role Jaffna College, as a Christian institution, played in the 19th century in shaping and strengthening Jaffna's bilingual educational traditions and opening up educational opportunities for women and oppressed sections of the community, and in light of the religious diversity of today's Jaffna and

its educational institutions and schools, and taking into consideration the majoritarian threats to religious pluralism and religious minorities in the North and rest of Sri Lanka, we would like Jaffna College to remain as a Christian institution.

We call upon the Trustees of Jaffna College Funds to ensure that Jaffna College and its Board are governed by a brand-new constitution that will ensure that the Diocesan Council of the JDCSI and its Bishop have no pre-eminent role in the affairs of Jaffna College and make the College a truly multi-denominational institution.

We also demand that the recently introduced constitutional clause that makes provision for the Bishop of the JDCSI to be the Chairperson of the Board by virtue of office be scrapped forthwith and substituted with a new clause that ensures a more democratic process is followed annually in the election of the Chairperson of the Board.

We propose that the new constitution should guarantee adequate representation of the teachers and non-academic staff of Jaffna College, parents/guardians of the students, the alumni, educationists and activists from the North and rest of Sri Lanka with proven records in human rights, child rights and social justice activisms.

We fully believe that our school can march towards a successful future only if such far-reaching reforms as the ones presented above are implemented. We call upon the Trustees of Jaffna College Funds, Board of Directors of Jaffna College, administrators, teachers and non-academic staff, parents and all beneficiaries and well-wishers of the College to support our proposals for change and join our struggle to make Jaffna College a more inclusive and democratic educational institution attentive and sympathetic to the needs of the communities in Northern Sri Lanka and outside that Batticotta Seminary and Jaffna College have served for the past 195 years.

Signatories:

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