

ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & POLICY**1 UNP secretary general proposes election postponement**

On 28 May, United National Party (UNP) secretary general Palitha Range Bandara proposed a referendum to postpone parliamentary & presidential elections by 2 years to allow President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) to continue for another two years and implement ongoing economic reforms. The same day, President RW & other UNP members distanced themselves from the proposal, stating there was no plan to delay elections. The government's main party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), were quick to oppose the proposal. Furthermore, the legality of the proposal is questionable. The Sri Lankan Constitution does not provide for referendums that are binding. Even if a referendum is passed, a Constitutional reform is necessary with two-thirds majority in parliament.

2 Nationalist forces form new alliance 'Sarvajana Balaya'

A new political alliance named Sarvajana Balaya was launched on 27 May. The coalition includes Dilith Jayaweera's Mawbima Janatha Party, Wimal Weerawansa's National Freedom Front, Udaya Gammanpila's Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, Vasudeva Nanayakkara's Democratic Left Front, the Communist Party, Gevindu Kumaratunga's Yuthukama National Organisation, and independent MPs led by Channa Jayasumana. All members of the Sarvajana Balaya were strong Rajapaksa supporters in the past and formed a strong nationalist lobby until 2022. Dr Sarath Amunugama, a prominent figure within Dilith Jayaweera's Mawbima Janatha Party, tendered his resignation on May 28, and this act coincided with the forming of the Sarvajana Balaya.

3 Political coalitions show short lifespans

Since political upheaval in 2022 and de-legitimisation of SLPP government, many MPs became independent. Since then, they formed alternative coalitions, such as Dallas-led Helicopter alliance & Nidahasa Janatha Sabhawa, Uththara Lanka Sabhagaya which brought together Sinhala Buddhist nationalist & left parties, Lansa faction represented by 'New Alliance', an independent group of MPs in support of President RW led by MP Anura Priyadarshana Yapa, & Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) ousted secretary general MP Dayasiri Jayasekara's political coalition. Many such coalitions further fragmented and metamorphosed into others. Sarvajana Balaya is the latest of these. The United Republican Front (URF), that celebrated its 1st anniversary on 01 June, in an attempt to show its political relevance & power, is another such political entity. In a recent interview circulated heavily on social media, URF leader Patali Champika Ranawaka said he would not hesitate to become a common Presidential candidate if President RW invited him.

4 Sarath Fonseka likely to run for presidency

On 22 May, it was reported that former Army Commander & Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) Chairman, MP Sarath Fonseka will run for Presidency. Sources close to MP Fonseka suggest he will formally announce candidacy in June, as an independent candidate. This development, if realised, indicates a manifestation of reported rifts between MP Fonseka and SJB Leader, Sajith Premadasa. However, no key SJB members commented or supported Fonseka on the news. Meanwhile, SJB MPs & organisers in Gampaha district demanded that disciplinary action be taken against MP Fonseka for undermining SJB's operations in the district.

5 Trivialism overrides SJB and JVP unlikely debate

The inability of SJB & National People's Power (NPP) to reach an agreement on dates for a debate between the party leaders & economic teams continues. At a recent SJB rally in Polonnaruwa, it was announced that a former JVP politician at local government level had crossed over to the SJB. However, NPP leader Anura Kumara Dissonayake retaliated soon afterwards that the person was not a JVP member but an SLFP member. The unending back and forth between the two parties and the lack of new political rhetoric, beyond the debate over the debate and SJB's criticism of the NPP lacking economic expertise, are likely to frustrate voters who are looking for a more informed and transparent policy discourse.

6 President adopts development as main approach to ethnic question

On 25 May, President RW met with former Northern Province Chief Minister & Tamil People's National Alliance (TPNA) MP C. V. Wigneswaran to discuss development initiatives in the North. The President distributed 1,286 freehold deeds in Jaffna & promised Jaffna Hospital would be upgraded as a national hospital in near future. On 30 May, Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) Minister Jeevan Thondaman was reported to have threatened plantation owners to implement the government policy of a minimum wage for plantation workers. While a major section of the Tamil political community emphasises political rights of Tamil people, the President is seen to shift to development-related issues, as many former Southern political leaders have done. Meanwhile, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) MP M. A. Sumanthiran called for a special meeting with all politicians & members of Tamil political parties on 9 June to examine pros & cons of appointing a common Tamil presidential candidate.

7 Economic reform bills become issues for parties to test strength

The recently gazetted Economic Transformation Bill, Public Financial Management Bill, & Public Debt Management Bill have become rallying points for political forces to test their strength. On 28 May, civil groups sympathetic to SLPP protested at Nelum Mawatha demanding SLPP MPs to oppose bills enabling selling 'national assets'. On 24 May, the NPP announced it will challenge the Economic Transformation Bill before the Supreme Court. The SJB too criticised the government for rushing economic reform bills without stakeholder consultation & questioned politicisation enabled by new laws. Meanwhile, on 17 May, State Minister of Finance Shehan Semasinghe claimed to get death threats from groups who may be attempting to jeopardise the government's ongoing economic reforms. No updates were provided following investigations by police.

8 NPP's war victory rhetoric likely to alienate Tamil voters

On 21 May, addressing former military officers in Rathnapura during a party meeting, NPP stalwart Lal Kantha said the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, the main party within the NPP) must get credit for mobilising ideological & political support to fight and win the war against the LTTE. The NPP has been canvassing the ex-military community in the run-up to Sri Lanka's upcoming presidential elections. These comments come in the backdrop of the government downsizing its army to 100,000 by 2030 from the current 208,000, as part of IMF conditionalities to reduce state expenditures, a politically expensive decision. The NPP's comments are likely to appeal to its Sinhala Buddhist nationalist voter base, while alienating minority Tamil votes.

9 SLPP support for President becomes uncertain

Former President & SLPP leader MP Mahinda Rajapaksa said SLPP will wait for President RW to announce his candidacy before announcing SLPP presidential candidate. There are two main implications of this statement. First, if SLPP's Rajapaksa faction pulls out from supporting RW, the Rajapaksa faction's real strength would become evident, further diminishing their chances of negotiation. Second, if SLPP were to withdraw support of RW candidacy, this allows RW to renew his legitimacy by getting support from a breakaway SJB group & minority political parties.

10 SLFP's Dayasiri faction to support SJB under UPFA banner

MP Dayasiri Jayasekera and former MP Thilanga Sumathipala, representing a breakaway SLFP group, under the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) banner, announced plans on 02 June to negotiate with the SJB to support them at the presidential elections. The group said it is unlikely for them to support the NPP or the government. This announcement coincides with the MP Nimal Siripala de Silva SLFP faction reiterating their support of the government. Meanwhile, the small SLFP group led by former President Maithripala Sirisena and Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapaksa has not yet indicated their alliance desires.

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