



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

11

1 2024 presidential election: A three-cornered battle

39 candidates submitted nominations for Sri Lanka's presidential election on 15 August. The election is a three-cornered battle between President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) who is an independent candidate, Opposition Leader and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader, Sajith Premadasa, and leader of the National People's Power (NPP) Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD). The high number of candidates is claimed to be mainly proxy candidates, whose function is to attract supporters to another candidate or detract voters from another candidate. At this presidential election, no candidate is expected to obtain a clear majority, which would lead to counting the second and third preferences (of votes for eliminated candidates) cast in favour of the leading two candidates. Such a second count is unprecedented in Sri Lanka, and may risk increased social polarisation and legitimacy deficits of the incoming president.

2 Ranil Wickremesinghe's 'Puluwan Sri Lanka' presidential campaign

President RW is contesting as an independent candidate under the gas cylinder symbol and the Puluwan Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Can) campaign launched on 16 August. Among those backing him are (allegedly) 94 Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) ministers and MPs, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) led by Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, and approximately 116 former Provincial Council members from the SLPP and United National Party (UNP). This has likely driven the patronage politics-based electoral machines of the 94 SLPP MPs to back RW, where there is more room for political manoeuvring than in the 'family-first' SLPP. Former minister and SJB heavyweight, MP Rajitha Senarathne, also recently pledged his support for President RW. Meanwhile, the President is responding to his unpopularity over implementation of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) reforms programme, by proposing an income tax relief through adjusting tax slabs, as the tax burden has become a key topic in the presidential election campaign.

3 SLFP splits three-ways and PA revived

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) is facing internal divisions as different factions endorse competing presidential candidates. The SLFP faction led by Dayasiri Jayasekara supports Sajith Premadasa, while the SLFP faction led by Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva backs President RW. A third SLFP faction led by former President Maithripala Sirisena has declared it supports no presidential candidate, amidst some reports that his support extended to President RW was rejected. On 14 August, the second faction reunited under the banner "People's Alliance (PA)" (Podujana Eksath Peramuna), which is former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's 1994 election platform. MP Anura Priyadarshana Yapa has been appointed as the leader of this new coalition which backs President RW, and includes MPs Nimal Lanza, Nalin Fernando, and others. This move brings a centre-left look and feel to their candidate, and blurs the ideological gaps among the main presidential candidates.

4 Namal Rajapaksa named SLPP presidential candidate

Namal Rajapaksa, the National Organiser of the SLPP, was nominated as the party's presidential candidate on 07 August. Former Presidents Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa have thrown their support behind his candidacy. However, the SLPP is experiencing significant internal rifts, as key members chose to endorse President RW, despite Namal Rajapaksa calling on them to return and back him and the party. SLPP secretary-general MP Sagara Kariyawasam announced that the party would not take disciplinary action against its MPs for supporting RW at this election. The SLPP fielding NR indicates a likely end of the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa alliance, although there are some that think it is a move to chip away at NPP and SJB votes. The Rajapaksa's were severely delegitimised by the Aragalaya. Namal Rajapaksa's campaign will test the party's resilience and provide him a platform to build his political career aiming at the 2025 general elections and the next presidential election.

5 Samagi Jana Sandhanaya formed

A broad alliance led by the SJB, the Samagi Jana Sandhanaya, was launched on 08 August. The alliance includes the Dayasiri Jayasekara SLFP faction, the Freedom People's Congress led by MP Dulias Alahapperuma, the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) led by MP Mano Ganesan, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) led by MP Rauff Hakeem, the leader of the National Union of Workers (NUW) MP Palani Thigambaram, and former MP Arjuna Ranatunga's 'Purawesi Handa'. This appears to be the broadest electoral coalition currently, and its internal tensions are likely to play out in due course and are already being highlighted by opponents. On 15 August, United Republic Front (URF) leader MP Patali Champika Ranawaka announced his support for Sajith Premadasa's candidacy. On 13 August, Chief Prelate of the Mihintale Raja Maha Vihara, Ven. Walahagunawewa Dhammarathana Thera offered conditional support to Sajith Premadasa. Sajith Premadasa is also the first among the leading three candidates to promise to abolish the Executive Presidency if he wins.

6 Election law violations and election expenditure ceilings

On 11 August, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) reported 269 instances of election law violations by candidates, and 01 complaint of election violence, since the election announcement was made on 26 July. According to the ECSL, almost all these violations were related to the abuse of state property. On 12 August, the government's attempts to increase state pensioner payments by 3,000 rupees from September was shot down by the ECSL as it would be in violation of election law. There were also concerns that NPP's leader AKD attending the National Convention of Nurses who came in official uniform was in violation of election law, although this was clarified as not so by the ECSL later. The ECSL also stopped SJB leader Sajith Premadasa from conducting the Sakwala and Husma programmes which distribute IT equipment to schools and medical equipment to hospitals. As per Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023, with the conclusion of the nomination process, the ECSL is now empowered to impose limits on election expenditure by candidates. However, there is doubt whether this law enables filing criminal action against a presidential candidate who wins, due to presidential immunity.

7 Muslim parties and MPs split support

On 08 August, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) led by Rauff Hakeem joined the SJB's alliance. On 16 August, SLMC MP Ali Zahir Moulana expressed support for President RW. The same day, SJB MP Ishaq Rahuman and MPs Ali Sabri Rahim and S. M. M. Musharraf from the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) also pledged support to President RW, despite the ACMC's leader MP Rishad Bathiudeen expressing his support to Sajith Premadasa. While it is not new for Muslim parties to split up and support different candidates during election times, these splits shows the shifts within the Muslim community. The NPP is also said to have made inroads with this community's younger demographics.

8 NPP's preparations for the 2024 presidential elections

The NPP has declared that it will unveil its presidential election manifesto on 26 August. This revised manifesto will build on the 2019 framework and address recent economic challenges. In the backdrop of multiple crossovers between the SJB and President RW's camp, NPP leader AKD mentioned that the party had rejected some of these MPs, who had wanted to join them, due to their problematic political histories. Among the criticisms of the NPP made by opponents is that NPP proposals are optimistic but lack policy substance. For example, the RW camp has advanced a critique that the NPP's science policy includes abstract ideas that various scientists around the world have been saying but lack policy coherence.

9 Tamil common candidate & divisions

Former Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) MP P. Ariyanethan has been named as the Tamil common candidate for the presidential election. This nomination follows an agreement in July 2024 among key Tamil groups, including the Tamil People's Alliance, TELO, PLOTE, the Tamil National Party, and the EPRLF. MP P. Ariyanethan will push for the right to Tamil self-determination in the North and East. The Tamil common candidacy faced strong criticism by the Tamil National Alliance's (TNA) ITAK MP M. A. Sumanthiran, who argued that the common candidate approach undermines the Tamil cause and is likely to fail. ITAK MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam also rejected the need for a common Tamil candidate saying that there is speculation that this common candidate was introduced to serve the interests of another candidate, to prevent votes from going elsewhere. The TNA announced that it will declare support for a presidential candidate once the candidates' manifestos are out. The Tamil National People's Front (TNPF), a breakaway of the TNA, has called for a boycott of the presidential election. Meanwhile, a Bill to reactivate Sri Lanka's provincial councils, as per the 13th Amendment of the Constitution, was taken up for second reading and adopted with a division in parliament on 06 August.

10 Hill country Tamil vote split between Premadasa & Wickremesinghe

The Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) led by MP Mano Ganesan has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the SJB. The agreement, articulated in a seven-chapter, 48-clause document, outlines the aspirations of the hill country Tamil community to achieve full integration into the political, administrative, economic, and social fabric of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by MP Jeevan Thondaman has extended support to President RW. On 13 August, in a win for plantation workers, Sri Lanka's Wages Board passed a mandated wage of Rs. 1,700 a day for plantation workers, which amounts to Rs. 2,000 a day with provident fund benefits. Politicians of the ruling coalition threatened to expropriate plantation companies that did not pay the mandated wage. So far, the hill country Tamil vote remains divided mainly between the SJB and President RW.

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