

ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

**1 NPP demonstrates strength at multiple May day rallies**

The National People's Power (NPP) held four rallies in Colombo, Jaffna, Matara, and Anuradhapura on May 1. The large turnout at the rallies indicated the party's mobilising power and strong ability to appeal to people's sentiments of hope and change. However, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the main party in the NPP, being a leftist party, has a history of mobilising large May day rallies, which has not been really reflective of their subsequent electoral prowess.

2 Political parties attempt to mobilise trade union strikes

Several state owned enterprises and other public sector departments commenced union action this month, demanding higher salaries, and resisting economic and structural reforms. These disruptions in public services are likely to mark a new and more intensified period of strikes and union action. The main opposition forces (the NPP and Samagi Jana Balawegaya, SJB) command significant control over key trade unions, indicating the potential disruption these strikes are capable of causing in the lead up to elections.

3 SLPP indicates withdrawal of support for government

On May 12, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa urged the government to halt selling national assets and state-owned enterprises until after the next Presidential elections. He spoke of his government having had no difficulty in paying off public debt or meeting the costs of subsidies, and that SOEs his government had acquired had gone on to make profits. He stated that no one even spoke of privatisation when he was President. This is illustrative of the fracturing of the ruling coalition and the President's weakening chances of becoming one of the two main presidential candidates. Increasing pressures by the SLPP on President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) to dissolve the Parliament and hold general elections becomes increasingly likely.

4 NPP's position on power devolution to villages triggers anti-JVP scaremongering

During the May Day Rally in Anuradhapura on May 1, NPP stalwart Lal Kantha declared a future NPP government would devolve legislative and judicial authority to local levels. These remarks were capitalised by their competitors as indicative of an extreme communist form of governance if the NPP came to power, and a throwback to the JVP's extrajudicial violence in late 1980s. Clarifying Lal Kantha's statement, NPP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake said the proposed legislative and judicial mechanisms would be akin to existing mediation boards (*samatha mandala*). Later, NPP lawyers defended Lal Kantha's statement, that a future NPP government would introduce a new Constitution, that will provide for establishing such mechanisms.

5 President presents proposal to provide state lands to military

Sri Lanka has appointed a special committee, which includes the Defence Secretary, to provide state-owned lands to the military. It was reported on May 15 that President RW presented a cabinet paper to give concessions when lands are given to military personnel, as a programme which will exist parallelly to the Urumaya programme (a national programme to grant unconditional freehold ownership of lands allocated to farmers and low-income earners). This move indicates the government's attempts to appeal to the lower-ranking military personnel, especially in the Sinhala-majority rural areas (traditionally SLPP voter bases, in which the NPP is making increasing inroads). This move also coincides with pressures to cut down government expenses in terms of the IMF-driven economic restructuring programme, which includes downsizing the military.

6 TPA discusses idea of a Tamil common candidate

At the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) May Day Rally in Kilinochchi, talking about the idea of a Tamil common candidate, Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) leader Mano Ganesan said that Tamils in the North and up-country need to be considered as separate communities. Agreeing on principle to discuss the idea of a Tamil common candidate, he cast doubt on some calls for 'trading' the second preference to a Southern politician at a future Presidential election. These developments are indicative of the differences of opinion among key Tamil political constituents.

7 SLMC ups campaign gear by speaking on Palestine issue

On May 14, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader MP Rauff Hakeem called on the Sri Lankan government to suspend diplomatic ties with Israel for committing genocide in Palestine. SJB leader Sajith Premadasa attended a "Stop Genocide in Gaza" protest in Colombo the same week. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP M. A. Sumanthiran called out MP Hakeem's "hypocrisy", as the former Sri Lankan justice minister had lobbied against international accountability for the "Tamil genocide". MP Hakeem also criticised President RW for claiming credit for the Iranian spearheaded Uma Oya development project, when it was due to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This signalling of the SLMC leader indicates growing awareness of the increasing electoral relevance of the SLMC and other minority parties in upcoming elections.

8 SJB and UNP compete to disown former MP Diana Gamage

A three-judge Supreme Court bench decided that State Tourism Minister Diana Gamage is not eligible to hold an MP post after a legal case challenging her eligibility over holding the MP post due to her foreign citizenship. MP Gamage entered parliament through the national list under the main opposition SJB, crossing over to the government in 2020. Subsequent questions about whether this invalidated SJB's presence in parliament have been revealed as baseless. The episode has raised ethical concerns about party conduct and member scrutinisation processes, as well as functioning of the electoral system. The SJB stands to gain from the subsequent appointment of MP Mujibur Rahman, a key SJB speaker.

9 CBK says no decision to support any party as yet

On April 29, former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (CBK) declared having no intention of helping the United National Party (UNP) or any other party in upcoming elections, but only assisting rebuilding the fractured Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). However, the CBK-led SLFP group's leading members hold ministerial positions. The Sirisena faction of SLFP has appointed Wlleyadasa Rajapaksha, a current Minister, as its acting Chairman. This seems to deviate from aligning closely with the government. Meanwhile, MP Daysiri Jayaskera leads a battle to prevent SLFP becoming a government junior coalition partner. Overall, the electoral relevance of SLFP is waning, as its ideologically centre-left position is increasingly occupied by the NPP.

10 VFS scandal further dents government credibility

Controversy over the newly appointed visa facilitating agency VFS-led consortium emerged since May 5, over the higher than standard charges by the agency, which led to accusations of blatant corruption by the government. It was later reported by parliament that immigration and security ministry officials have dodged summons by the Committee of Public Finance for discussions on the issue. The episode revealed how the government's promises of anti-corruption have fallen through and how ministers act with impunity, alluding to the President's diminishing powers to restrain conduct of his cabinet.