



ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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1 New NPP government acts on good governance mandate

On 21 September, President Anura Kumara Disanayake (AKD) was elected as the 9th Executive President of Sri Lanka. On 24 September, President AKD appointed Dr. Harini Amarasuriya as the country's 16th Prime Minister and appointed a three-member cabinet comprising himself, PM Amarasuriya, and Minister Vijitha Herath, with 15 ministries in total under them. With general elections scheduled for 14 November 2024, the NPP government has adopted a cautious approach on policy, aiming at gaining a two-thirds majority, which is necessary to pass constitutional reforms. The new government has been proactive in trying to deliver promises of good governance, and ordered investigations into high profile cases such as the 2019 Easter Sunday Attacks, 2015 Central Bank bond scam, and murder/disappearances of journalists. However, some of its political appointments are criticised as being awarded to loyalists and those within NPP patronage circles, indicating insular decision-making.

2 NPP continues past government's economic agenda

Since 23 September, the NPP government has continued existing appointments of the Central Bank Governor & Finance Ministry Secretary, and continued the International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme. During the presidential election campaign, AKD promised to renegotiate the IMF's Debt Sustainability Agreement but moves on this have not yet been seen. The NPP defended this position saying the government does not wish to take any decisions that might disrupt the state machinery during a period of transition until parliamentary elections. Since coming to power, the government has provided subsidies to farmers and fishermen, and increased pension payments, but these had already been gazetted during the past government's period. AKD had also promised to lower taxes and increase public sector salaries, but it is not clear yet on how revenues would be raised to fund these. Some policy departures from the past government include the decision to not privatise Sri Lankan Airlines & reported reconsidering of state owned enterprise reforms.

3 SJB to contest general election with no broad alliance

Given that Sajith Premadasa and Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) collectively secured over 50% of the vote at the presidential elections, an electoral alliance between the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and United National Party (UNP) for the general election was anticipated. Despite the UNP-led alliance being open to Premadasa being the PM candidate, this alliance was unable to materialise, which according to some UNP members, was due to them being unable to agree with some conditions Premadasa put forward. The SJB too has faced some internal divisions, involving the recent departure of some members who joined its alliance, the Samagi Jana Sandhanaya, during the presidential elections, and the resignation of some members over nominations and appointments. The SJB faces a challenge in distinguishing itself ideologically, as both it and the NPP occupy a centre-left ideological position.

4 Gas cylinder coalition prepares to contest general election

The UNP has joined forces with parties & individuals who backed RW during the 2024 presidential election, contesting under the New Democratic Front (NDF) banner with the 'Gas Cylinder' symbol. Members of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) who backed Wickremesinghe during the last election, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) faction led by Nimal Siripala de Silva, and the Ceylon Workers Congress led by Jeevan Thondaman are part of this alliance. Wickremesinghe will not be contesting for this election, and the Prime Ministerial candidate of this alliance has not been revealed yet. The alliance claims to have governance experience, in contrast to the NPP, whose members are newer to leading a government. Wickremesinghe announced that he, as the outgoing President, had set aside sufficient funds to support the salary hike for public servants and demanded the government to reveal what happened to that money - a claim which President AKD has refuted. Meanwhile, the national list of the gas cylinder shows that it platforms a number of delegitimised establishment politicians, which is unlikely to be popular among a growing anti-establishment voter base that the NPP mobilises. While the SJB aims for a parliamentary majority, the UNP has claimed that they are aiming to form a strong opposition, to honour the people's wishes at the presidential election and hold the NPP government accountable.

5 Namal Rajapaksa demands NPP government to honour campaign promises

Namal Rajapaksa, the SLPP presidential candidate, has launched a sophisticated political campaign, despite securing only 2.5% of the vote at the presidential election. The election result revealed the extent of delegitimisation of the Rajapaksa political family and the SLPP following the 2022 crisis and Aragalay. The Rajapaksa family - Mahinda, Gotabaya, Basil, and Chamal - have indicated that they will not run for the general election. For the first time since Sri Lanka adopted universal franchise, no member of the Rajapaksa family is contesting at any electorate. The SLPP stated that it will not appoint any of its recent dissenters to high positions in the party or nominate them for the parliamentary election. The SLPP is positioning itself as an ideologically coherent and small but formidable opposition political camp, with a left nationalist ideological stance. This is seen, for example, in Namal Rajapaksa challenging the NPP government to make true on their allegations that the Rajapaksas had stolen \$18 billion of the country's wealth and taken it to Uganda.

6 Mawbima Janatha Party grows in numbers

Media tycoon Dilith Jayaweera's Mawbima Janatha Party (MJP) has been joined by a number of former MPs who were in other main political camps, as well as new entrants. Former Minister Roshan Ranasinghe, a candidate in the presidential election, was appointed Chairman of the party. Other new members include former State Minister Dilum Amunugama; Daham Sirisena, the son of former President Maithripala Sirisena, and ex-MP Rajika Wickremesinghe. Dilith Jayaweera has indicated plans to contest the general election under the MJP's "Sarvajana Balaya Alliance," featuring a new symbol. The Sarvajana Balaya is attempting to capture the left nationalist space that was momentarily left open by the delegitimisation of the SLPP and the Rajapaksas, and the NPP's move towards the centre. This is seen best in recent attempts by Udaya Gammanpila to blame the NPP government over the alleged contents of the 2019 Easter Attacks commission of inquiry reports.

7 Major political figures withdraw from general elections

Several political heavyweights announced that they will not be contesting in the general election. These include former MPs and Ministers Maithripala Sirisena, Bandula Gunawardena, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, Lakshman Kiriella, Ali Sabry, Shehan Semasinghe, Patali Champika Ranawaka, Gamini Lokuge, Wimal Weerawansa, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, Tissa Vitharana, and A. H. M. Fowzie. Some stated this was a result of political developments, while others said they were returning to professional careers or cited health issues. The step-down of major political figures is likely driven by a cost-benefit analysis of lowered chances of re-election since the NPP's as a major centre of power, and recognition of the influential role some of them can play from outside the parliament.

8 Growing fragmentation of Tamil parties & alienation of minority vote

The presidential elections demonstrated the fragmentation of the Northern Tamil political parties, with the vote split between Premadasa, RW, and Tamil common candidate P. Ariyanethiran. Jaffna District had the lowest voter turnout in the country, likely indicating political disillusionment with available choices and the call by All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) to boycott elections. The NPP was not able to perform well in minority dominant areas. After elections, the NPP has not taken any major initiatives to appeal to this voter base or to work with key Tamil representatives or parties. These developments indicate the growing alienation of the Northern Tamil vote. This occurs against a backdrop of the Sri Lankan government continuing the policy of opposing 51/1 resolution of the draft resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council and stating it will not agree to any resolution that extends the powers of the collection of external evidence mechanisms.

9 Conflict in the Middle East has spillover effects on Sri Lanka's stability

A travel advisory by the US Embassy announced a threat of attack targeting popular tourist locations in the Arugam Bay area. Subsequently, Sri Lanka Police announced the measures it has taken to ensure the safety of tourists, following intelligence received from Indian counterparts three days prior. Three suspects were arrested so far over the suspected attacks. Meanwhile, Israel requested its citizens to withdraw from the East coast of Sri Lanka, as they could be the target of an imminent terrorist attack. While Sri Lanka's fragile economy depends heavily on its tourism sector, there has been growing local dissatisfaction over the operation of illegal foreign businesses in popular tourist areas in the South and East. If the situation in the East becomes volatile, Sri Lanka's domestic peace and stability is likely to deteriorate, while the country's defensive and 'neutral' foreign policy will be tested. The new government initially did not sign a letter condemning Israel for banning the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) from entering the country, but later expressed its support for the letter, which has been backed by over 100 countries, on 21 October.

10 NPP government attempts to balance India-China rivalry

The NPP government is attempting to balance relations with India and China, as it is perceived to be biased towards China, due to the JVP's historical antagonism towards India and ideological affinities with China. On October 04, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made the first high-level visit by a diplomat to Sri Lanka's new government. Subsequently, President AKD stressed Sri Lankan territory would never be used in a manner inimical to India's security interests and said his first official bilateral visit will be to India. The NPP government has stated that it is seeking membership in the BRICS economic bloc. On 09 October, a Chinese navy sailing ship was allowed to dock in Sri Lanka despite a prevailing ban on foreign research vessels. The NPP government has said it will review Indian connectivity projects, after promising to cancel the Adani wind power project during the presidential campaign. India has stressed the importance of implementing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which supports devolution of power through Provincial Councils (PC) as a solution to the ethnic issue. While President AKD signalled his government would continue the PC system during the presidential campaign, the NPP has indicated its solutions to the ethnic issue would come under a new constitution.

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