

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: History in the Making

Chulanee Attanayake



Summary

The 2019 presidential election in Sri Lanka will make history for being the first in the country not to have a serving president, prime minister or opposition leader contest as a candidate. It is the first time in which the Sri Lanka Freedom Party is not fielding its own candidate or leading a coalition. This paper looks at the new developments on the election scene since the nominations were accepted. It also explores the reasons for the first-three citizens of the country opting out of the contest.

A Record Number of Contestants, Costliest Election

The Sri Lankan Election Commission (EC) confirmed that the presidential election will be held on 16 November 2019. A total of [35 candidates](#) have submitted their nominations. Among these candidates are two Buddhist monks, four members of the Muslim community and two members of the Tamil community. It is also notable that there is only one female candidate.

According to the EC, the increased number of candidates will make the 2019 presidential election the costliest in the country's history. The ballot paper is expected to be 26 inches long. The existing ballot box has to be modified to cater to the extra-long ballot paper. The ballots of all the election centres in an area will have to be taken to a single place for counting to accommodate the increasing number of polling agents and election officers. The cost of the election is [estimated at LKR7 billion](#) (\$52.54 million).

No President, Prime Minister or Opposition Leader in the Contest

However, the extraordinary cost is not the only reason that will make the upcoming election special. This is also the first presidential election in which the serving president, prime minister and opposition leader will not contest. It is also the first election in which the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) or an alliance led by the SLFP, will not field any candidates.

As a result of President Maithripala Sirisena's decision not to contest, the SLFP did not field its candidate. Instead, it joined the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) to back Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Defense Secretary, and brother of former President, Mahinda Rajapaksa. Sirisena's decision could be due to his slim chance of winning the election this time. He has lost his credibility due to his failure to adhere to the promises made during his last election campaign. The local government election result in 2018 was a clear indication of how much he had lost the people's mandate. His party secured just 4.4 percent of the votes, as opposed to the SLPP's 44.7 percent. His legitimacy took a further hit following the [constitutional crisis](#) in November 2018 in which he sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replaced him with Rajapaksa. Early this year, Sirisena sought the Supreme Court's opinion on the possibility of extending his term

limit. The Supreme Court rejected his request, claiming that the term limit introduced through 19th Amendment of the Constitution applied to him as well. Having lost every possible option of holding onto power, Sirisena may have come to the self-realisation that it is better not to contest the election than to experience a humiliating defeat.

Wickremesinghe was expected to contest the upcoming election for it could be his last opportunity to become president after several failed attempts. Following his multiple presidential election defeats between 1999 and 2005, Wickremesinghe has not directly contested in the polls and has fielded a nominee while keeping the party leadership to himself. During these elections, his support was conditioned upon abolishing the executive presidency. This brought his candidate, Sirisena, to victory in 2015; yet the power of the executive was only diluted. At the upcoming election, his party supporters have demanded that Sajith Premadasa be the candidate as they believe he has a greater chance of winning the election against Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

[Opposition leader](#) Mahinda Rajapaksa, who assumed the position days after resigning as the prime minister following the [political crisis](#) in November 2018, is constitutionally barred from contesting in the upcoming presidential election because he has already served two terms. When in office, Rajapaksa gained popularity for defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. However, he was ousted from his position during the 2015 presidential election for alleged bribery and corruption, nepotism and his attempt to centralise executive power through 18th Amendment of the Constitution. As he is unable to contest for a third term, Rajapaksa is backing Gotabaya at the presidential election.

Still Active in Mainstream Politics

Abstaining from contesting at the presidential election is not likely to keep Sirisena, Wickremesinghe or Rajapaksa away from mainstream politics. While Sirisena announced that he would remain neutral during the election, he also hinted that he would continue to be actively involved in mainstream politics. He still has the option to make a comeback at a parliamentary election or a future presidential election. Similarly, Wickremesinghe has given Premadasa the candidacy on the condition that he will remain the party leader. In other words, Wickremesinghe will be the main candidate from the United National Party at the next parliamentary election. Similarly, as there is no limit to the number of terms for prime ministership, Mahinda Rajapaksa could be a candidate at the next parliamentary election.

.

Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.