



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

1 Candidate deposits for presidential elections increased

Election Commission officials have said a presidential election is likely to be held between September 18 and October 18 this year. On 9 April, the cabinet approved an increase in deposit required for candidates in elections to Rs. 2.6 million, while independents need to deposit Rs. 3.1 million. This is a measure to restrict the number of candidates, likely following a general awareness that this being the first elections held since the 2022 debt default, there will be an increase in the number of presidential candidates.

2 SLFP internal conflicts reach a fatal stage

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) is being pulled in different directions: One is led by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and SLFP ministers led by MP Nimal Siripala, who was appointed acting chairman of the party on 9 April, after MP Maithripala Sirisena was legally restricted from acting as the party leader; the second is the Sirisena faction and SLFP acting secretary general MP Sarathi Mithrapala; and the third is MP Dayasiri Jayasekara who is against both the above factions. The first faction seemingly supports a Wickremesinghe candidacy, the second faction is inviting external politicians to take leadership of a coalition, and the third faction is trying to prevent the SLFP from becoming a coalition partner of a Wickremesinghe candidacy.

3 SLPP disintegrates as Rajapaksa family weakens its control over SLPP-government MPs

Six MPs ('rebel group') from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by MP G. L. Pieris, have formed an alliance with the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Meanwhile, Basil Rajapaksa (BR) takes a step back, allowing for SLPP MPs to individually support any presidential candidate, confirming the declining control the Rajapaksa family has on the SLPP's government group. However, BR asks Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) to show that he has support from SJB breakaway members, for SLPP to throw its weight behind him. In the meantime, MP Prasanna Ranatunga declares open support to RW presidential candidacy with a group of over 80 SLPP members.

4 Debate between SJB and NPP presidential candidates

Both SJB & National People's Power (NPP) are laying conditions before a presidential debate. SJB argues that there must first be a debate between MP Harsha de Silva & NPP's Economic Council, which includes Sunil Handunnett. On 8 April, NPP's Harini Amarasuriya stated that a debate among all three leading presidential candidates - Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD), Sajith Premadasa, & RW must be held. Meanwhile NPP's Nalinda Jayatissa issued a statement, asking for a debate between the main candidates, and stating that if such a debate does not happen, a debate between the economic councils was possible. Both parties are trying to expose and capitalize on the other's vulnerabilities.

5 CWC's Thondaman seeks state apology for Muslim community

On 5 April, Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) leader and minister Jeevan Thondaman called for a formal government apology to the Muslim community over forced COVID cremations. He was also named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. These indicate the increasing electoral relevance of MP Thondaman, a likely partner of a Wickremesinghe-led alliance, as he tries to reach out to the Muslim voter base.

6 Dilith Jayaweera pitches himself as SLPP candidate

Dilith Jayaweera, leader of Mawbima Janatha Party, put forth his name as a potential presidential candidate for SLPP on 1 April. He was present at a discussion organized by Piripun Sri Lanka on 31 March, attended by breakaway MPs from the SLPP coalition, such as Roshan Ranasinghe, Wimal Weerawansa, & Charitha Herath. It appears Dilith Jayaweera is seeking to secure the leadership of the Sinhala Buddhist ultranationalist groups. The four year sentence handed out to Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara on 28 March is likely to be a rallying point for ultra-nationalists to regroup.

7 NPP wants northern Tamil MPs as future ministers, while ITAK internal rifts worsen

At a Northern Provincial Conference of Ceylon Teachers Service Union held in Jaffna on April 5, AKD emphasized a future government should have Tamil cabinet ministers from the North. Deviating from standard concessionary power-sharing rhetoric to Tamil political aspirations, AKD promised to tackle governance and economic issues of corruption and youth unemployment. ITAK's MP M. A. Sumanthiran attended the conference, while MP S. Shrirathar criticized AKD's inability to address Tamil community concerns, doubting his leadership capabilities among Tamils and Sinhalese. These developments indicate worsening ITAK internal conflicts, and the idea of a Tamil Hindu candidate for presidential elections gains more traction, as highlighted recently in a Shiv Sena statement.

8 RW tries to exploit SJB internal fractures

President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) is likely to drop UNP's elephant symbol and prepares to run for presidential elections as an independent candidate backed by a broad alliance. RW plays on internal conflicts emerging within SJB, by criticizing SJB for marginalizing UNPers, and for non-UNPers such as former SLPP chair and "Rajapaksa stooge" MP G. L. Peiris allegedly taking control of the SJB. Meanwhile, highlighting the need for a UNP-SJB merger, SJB MP Thalatha Athukorala bats for uniting the UNP and SJB on 6 April.

9 Lansa faction's New Alliance takes backseat

The Lansa faction, which claimed to have around 50 MPs from the SLPP, SJB, and SLFP under the "New Alliance," has gone relatively quiet. This group appears unable to generate sufficient momentum, likely due to its left, nationalist platform not gaining sufficient traction, and with SLPP minister Prasanna Ranatunga's growing importance due to the latter claiming he can deliver over 80 SLPP members to RW.

10 Wijeyadasa Rajapakse & PCR eye political platforms to launch presidential ambitions

On 1 April, Justice Minister and SLPP MP Wijeyadasa Rajapakse claimed he was in discussion with religious leaders, who requested him to be the common candidate in upcoming presidential elections. United Republic Front (URF) leader MP Patali Champika Ranawaka also said that if he was invited to contest presidential election by a newly formed alliance, he will accept it. These two statements indicate that they are looking for large enough political platforms to launch their presidential ambitions. The SLFP, which has attempted to build large coalitions in past, might look attractive to both of them.