

ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

1 SJB and NPP talk about 13 Amendment and Provincial Councils

On 10 June, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader MP Sajith Premadasa promised in Jaffna that a future SJB government will implement the 13th amendment to the Constitution. Premadasa also proposed devolving power to the village level through a Grama Rajya system. On 11 June, National Peoples' Power (NPP) leader MP Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) met Tamil political leaders at the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) office in Jaffna. AKD assured a future NPP government would continue the Provincial Council (PC) system and bring a new Constitution aimed at solving the ethnic question. All the key presidential candidates are seen to converge on the continuity of PCs, while the SJB and President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) seem to move towards full implementation of the 13 Amendment.

2 President RW Intensifies campaign activities

While not announcing himself as a candidate yet, President RW has embarked on a number of campaign activities. This includes establishing a political office, increasing public addresses, and promising employment and land ownership in a bid to increase his popularity. This uptick in campaign activities comes alongside Sri Lanka getting its third tranche of the IMF loan and the President's announcement that an external debt restructuring agreement is forthcoming, validating his economic stabilisation narrative. Meanwhile, on 20 June, the President tendered an apology in Parliament for the government's decision to enforce cremations during the Covid-19 pandemic and announced a new Burial Rights Bill. In an attempt to win over advocates of gender and sexual rights, the Gender Equality Bill was also recently tabled in Parliament. All these moves indicate his campaign strategy to appeal to as many voter constituencies as possible.

3 NPP show of power with retired senior police officers checked

Former Directors of the Criminal Investigation Department, Retired Senior DIG Ravi Seneviratne and Retired SSP Shani Abeysekera attended an NPP conference of retired police officers on 9 June. In response, several other retired police officers, including former Inspector Generals of Police voiced their discontent regarding the endorsement of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led NPP, given the latter's violent history during past insurgencies. Moreover, the endorsement of the NPP by former police heads has also led to criticism by other political camps, to the extent of linking the 2019 Easter Bombings to the JVP. AKD's outreach to the diaspora continued with his London visit on 15 June.

4 Sarvajana Balaya holds inaugural rally in Nugegoda

The inaugural public rally of the Sarvajana Balaya was held in Nugegoda on 18 June. Representatives from seven political parties and organisations formed the Sarvajana Balaya alliance, including the National Freedom Front, Mawbima Janatha Party, Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, and the Independent MP's Forum. The rally's slogan was "A fresh hope for the 69 lakhs", referring to Gotabaya Rajapaksa voters of 2019. This new platform's key political stances include opposition to the IMF programme (foregrounding economic nationalism), opposition to the 13th Amendment, anti-privatisation of public enterprises, and opposition to the Gender Equality Bill.

5 Wijeyadasa Rajapakse source of RW-Rajapaksa infighting

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) Politburo authorised disciplinary action against Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse on 7 June, according to MP S. B. Dissanayake, due to Rajapakse's failed attempt to be the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) Acting Chairman. In addition, SLFP former General Secretary Prof. Rohana Lakshman Piyadasa claimed that President Ranil Wickremesinghe has pressured Rajapakse to resign from the cabinet. However, Rajapakse has refuted reports that he had been asked by President RW to step down. These developments indicate the SLPP vs RW power moves, and the tensions within the SLFP as various leaders try to pull the party in multiple directions.

6 FSP fronts People's Struggle Alliance as Aragalaya's electoral platform

On 19 June, an alliance of political parties, Aragalaya and student activists, and journalists formed a new political movement called the People's Struggle Alliance. The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), the New Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party, national organiser of 'Youth for Change' Lahiru Weerasekera, former convener of the Inter-University Student's Federation (IUSF) Wasantha Mudalige, lawyer Nuwan Bopage, Tharindu Uduwaragedara of the Young Journalists' Association, and human rights lawyer Swasthika Arulingam, are among the members of the new political movement. As the People's Struggle Movement has been a political arm of the FSP even before the Aragalaya started in 2022, the FSP appears to seek political legitimacy by fronting Aragalaya activists.

7 Crossovers into and out of SJB emerge

At a press conference on 15 June, SJB MP Rajitha Senaratne declared his support for President RW. MP Senaratne stated his group of MPs and Wickremesinghe share a common stance and that he will back efforts to rebuild the country, emphasising his desire not to be seen as a traitor. Senaratne mentioned ongoing efforts to form a coalition of around 100 MPs to support nation-building, stressing that there will be no crossovers but rather a unified group dedicated to the cause. On 20 June, SJB Chairman, MP Sarath Fonseka launched a verbal attack on SJB leader Sajith Premadasa in Parliament, indicating future crossovers. Meanwhile, SLPP Thilak Rajapaksa joined SJB on 3 June, while MPs Dullas Alahapperuma, Dayasiri Jayasekara, and Roshan Ranasinghe are reported to be in discussion with SJB.

8 Executive overreach on judiciary and legislature

On 19 June, President RW accused the judiciary of 'judicial cannibalism' following its negative determination on the Gender Equality Bill. The President subsequently proposed the appointment of a select committee to review the Supreme Court's ruling. Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse accused the judiciary of misconduct and corruption. The appointment of a select committee of Parliament to reverse the Supreme Court's determination would lead to legislative overreach, facilitated by the executive branch of the government. In a similar vein, the Constitutional Council had rejected the President's unprecedented proposal to extend the tenure of Attorney-General Sanjay Rajaratnam (PC) by another six months. These moves come on the back of rumours that the President is trying to exploit Constitutional loopholes to extend his term by one more year.

9 SLFP elects new Chairman

On 19 June, the Executive Committee of the SLFP unanimously elected Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva as the party's Chairman and MP Duminda Dissanayake as the SLFP General Secretary. This came following the Colombo District Court's decision to not prevent the said meeting of the SLFP Executive Committee. This development helps President RW's potential candidacy, as this faction of the SLFP is likely to side with RW in a presidential race.

10 Anti-India narrative emerges

On 20 June, Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Jaishankar, commenced his official visit to Sri Lanka. This visit marks the first diplomatic exchange between India and Sri Lanka following the inauguration of the new government under Indian President Narendra Modi's third term. While the three main political forces (the UNP-SLPP, SJB, and NPP) see pragmatic value in engaging with India positively, fringe political movements such as the Sarvajana Balaya are seen to mobilise an anti-Indianization narrative, on claims of unsolicited business deals with Indian companies, power grid connection, and facilitating Indian currency acceptance in Sri Lanka.

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