



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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1 Frontrunners of presidential election launch manifestos

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential election in Sri Lanka, the three leading candidates have launched their manifestos since 26 August. Wickremesinghe's "Sri Lanka Can" forwards a Theravada economy policy, which is interpreted as open trade with Asian powers. The SJB's manifesto "A Win for All" advocates a social market economy, which proposes a correctional approach to pro-market policy. The NPP's manifesto, "A rich country, a beautiful life" proposes the concept of economic democracy, which advocates for more economic inclusion and elements of state-led fair trade. The three manifestos indicate some degree of liberal/neoliberal consensus on economic policy being pro-IMF. The SJB & NPP also promised to bring in a new Constitution and abolish the Executive Presidency.

2 ITAK's backing of Sajith Premadasa and AKD's remarks stir up controversy

On 01 September, the central committee of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), a key party in the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), said that it would support Sajith Premadasa in the 2024 Presidential Election. This move comes despite ITAK leader-elect MP S. Shriharan declaring support for P. Ariyanethiran, the common Tamil candidate endorsed by a coalition of Tamil political parties and civil society. In contrast, on 17 September, All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) Leader MP G. Ponnambalam advocated for the Tamils in the North to not cast their vote and boycott the election. Meanwhile, ITAK MP, M. A. Sumanthiran came to the defense of NPP leader Anura Kumara Dissonayake (AKD), after his remarks in the North caused controversy, where he said, "When the people of the South are rallying for change, if you oppose that change, imagine the mood of the people in the South. Do you want Jaffna to be seen as opponents of that change?"

3 Political camps compete over left nationalist space

The left nationalist space which was left open briefly, following delegitimation of the Rajapaksa during the Aragalaya, is being slowly recaptured by the SLPP presidential candidate Namal Rajapaksa. On 22 August, Namal Rajapaksa asserted that police and land powers will not be devolved to the Provincial Councils under his governance, and that he would not mislead the Tamil people in the North. The Sarvajana Balaya's presidential candidate Dilith Jayaweera and MP Dayasiri Jayasekara who is now with the SJB has also been trying to capture this left nationalist space, but with less success. While the NPP has not so far campaigned for this space strongly, AKD stated that his administration will not seek to punish anyone accused of human rights violations and war crimes during Sri Lanka's brutal 26-year civil war. On 16 September, the NPP also vowed to cancel the Indian Adani Group's wind power project in Sri Lanka if it gets elected. This is consistent with the JVP's (the main party within the NPP) Sinhala Buddhist nationalist past in the 1980s-2000s, and makes it possible for the NPP to occupy this space when needed and/or after coming into power. On a different note, SJB candidate Sajith Premadasa announced downsizing the military under his leadership.

4 NPP to dissolve parliament if it comes to power

Since August 2024, the NPP has said that it will dissolve parliament if it wins elections, and will govern the country during that interim period in a constitutional manner with a team of four members. Furthermore, the NPP's presidential candidate AKD said: "If this arrangement is not acceptable, the constitution grants the president the authority to bring all ministerial portfolios under his preview. If that too is unacceptable, we can establish a caretaker government." The NPP has been criticised for its lack of clarity on their post-election governance plan and a potential single-leader government, which raises issues of constitutionality of some of these options. On 16 September, the NPP expressed concern over a potential dissolution of Parliament by the President before the announcement of the Presidential Election results.

5 Crossovers between Wickremesinghe & Premadasa camps continue

On 21 August, SJB MP Thalatha Athukorala announced her resignation from parliament. She subsequently extended her support to President Wickremesinghe. This development came shortly after former SJB MP Rajitha Senarathne crossed over to support Wickremesinghe. They are both seen as moves which recognise that Wickremesinghe and Premadasa are fighting over overlapping voter bases, paving the way for an NPP victory. However, differences between the two leaders have made any alliance between Wickremesinghe and Premadasa unlikely. Meanwhile, crossovers between the Wickremesinghe and Premadasa camps continue, and add to the NPP narrative that both camps are parking spaces for establishment political elite, with no strong integrity or ideological difference. Another important development has been that while the leaders of various minority parties, such as ITAK, ACMC, and SLMC have declared their support for the SJB, there have been internal factions within these parties, with members declaring support to Wickremesinghe.

6 Local government elections

On 22 August, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court deemed that the fundamental rights of voters have been violated through the postponement of the 2023 local government election. The Supreme Court ordered the Election Commission to hold the postponed election immediately. President Wickremesinghe responded saying he was forced to make this decision due to financial constraints & the "betterment of the country". On 03 September, Cabinet spokesman minister Bandula Gunawardena said nominations will be called anew for the overdue local government elections. The Local Government Elections (Amendment) Act No. 30 of 2023, which states that a 25% youth representation should be allowed in the nominations submitted for local government elections, will be activated for the first time when these local government elections are held.

7 Postal vote turnout & election law violations

Postal voting for Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election occurred on 04-06 & 11-12 September, with over 700,000 state sector employees eligible to cast their ballots. According to reports, more than 80% of (postal) votes were cast, indicating higher voter turnout. Meanwhile, local election monitors raised concerns over misuse of state resources by the President's independent group during their campaign. It was also reported that the Election Commission is struggling to address AI-generated propaganda videos that could affect certain candidates, though no major disinformation campaigns were identified. The Commission warned against posting Presidential Election surveys on social media by various groups and individuals, as it could sway voters' independent opinions and is a punishable offense under the law. However, compared to previous elections, an overall dip in hate content and misinformation regarding election is observed, mainly due to the relatively lesser importance racism has gotten in election campaign themes.

8 Increasing polarisation among main candidates

NPP leader AKD has alleged the second tier of Wickremesinghe and Premadasa's campaigns are discussing the possibility of working together to defeat the NPP. He also alleged that there was a deal between Wickremesinghe and Premadasa, where Wickremesinghe kept addressing AKD as 'his friend'. Meanwhile, SJB leader Premadasa says that Wickremesinghe and AKD have struck a deal regarding the 2nd preference vote. The increasing polarisation is also evident in each campaign asking voters to mark the vote (cross), and not preferences. One of the reasons for this is that for a party to ask its supporters to mark a 2nd preference is seen as an admission of defeat. Polarisation among the main candidates means that if a second round of voting is activated, the interim period would face high risk of security and stability. As the campaigns freeze on September 18, no open or latent agreement seems to prevail among the three front runner candidates.

9 Falling bridges between civil society and political society

A public debate for the 2024 Presidential Election, organised by the 'March 12 Movement,' was attended by one of the four confirmed candidates only - Sajith Premadasa, Namal Rajapaksa, Dilith Jayaweera, and P. Ariyanethiran. Dilith Jayaweera was the sole participant. Presidential candidates Wickremesinghe and AKD had not confirmed their participation in the debate. The incident indicates the low demand among the public for debates of this nature, and candidates seeing other more traditional forms of public engagement as more effective (such as rallies). It also demonstrates the increasing distance between the establishment civil society and the political society. Earlier in the year, an NPP-SJB debate had fallen through, and AKD has now challenged Wickremesinghe for a debate. Challenging for debates appear to be a political strategy, where the act of engaging in dialogue signals to the people whom it considers as its equal, and can be part of a campaign strategy for one party to be downplayed while two other parties debate it out (in the current three-way battle).

10 Campaign promises

In response to opposition politicians' vow to amend the IMF deal, a top Central Bank official said that Sri Lanka could face severe implications if it reverses current International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed policy reforms. The manifestos and election rallies of the three main candidates also have many promises of economic relief. For example, the NPP promises to raise the tax-free threshold and cap progressive taxation at 24 percent. The SJB promises salary hikes, pension boosts, and tax cuts. In the lead up to the election, the government has also been observed to engage in promises and/or distribution of freebies, such as public sector salary and pension increases, farmer subsidies, and writing off crop loans. Importantly, the promised salary hike to plantation workers has been held back, as plantation managements have offered counter proposals.

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