

## ELECTION &amp; CAMPAIGN WATCH

2024 Sri Lankan Elections

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**1 NPP targets parliament majority to form government without coalitions**

The National People's Power (NPP) general secretary Tilvin Silva stated that it does not expect an unlimited power such as that of a 5/6th majority in Parliament, deactivating the opposition, but hopes for a strong parliament to run a government without any obstacles. These remarks follow criticism over past remarks by NPP leader and President Anura Kumara Disسانayake (AKD) on there being no need for a parliamentary opposition. The NPP needs a two-thirds majority for constitutional reforms it has promised, such as abolishing the Executive Presidency and to implement an alternative model of power devolution. A key challenge to the NPP gaining two-thirds is its poor performance in minority-dominant areas, in the North and East and hill-country and its policy of non-engagement with other political parties.

**2 SJB and gas cylinder alliance goes to polls without united front**

The attempts to unite the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and New Democratic Front (NDF) - the 'Gas Cylinder' alliance - have not been successful, and has prevented the 'old guard' from posing a serious threat to the NPP's chances of leading in today's election. SJB has been unable to significantly defend or increase its share in this election as its campaign rhetoric has been unable to distinguish itself significantly from centre-left credentials of the NPP and centre-right, liberal credentials of the NDF. The electoral and campaign positions of the SJB remains largely unchanged since the presidential election. However, its candidates' electoral success depends largely on the ability of the SJB to attract its supporters to the polling booth in this low-voter turnout election. The SJB has adopted a strategy of conducting mainly small meetings instead of large rallies, with the party leader Sajith Premadasa, concentrating on Colombo District. President AKD, addressing a large rally, mocked the SJB for not being able to organise big rallies. SJB candidates have been complaining about a lack of resources to support their campaigns. These dynamics raise questions over political finances to parties, many of which are unaccounted under campaign finances.

**3 Wickremesinghe keeps gas cylinder coalition on the radar**

The New Democratic Front (NDF) - the 'Gas Cylinder' alliance - is led indirectly by Wickremesinghe but who is not running for this election. Wickremesinghe's experience as a former national leader and biting political commentary enables him to keep the gas cylinder alliance relevant in the media and popular discourse. This is also enabled by RW and NPP responding to each other at rallies and in the media, which alienates the SJB. While the gas cylinder alliance stands lower electoral chances than the SJB, it has managed to carve a niche ideological space combining the UNP and SLPP breakaways. This alliance was thought to be an expedient one in the last election, but increasingly looks like it is here to stay and will occupy a neoconservative ideological space. The performance of this alliance at the recent Elpitiya LG elections, securing 2 seats, shows that its relevance and the success of its candidates will depend largely on their ability to successfully activate the patronage networks they have built over many years.

**4 SLPP reestrategises following defeat at presidential and LG poll**

The SLPP National Organiser and former presidential candidate, Namal Rajapaksa, has been criticising the NPP government for not meeting its campaign promises. The SLPP is attempting to regain the left nationalist mantle it momentarily lost, and which was not fully taken over by the NPP. Among the SLPP's main critiques of the NPP are a statement by NPP candidate Lakshman Nipuna Arachchi, on trade unions being dissolved in the future since there would be no reason for strikes. Namal claimed that it was the trade union movement that had pushed the country back and caused damage to its economy and education sector. The delegitimization of the Rajapaksa family is evident in the fact this is the first election in Sri Lanka without a Rajapaksa family member running in the Hambantota District. Despite the arrests of high profile SLPP members, such as Johnston Fernando, since the NPP government came to power in September this year, the SLPP is expected to perform better at the parliamentary elections than it did at the presidential election. In the Elpitiya Pradeshiya Sabha election held on October 5, the SLPP secured 3 out of 30 seats.

**5 Sarvajana Balaya attempts to carve out its ideological space**

The Sarvajana Balaya has been trying to stay relevant and grab the media spotlight, as seen in its member Udaya Gammampila's highly mediated challenge to the NPP over a 2019 Easter Attacks probe report. The Sarvajana Balaya's leader, Dilith Jayaweera, blamed SJB's leader Sajith Premadasa for failing to secure power, as was usual for the main Opposition party to do, and paving the way for an alternative, third party win. Jayaweera calls his party the 'edithara vipakshaya' (the brave opposition) undermining his competitors, and pledged that members of his party who enter parliament will not take salaries, allowances, perks and privileges allocated to MPs. While the Sarvajana Balaya is unlikely to secure a significant number of seats this election, its presence as a small, powerful nationalist majority in parliament can force more moderate political parties to reposition themselves, especially the NPP, in the event the NPP is unable to deliver on the high expectations it has cultivated among supporters.

**6 Fragmentation among Northern Tamil vote**

Tamil political parties in Northern Sri Lanka are divided, with the newly formed Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA) challenging the long-standing Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK). The DTNA's leaders advocate for Tamil sovereignty, while ITAK supports federalism. Meanwhile, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), in which ITAK is the main party, has stated that it is open to collaboration with a future NPP government if a political solution is found. Reports over the NPP reaching an agreement to offer a ministerial position to Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) leader Douglas Devananda were subsequently denied, with Bimal Ratnayake of the NPP accusing Devananda of misleading voters. Devananda stated that the EPDP is ready to cooperate with the government, but the final decision will depend on the election outcome. Meanwhile, despite Udaya Gammampila from Sarvajana Balaya alluding to a potential alliance between NPP and ITAK, ITAK stalwart Sumanthiran's subsequent criticism of the NPP for bussing in crowds to Jaffna rallies indicates such an alliance is unlikely to be an immediate reality. An indication of the increasing electoral competition was seen when the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam was arrested and bailed out later recently for allegedly violating campaign laws.

**7 Muslim parties & hill-country Tamil parties leave options open**

Unlike the Northern Tamil parties, the main Muslim political parties, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC), and up-country Tamil parties, such as the National Union of Workers (NUW) have not indicated any coalition preferences, adopting a wait and watch approach. Since they have not taken any hard stance regarding the NPP, or made any strong statements in the lead up to parliamentary elections, they are seen as leaving open their options of joining a new government. Meanwhile, the Ceylon Workers' Congress, led by former MP Jeevan Thondaman is set to contest within the 'gas cylinder' alliance under the 'elephant' symbol of the United National Party (UNP).

**8 Ranjan Ramanayake's UDV faces controversy**

The United Democratic Voice (UDV) appeared in this election as a miscellany of hurriedly put together party, onboarding a diverse group of civil and trade union activists, and second-tier political actors from other parties. It is led by former actor and MP Ranjan Ramanayake, and has come under recent controversy after Prasanna Adikari, who was set to contest from the UDV in the Colombo District, resigned from the party and his candidacy after questioning the UDV's legitimacy and leadership. Adikari raised concerns over the UDV's constitution, alleging that it was written in Tamil and had some pages removed, leaving parts of the document unclear. Adikari's stated that his attempts to access the UDV's National List were unsuccessful, leading him to suspect the party was working to secure a slot for an undisclosed influence. The UDV is known to be funded by Allirajah Subaskaran, Founder and Chairman of the Lycatel and Lyca Mobile Group of companies. The emergence of a new party in the last month leading to the elections, backed by a business tycoon, underscores the increasing influence of big money in Sri Lankan elections.

**9 Sri Lanka looks for geopolitical alternative in BRICS**

NPP Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath stated that Sri Lanka's application to become a BRICS member had not been accepted as it was not accepting new members at present. However, a request by Sri Lanka to become a member of BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB) was accepted. President AKD's first official bilateral visit is scheduled to be to India. Sri Lanka is looking for alternative avenues of international engagement, due to the politically costly situation of having to choose between regional superpowers, China and India, and having to pursue a non-aligned policy in the midst of increasing volatility in the Middle East and the involvement of Western major powers such as the United States. Sri Lanka is particularly exposed to the war in the Middle East, its national economy being highly reliant on tea exports, oil imports and foreign remittances by workers in the MENA region.

**10 Low election turnout expected at parliamentary polls**

Compared to the presidential election, the upcoming election is very low-key and muted. The political opposition represented by the SJB and/or the gas cylinder alliance have found it difficult to mobilise their supporters to vote for the party. By 2 pm a voter turnout of around 50% has been recorded, the lowest in decades. This low turnout is expected to skew the result in favour of the NPP. Meanwhile, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) shared that there had been no complaints about the abuse of state resources for election campaigning for the first time.

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