



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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1 Presidential Elections to be held on 21 September 2024

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) announced 21 September as the date of presidential elections, with 15 August as the date of nomination of candidates. Speculations that parliament would be dissolved have not materialised. While there is no constitutional barrier for President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) to do so, the issue of funding two elections will add complications. The announcement of the election date comes after growing concerns by the opposition, including civil society, that the government was trying to delay elections through a constitutional amendment.

2 Government stance on IGP paves way for constitutional crisis

On 24 July, the Supreme Court issued an interim order preventing Deshabandu Tennakoon from serving as Inspector General of Police (IGP). The interim order was based on fundamental rights violation petitions made by nine groups. The cabinet of ministers subsequently called for an urgent meeting, and thereafter informed the Speaker of Parliament that with elections declared & as a presidential candidate, the President will refrain from getting involved in this matter. On 26 July, PM Dinesh Gunawardena announced in Parliament that the government refuses to accept the Supreme Court's decision, claiming that the President lacks legal provisions under the current framework to appoint an Acting IGP. However, none of these attempts nullifies the decision of the Supreme Court and there is nothing constitutionally obstructing the duty of the President to carry out the order of the Supreme Court, despite being a presidential candidate.

3 Tamil parties to field common presidential candidate

Several Tamil political parties & civil organisations in Jaffna, including TPNA, TELO, PLOTE, TNP and EPRLF, agreed on 22 July to field a common Tamil candidate for the presidential election. Notably, two of the largest Tamil political parties, Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) and All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), did not join this alliance or officially express their stance on fielding a common Tamil candidate. This move will mostly impact forerunning political parties who will have to rely on Tamil votes to win a majority in a three-or-more horse race, if a second preference support is to be extended to a mainstream candidate. A common candidate of the Tamil people might make nationalist demands such as a North and East merger & internationally-involved reconciliation and transitional justice process. Previously, there was a drive for the Tamil common candidate to be a Hindu candidate. This appears to have subsided.

4 BBS General Secretary Ven. Gnanasara Thera released on bail

Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera, General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), was granted bail by the Colombo High Court on 22 July. Speaking at a press conference, Ven. Gnanasara said he needs a place in Parliament to address the issue of Muslim extremism, as mainstream parties do not provide a platform for him to do so and he gets accused of hate speech when he raises the issue outside parliament. He also said that he aims to influence the lawmaking process. These comments indicate he is likely to run for elections through a Buddhist nationalist party. In the 2020 general election, Ven. Gnanasara was the leading figure in the Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya that won a national list seat, which Ven. Athuraliye Rathana now occupies. These developments are likely to polarise the electoral space, forcing mainstream political parties to make difficult concessions to Buddhist ultra-nationalist demands.

5 Sarath Fonseka & Wijeyadasa Rajapakse make presidential bid.

On 25 July, Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse announced he will be running for president on an independent platform. The same day, former army chief and SJB parliamentarian Sarath Fonseka also announced his intention to contest as an independent candidate for presidential elections. These candidacies, which have low electoral potential, can be interpreted as attempts to chip away mainly at SJB and NPP voter bases. This adds to the possibility of a second round of counting, in the chance that no one candidate gets more than 50% of the vote. On 26 July, President RW was declared as an independent candidate for the forthcoming presidential election, by depositing a bond at the ECSL. By running as an independent candidate, the President can be seen as trying to garner the support of a wide range of political forces, many of whom would be diametrically opposed to a party affiliation of the UNP or SLPP.

6 Samagi Jana Sandanaya to be announced on 8 August

The Nidahasa Janatha Sabawa (NJS), led by MP Dullas Alahapperuma, formed an alliance with the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) on 10 July. On 23 July, SJB General Secretary Ranjith Maddumabandara said that 30 MPs will be joining the main Opposition Party-led political Alliance that is being formed for the upcoming election – the Samagi Jana Sandanaya (SJS) – before its launch on 08 August. Forming such big-tent alliances is critical for the SJB, as the potential announcement of a Tamil candidate and any withdrawal of support by key Tamil political parties will impact the SJB's electoral chances significantly.

7 Rajapaksa support for Wickremesinghe still uncertain

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) stalwart Basil Rajapaksa met President RW on 25 July to discuss who the SLPP would support at the coming presidential election. The same day, 30 ministers, state ministers and government MPs met SLPP leader Mahinda Rajapaksa & shared that a majority of SLPP MPs will support RW at the presidential election. Meanwhile, national organiser of SLPP MP Namal Rajapaksa accused President RW of dividing political parties & attempting to split the SLPP. These accusations come after many SLPP stalwarts joined RW on stage at the recent "Ekwa Jayagamu" (Let's Win Together) series of rallies and extended their support to him. The SLPP is left with the choice of either backing RW and keeping the party intact, or fielding their own candidate and fragmenting the SLPP.

8 Competing attempts to win up-country Tamil votes

The government has been attempting to win up-country Tamil votes, through the cabinet approving an increased daily minimum wage for plantation workers, and promising land plots of 10 perches in plantation settlements. General Secretary of Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), Minister Jeevan Thondaman, is thus seen to mobilise a popular campaign in response to a decision by the Nuwara Eliya Magistrate's Court order on 22 July to arrest him. Meanwhile, Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), led by MP Mano Ganesan, submitted an alternative six-point proposal to the President, saying that there was no point in keeping the plantation workers isolated "in the hills," and that they too must be resettled in areas close to non-plantation areas, which will allow them to integrate into the mainstream. For national integration, overcoming electoral and labour exploitation of the plantation workers, the proposals by the TPA seem appropriate.

9 National People's Power pre-empts coming to power

The National People's Power (NPP), announced the launch of an Election Monitoring Centre, headed by former senior police officers who previously led the Police Department's election affairs unit. Alongside this, threats to prominent journalists such as Hudson Samarasinghe & Chamuditha Samarawickrama have been made repeatedly by senior Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) members of the NPP, including Lal Kantha & Wasantha Samarasinhe. Meanwhile, NPP frontrunner, Sunil Handunnetti welcomed black money to a national project fund to be set up under a NPP government. These actions allude to populist appeals for taking the law into one's hand & subverting democratic processes as the party's electoral confidence grows.

10 President attempts to win over Muslim votes

President Wickremesinghe visited politician M. L. A. M. Hizbullah's Batticaloa university on 20 July, to hand over the university back to Hizbullah which had been taken over by the military following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. On 24 July, the government formally apologised to the Muslim community for forcing cremations on Covid-19 victims, in contravention with Islamic rites. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) MP Hakeem criticised President RW for dealing individually with selected SLMC MPs instead of discussing as a political party, and for allocating funds from the decentralised budget to a few selected SLMC MPs on a preferential basis. These events show the President trying symbolic as well as patronage-based attempts to appeal to Muslim politicians and the community.

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