



# ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

## 2024 Sri Lankan Elections

### 1 Factional disputes over party leadership in SLFP

The Colombo District Court issued an injunction order on 24 April preventing the appointment of Minister of Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakse as Acting Chairman of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This decision reverses the action by former President Maithripala Sirisena, who was barred by the courts to function as SLFP Chairperson. The unfolding Sirisena-CBK-Dayasiri Jayasekara three-corner fight is likely to reduce the electoral relevance of the SLFP in future alliance building.

### 2 SJB, NPP yet to finalise inter-party presidential debates

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and National People's Power (NPP) continue to argue on the sequence and nature of an inter-party presidential debate. The NPP argues it was their leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake who first challenged SJB leader Sajith Premadasa for a debate. The SJB is calling for an election debate between the Economic Councils of the two parties, building on their criticism of the NPP's lack of economic governance expertise, such as the NPP proposal of a 'debt audit' prior to restructuring Sri Lanka's international sovereign bonds. Both parties wish to play to their perceived strengths. Meanwhile, the United National Party (UNP) general secretary dismissed the debate as a "battle of empty rhetoric" as both parties did not take up the challenge of governing the country at the height of the 2022 financial crisis.

### 3 Political parties plan to mobilise large May Day rallies

As all political parties gear up for upcoming May day rallies, on 23 April, the SJB accused the Government of attempting to disrupt the party's rally on May Day by not allowing them to reserve the F. R. Senanayake Avenue area for their rally, while facilitating the NPP to hold their May Day rally at this venue. These developments indicate growing competition between the UNP and SJB, due to their overlapping political identities, and needing to stand out as elections approach.

### 4 Unions protests signal upcoming electoral manoeuvring

On 25 April, trade unions representing Sri Lanka's state-run Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) threatened to escalate union action to defeat the new electricity bill if passed in Parliament. This indicates a potential culmination of union-led protests against the IMF-linked reforms agenda of the government. In the build-up to elections, these union actions are likely to be capitalised by political forces, as the most powerful unions in the power and energy sectors have links with political parties currently in the opposition.

### 5 TPA green lights any ruling coalition while CWC and NUW party positions intensify

On 21 April, upcountry plantation workers initiated a strike organised by the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), demanding a minimum daily wage of Rs. 1700 as instructed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW). SJB MP Palani Digambaram, the Leader of the National Union of Workers (NUW), stated that trade union action was unsuccessful because of certain political motives, effectively lashing out at CWC's close links with the government. Meanwhile, Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) leader MP Mano Ganesan said at a press conference on 24 April that the SJB is the front runner in upcoming presidential elections, indicating he is leaning towards an SJB alliance. However, the MP also stated that he is open to working with any other future RW-led or NPP-led government.

### 6 Common Tamil presidential candidate proposals continue

On 16 April, it was reported that the Democratic Tamil National Alliance, a breakaway faction from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), along with Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) and Thamizh Makkal Thesiya Kootani (TMTK) led by C. V. Wigneswaran, have come to a consensus to nominate a candidate for the upcoming elections. Meanwhile, former Chairman of the Northern Provincial Council, C. V. K Sivagnanam, maintained on 12 April that the TNA would not field a common Tamil candidate. As many political parties and leaders get involved in this discourse, the possibility of a Tamil presidential candidate is gradually increasing.

### 7 Political relevance of Easter attacks investigations tested

On 21 April, the Sri Lankan parliament discussed the issue of the investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday terror attacks. Government speakers accused the Opposition of politicising the issue by bringing it up in parliament. The relevance of the Easter attacks, over the lack of accountability and justice in apprehending those responsible in power, will be tested in the run up to the presidential elections.

### 8 Uma Oya development project launch confers political capital to RW and Rajapaksa

Sri Lankan President RW and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi jointly inaugurated the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project (UOMDP) on 24 April. The project is a positive development for RW and the SLPP, especially as the development project brings water to areas that are Rajapaksa heartlands (and are areas where the NPP has been making inroads). Meanwhile, the NPP likely suffers an electoral setback, as it continues to oppose the project as a total failure.

### 9 SLPP remains indefinite on presidential candidate

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP Rohitha Abeygunawardena confirmed on 10 April that the party's politburo meeting had determined that the party's candidate and the declaration of candidacy would solely be made by party leader Mahinda Rajapaksa. Meanwhile, Basil Rajapaksa and President Ranil Wickremesinghe have met for another round of talks on upcoming elections, on 24 April, where it was said he had asked RW to announce his candidacy after which the SLPP will announce their presidential candidate.

### 10 Public response to former MP Thewarapperuma's death

A former UNP Deputy Minister, Palitha Thewarapperuma's death on 16 April sparked widespread social media appreciation for his dedicated service to the public. Popular support for the former MP was similar to the large number of public which turned up at former MP Sanath Nishantha's funeral in January this year, despite social media posts being largely antagonistic regarding the latter's conduct in politics. These developments indicate how patronage politics continue to remain relevant in the post-aragalaya period and are likely to play a role in the upcoming elections.