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## Building An Image Of A Secular State Gets A Beating

- **Government trying to promote Buddhism through Sri Lankan Missions**

*By Mandana Ismail Abeywickrema*



Buddha statues for Sri Lankan Missions

Sri Lankan diplomats are nonplussed about the government's move to send Buddha statues to overseas missions despite the

massive tamasha organized by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and the Presidential Secretariat last week.

Buddha statues similar to the Samadhi statue were brought to the Independence Square from the Matara Bodhi with religious events being organized in Galle and Kalutara en route to Colombo and the Maha Sangha chanting pirith all the way. The SLBFE even organized Bhakthi Gee in Colombo.

The Buddha statues were brought to the Independence Square on Wednesday (8). The statues were taken to Temple Trees the following day, on the 9th where the President handed them over to External Affairs Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris. Diplomats observe that the government's whole exercise to distribute Buddha statues to Sri Lankan missions overseas would hamper the country's image as being a secular state, Foreign Service officials observe. The propagation of religion they have said is a matter for civil society and not for a State through its foreign missions.

Following a concept of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the government has taken to propagating Buddhism in foreign countries by sending 26 Buddha statues to Sri Lankan missions overseas to commemorate the 2,600th Sambuddhathva Jayanthi.

A large number of governing party members worshiped the statues that were to be sent overseas.

Foreign Employment Promotions Minister Dilan Perera, who played a key role in organizing the event, was quoted in the international media as saying that the statues will be handed over to Sri Lankan foreign missions overseas to mark the 2600th Sambuddhathva Jayanthi.

He has told the media after the statues were brought to Colombo, that people in many countries worship Buddha statues. The Buddha statues to be handed over to Sri Lankan embassies are similar to the Samadhi Buddha statue.

"These Buddha statues will help promote Theravada Buddhism in the world and also promote characteristics of Sri Lankan Buddha statues. Sri Lankans abroad will get the chance to worship these Buddha statues," Perera has said.

Attempts by The Sunday Leader to contact Perera for a comment on the programme failed.

The External Affairs Ministry when contacted on Friday (10) was not aware of the Sri Lankan missions that would receive the statues. The Ministry said the statues would be sent to missions that do not already have Buddha statues.

Nevertheless, the decision to send Buddha statues to Sri Lankan missions would instill a feeling of religious bias in the minds of Sri Lankan expatriates including the Tamil Diaspora, with whom the government is trying to build relations.

The External Affairs Ministry has in its official website under the heading of "Protecting Sri Lankans abroad" states that it seeks to ensure the welfare of expatriate Sri Lankans through its network of Missions, Consulates and Honorary Consulates abroad. Sri Lanka's Ambassador to France, Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka when asked about the government's decision to send Buddha statues to Sri Lankan mission overseas, said that he was unaware of any such proposition.

"No such instruction to "propagate religious doctrine" has been given to our Missions overseas, and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka not being a theocratic state, I cannot see how it can," he claimed in an e-mail to The Sunday Leader.

"Thus, I rather doubt that such an instruction would be given," he added.

According to Jayatilleka, although foreign missions promote culture and civilisational heritage of a country, the propagation of religion is a matter for social or socio-cultural organizations.

"The promotion of Sri Lankan culture and civilisational heritage is another matter altogether, and Sri Lankan missions overseas do promote and protect those, as do the Missions of all countries with respect to their own cultural and civilisational heritages. The propagation of religion is a matter for civil society, or to put it differently, social and socio-cultural organizations," Jayatilleka said.

Meanwhile, a Foreign Service official who spoke on conditions of anonymity told The Sunday Leader that considering the path of reconciliation chosen by the government, it should acknowledge the fact that Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural, multi-religious state.

"Aren't we trying to portrait an image of a secular state to the international community?" the official queried.

He explained that although the government may be bound by the Constitution to safeguard Buddhism in the country, the state needs to be identified as a being secular, especially since it is a multi ethnic country.

The clause on safeguarding Buddhism was included in the Constitution due to the discrimination of the majority Buddhists in the country during the periods of Portuguese, Dutch and British.

According to the External Affairs Ministry, it is paying attention to strengthening the "public diplomacy" capabilities of Missions abroad and with the support of expatriate Sri Lankan communities seeks to change the negative perceptions about Sri Lanka that had hitherto prevailed.

However, as pointed out by the Foreign Service official, the government needs to pay special attention to building an image of a secular society and the whole exercise of sending Buddha statues overseas would only hinder the process.

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