



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & POLICY

1 President announces external debt restructuring agreements

President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) announced on June 26 that Sri Lanka reached a final agreement with official bilateral creditors. The announcement came alongside an "Aranchiya subhay" (The news is good) poster campaign, which was subverted by many groups, including a counter poster that claimed "Aranchiya subhay, Pohottuwen apekshakayek" (Good News - A candidate from SLPP). Eventually, the campaign could not convert to anything significant. RW's announcement was also accompanied by a "Meh welawey Ranil thamay" (This time, it is Ranil) poster & media campaign, also seen as a soft campaign launch for RW's Presidential bid. The debt restructuring announcement was responded by Samagi Jana Balawegaya's (SJB) MP Harsha De Silva, who said that the final haircut was lower than promised by government-linked sources previously, but that the secured haircut was due to the SJB campaigning loudly against a worse deal.

2 SLPP undecided on presidential candidate

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP Dhammika Perera stated on 5 July the SLPP must decide its presidential candidate and he is willing to be the candidate. Previously, some SLPP ministers, Arundika Fernando & Kanchana Wijesekara, expressed support for President RW. Meanwhile, on 6 July, SLPP's former minister Basil Rajapaksa (BR) declared the intention to continue supporting President RW in government until elections. BR's comments follow an alleged argument between him and SLPP MP Nimal Lansa & SLFP MP Duminda Dissanayake, the latter having suggested to drop the Rajapaksas as a campaign strategy & BR responding "if you don't want us once, we don't want you a hundred times". Meanwhile, on 27 June, MP Namal Rajapaksa said that the party disagrees with some of President RW's policies as they do not align with those of the SLPP. In addition, the SLPP also said that the party will consider granting the Presidential candidacy to President RW if he seeks membership in the SLPP. These developments indicate divisions within the SLPP on backing RW as a presidential candidate.

3 President's term discrepancy resolved by courts

On 8 July, the Supreme Court turned down a petition seeking clarity on the tenure of the current President as per the Constitution. The petition did not seem to have the support of any major political force, making it unclear if either the President or an opposition group was behind it. The petition exhausted the argument if the President's term could be extended by another year. Meanwhile, the Elections Commission will be empowered to fix a date for the Presidential Election on July 17th.

4 Passing of TNA leader R. Sampanthan

Leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) & former Opposition Leader R. Sampanthan passed away on 1 July. This opens up leadership struggles within the TNA. Meanwhile a number of Tamil political actors have expressed support for President RW. MP C.V. Vigneswaran from Tamil People's National Alliance supported postponing the presidential election; State Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, also known as 'Pillayan', leader of Tamil Makkal Viduthalaip Puligal, announced that he and his party will endorse President RW in the upcoming Presidential Election. Similarly, former MP Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, alias 'Karuna Amman', leader of the Tamil United Freedom Front, confirmed that he and his party will also support President RW in the presidential poll. Ceylon Workers' Congress leader, Jeevan Thondaman, also has endorsed postponing elections. These developments indicate the emerging traction President RW is gaining among Tamil political parties.

5 SLFP leadership and membership struggles continue

On 3 July, the Colombo District Court issued an injunction order preventing the decision taken by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to remove its former General Secretary (Gen-Sec) MP Dayasiri Jayasekara from acting and interfering in his position as Gen-Sec & removing his party membership. However, the RW-leaning Nimal Siripala de Silva faction of SLPP sought legal action to prevent him from acting in the post of Secretary General. Meanwhile, former President Maithripala Sirisena who sacked MP Jayasekera from the position of Gen-Sec has said he is willing to work with him in the future. Both Sirisena and Jayasekara are united by opposition to the Nimal Siripala faction, and the distance they seem to be trying to maintain from RW, for now.

6 Public sector trade unions strike

Over 200 public sector trade unions engaged in a trade union action during 8-9 July. The strikes come alongside strikes by school teachers & principals, customs, & long-drawn strikes of university non-academic staff. These strikes demand addressing salary discrepancies & other benefits in the public sector. In response, Treasury Secretary Mahinda Siriwardana said on 8 July that for a salary increase, the Value Added Tax will need to be increased from 18% to 21%. The timing of these strikes, in the lead up to elections and as the government is entering debt repayment agreements, indicate political motives, such as increasing public displeasure at governance failures & breakdown of services. In general, the National People's Power (NPP) appears to have closer links with the striking trade unions, than SJB or any other political party.

7 Opposition parties call out resource allocations by President

In June, Opposition party leaders criticised President RW's move to allocate funds under the decentralised budget to a select group of MPs. SLFP MP Dayasiri Jayasekara, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) Leader & SJB MP Rauff Hakeem, & Chief Opposition Whip SJB MP Lakshman Kiriella called on Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena to intervene & ensure fair distribution of funds under the decentralised budget. Meanwhile, direct & indirect benefits that the executive arm of government provides to a select group of legislators were also discussed. Such benefits include favourable budget allocations for development work in respective regions of MPs & vehicles provided from ministries/President's office under various pretexts. The complex & unequal distribution of benefits to loyalists at the cost of tax money has been a difficult area to regulate by prevailing electoral law regime.

8 SJB attacks NPP's Science Policy while NPP & UNP try to side-line SJB

On 29 June, NPP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake announced release of party's new Science & Technology policy framework, titled "Quantum Leap". Meanwhile, an SJB strategy to counter NPP is emphasising any contradictions to the clean, corrupt-free, & progressive narrative that NPP portrays itself to be. This includes a video of NPP Lal Kantha on social media jokingly hinting at violence against women, allegations of key NPP member Wasantha Samarasinghe of corruption, & portrayal of former JVP MP Sunil Handunethithi of incompetence in comments on digital dissemination. While the SJB targets the NPP frequently, NPP & RW-led government's discourse refer to each other as key opponents, side-lining SJB. This could be part of a strategy to elevate each other as their main opponent, as they realise SJB is their greatest threat. The NPP prefers RW as its main opponent, since it has more political mileage against RW, & RW prefers NPP as its main opponent, as his profile & policies stand out from NPP more than from those of SJB.

9 Crossovers rumours and signalling continue

Opposition MPs Sarath Fonseka & Patali Champika Ranawaka (PCR) refuted rumours of joining the government. Simultaneously, President RW attended the launch of Fonseka's book titled "The Army Commander's Promise to the Nation - I will not leave this war to the next Army Commander". Meanwhile, All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) MP Rishad Bathiudeen praised RW for the support he had given by ways of decentralized budget allocations. On 8 July, Gampaha District SJB MP Harshana Rajakaruna announced that two SJB MPs from Gampaha & Kalutara Districts will join the government. As elections approach, a series of crossovers can be expected to & from the SJB. Meanwhile, former SJB MP Hirunika Premachandra was sentenced to prison for three years rigorous imprisonment for a 2015 abduction of a young man in Dematagoda.

10 Campaign Finance Law shows its Limitations

The Elections Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) keeps renewing media guidelines as Local Government elections have not been held & the country is technically in an election period. The upcoming Presidential elections will likely serve as the first real test for the newly enacted Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023. As election rallies are held & lavish propaganda campaigns launched, ECSL has made no comments, despite its own directives of being in an election period. Anticipating stricter regulations to be in place when Presidential elections are announced, political parties & leaders are currently intensifying election expenditure, especially on electronic & social media. Key challenges to ECSL will include monitoring expenditure on political parties & candidates through indirect means, such as using social media promotion farms manned with paid employees to create a fake effect of an organic following. These subversions are likely to undermine expenditure limits to be introduced by ECSL to candidates & parties.

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