

ELECTION & CAMPAIGN WATCH

2025 Sri Lankan Local Government Elections

MURAGALA | CPPP
CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & POLICY**1. Sri Lanka to hold delayed LG elections, women and youth quotas in place**

Sri Lanka's local government (LG) elections are set to be held on 06 May 2025. The elections were due in 2023, but postponed at the time citing financial constraints following the 2022 economic crisis. In the interim, local government institutions functioned without an elected leadership. The 2025 LG elections are expected to renew the democratic mandate of these institutions that aim to decentralise power to the district and divisional secretariat level. Meanwhile, Provincial Council (PC) elections have not been held since 2014, and the government has indicated that they will be held subsequently, although not in 2025. Currently, all 9 PCs function under the governors appointed by the Executive President.

Observers have reported relatively low interest in the upcoming elections so far. The May LG elections will be the second time that the 25% women's quota is being implemented, and the first time that a 25% youth quota will be implemented. The Election Commission has reported that complications in fulfilling the requirements to include stipulated percentages of female and youth representation in lists, have led to a significant number of nomination lists from all political parties being rejected.

2. NPP maintains lead, pressure to deliver system change

The National People's Power (NPP) is expected to continue its electoral success since September 2024 during the local elections, as the latter is often a barometer of national politics and due to the patronage expected by the party which is in power at the centre. The latter was evident in a speech by President AKD at an NPP LG elections rally in Mannar, where he alluded to proposals forwarded by an NPP-led LG being passed faster than those forwarded by other parties'-led LGs. While this was alluding to high levels of corruption among the previous parties in power, it has been criticised as a move to consolidate the party's power.

There are no major setbacks to the government's popularity, other than some losses in cooperative elections and increasing pressure for the government to honour its promise of 'system change'. The new government has been in power for almost six months but no major cases of political corruption or violations of rule of law have been brought to justice. The government has reassured delivering justice on cases such as the Easter Sunday Attacks, the Batalanda Commission report, and the Rajapaksas' role in the 2022 crisis. PM Harini Amarasuriya also reaffirmed on 13 April the NPP's commitment to repealing the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) despite the Executive's recent use of it. The PM also assured that a new Constitution will be drawn up, which would entail abolishing the Executive Presidency system.

3. SJB tries to hold government accountable to economic & democratic reforms

Despite rumours of potential alliance between the UNP and SJB after the national elections, as their split was viewed to be a main reason for the NPP's wins in 2024, they did not manifest due to policy and personal differences between the parties and the leadership. In the lead up to LG elections, the SJB has raised concerns about the government's approach to managing criticism and dissent in the press. On 03 April, SJB leader and Leader of Opposition Sajith Premadasa also criticised the government for failing to anticipate and take preventive action in response to a 44% retaliatory tariff imposed by the United States (US).

The NPP was also accused by sections of the opposition of trying to 'play politics' with popular religious sentiments, as the exhibition of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha was organised to coincide with the time of the LG election campaign period. This accusation highlighted the President's claim to his personal involvement in organising the exhibition. However, the NPP has rejected this argument, claiming that the government did not know when the election would be held when it fixed the dates for the exhibition of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha.

4. UNP's RW attempts to maintain political relevance

The United National Party (UNP) is contesting under the elephant symbol, in the hope that it appeals to more traditional UNP voter bases who identify with the symbol. Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW), the leader of the UNP, has been trying to remain relevant in the domestic political discourse, and by attending international and regional engagements. Former President RW controversially involved himself in two cases: when he tried to contact Pillayan who was in the CID's custody, and claiming the alleged loss that Chamara Sampath Dassanayake incurred to the state as Chief Minister of Uva Provincial Council was in line with a circular issued by then-PM Ranil Wickremesinghe. On 03 April, UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake submitted a private member's bill to the Parliament Secretary-General, aiming to repeal the controversial Online Safety Act (OSA).

Meanwhile, on 14 March, the NPP government tabled the Batalanda Commission Report in Parliament, which investigated unlawful detention and torture chambers in the Batalanda Housing Scheme during the late 1980s. The NPP promises justice for Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) members who were allegedly killed by the governing political authority during the 1987-1990 period. NPP deputy Minister of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs, Sunil Watagala, alleged in Parliament that RW, who was the Minister of Industries during that period, is directly responsible for the alleged killings of youths who were unlawfully detained and tortured at the Batalanda Housing Scheme.

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CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & POLICY**5. SLPP attempts to rebuild its grassroots momentum**

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) is seeing some of its members, such as Lohan Ratwatte return to contest LG elections under the SLPP, having supported the National Democratic Front (NDF) candidate and UNP leader RW in the 2024 Presidential election. Despite the UNP-SLPP temporary alliance during 2022-2024, SLPP members recognise that their voter bases are strongly attached to the SLPP identity. The extent to which the SLPP can mobilise voters in this LG election is significant, as the national election performance may belie its strong grassroots mobilisation as seen in the previous 2018 LG elections. Moreover, part of the lower voter turnout during the 2024 national elections could be attributed to the lack of alternatives for a SLPP/SLFP voter base, which may be offset at the more local-level elections. Relatedly, National United Republic Front (URF) leader Patali Champika Ranawaka alluded to this greater space for new political parties to emerge in Sri Lanka's political arena, due to the delegitimisation of former mainstream parties and the relatively low voter turnout in the 2024 elections.

Namal Rajapaksa, the SLPP national organiser and one of three SLPP MPs in Parliament has been the main articulator of a 'left' nationalist discourse, critiquing alleged USAID funds to destabilise the Gotabaya government and condemning UK sanctions on senior Sri Lankan military figures. In February 2025, Namal Rajapaksa was indicted over allegations of misappropriating an investment from an Indian real estate company, Krish Company. Meanwhile, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) has chosen not to contest under the SLPP's 'Lotus' symbol, signalling tensions in former alliances.

6. Minority political parties sidelined by NPP's national outreach

The main Tamil political parties in the North and East, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) suffered setbacks in the 2024 elections, losing ground to the NPP, especially in the North. ACTC leader Ponnambalam alleged in Parliament that the NPP was working closely with the Chinese government to the detriment of Tamil minority interests.

While the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the main political party within the TNA, expressed concerns over the erosion of Provincial Council (PC) powers, particularly the delays in elections and the weakening of devolved governance under the 13th Amendment, the NPP has assured that PC elections would be held next year. President AKD, during a rally on 17 April in Mannar, stated that there was no majority or minority, only a Sri Lankan community. This signals the NPP's attempts to frame the ethnic issue in class terms, rather than an identity-based issue.

7. Sarvajana Balaya's nationalist narrative unable to take off

The Sarvajana Balaya is an alliance of several 'left' and nationalist political parties formed during the 2024 Presidential elections, and included the Mawbima Janatha Pakshaya (MJP) led by media tycoon and MP Dilith Jayaweera, the Pivithuru Hela Urumaya (PHU) led by former MP Udaya Gammanpila, the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the Democratic Left Front, and the National Freedom Front (NFF). The NFF led by Wimal Weerawansa has decided to contest the LG election separately in most places.

The Sarvajana Balaya has been trying to occupy the 'left' nationalist space, although the Rajapaksa-led SLPP has managed to assume its mantle more successfully following their delegitimisation post-2022. Part of their core narrative has been to frame the NPP government as anti-Sinhala and anti-Buddhist, as part of the 'communism' associated with them. This was seen, for example, in the uptick of nationalist discourse following the USAID cuts and rumours of foreign-funded destabilisation of governments through mass uprisings such as the Aragalaya. The recent involvement of Gammanpila in the arrest of Pillayan, LTTE-defector and former Chief Minister of the Eastern Province under Rajapaksa patronage, alienates the nationalist voter base and dents the narrative of the Sarvajana Balaya.

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8. Trends among Muslim voters

Minister of Public Security, Ananda Wijepala, said in Parliament on 10 April that 'there is substantial information linking Pillayan to the Easter Sunday Terror Attacks,' suggesting Rajapaksa involvement in the Easter Sunday attacks. This development is likely to be well received by the Muslim population, especially in the East, as it shows another side of the roots of the Easter Sunday attacks, de-emphasising the spectre of alleged Muslim extremism.

This comes in the context of the two main Muslim political parties, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) facing significant challenges from among younger Muslim voters, whose anti-establishment sentiments have swung them in the direction of the NPP. Both the SLMC and ACMC generally feel pressure from among Muslim voters to side with the government in power, as the NPP did not attempt to build direct coalitions with these parties and its position of not encouraging crossovers to the government.

9. Up-country Tamil voting trends likely to continue

The two main up-country political forces, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), suffered some political setbacks due to the NPP gaining ground during the national elections. This may be one reason why the CWC contested under the UNP's elephant symbol in the 2024 elections and in the upcoming LG elections.

Both parties met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Sri Lanka in April and asked for Indian assistance for socio-economic development of the plantation community. TPA leader Mano Ganesan stated that he had told the Indian PM that they would submit their political proposals only after the NPP government starts the process of drafting a new Constitution. PM Harini Amarasuriya stated on 10 April that the process of drafting a new constitution would begin after Provincial Council elections, which are likely to be held next year. The parties also welcomed Sri Lanka's growing integration with India, following a slew of MoUs signed between the NPP government and the Indian government during the April bilateral visit.

10. NPP's foreign policy reacts to major global volatility

The NPP government has attempted to have equidistant relations with India and China, and to engage more with regional collectives such as BRICS and BIMSTEC. However, India's strategic embrace of the new government has resulted in Sri Lanka signing a defence MoU with India, which is being perceived as a 'defence pact' and signals the limits of Sri Lanka's ability to balance between and among key players. During PM Modi's visit to Sri Lanka, a number of key MoUs were signed, including the implementation of power grid connectivity and cooperation in the development of Trincomalee as an energy hub.

Meanwhile, the government continues to face pressure from its Western partners: the UK sanctioned three Sri Lankan military personnel and one former MP, linked to human rights violations during the civil war: General Shavendra Silva, Admiral Wasantha Karannagoda, General Jagath Jayasuriya, and Karuna Amman. The EU's GSP+ preferential trade access, too, which the Sri Lankan government must reapply for in 2026, remains conditional on the government's record of human rights and democracy. Meanwhile, the biggest potential challenge to the government and its path of economic 'stabilisation' following the 2022 foreign debt crisis, is US President Donald Trump's announcement of a 44% tariff on Sri Lankan goods, citing Sri Lanka's trade barriers on U.S. imports. While these tariffs are momentarily suspended (with a 90-day pause), they could significantly harm Sri Lanka's economy as the US remains its largest export market, and push the country into further cycles of political and social instability, making the NPP government's tightrope walk an even more challenging task.

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