

# Sri Lanka Election 2024: Key Political Candidates and Campaigns

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## Summary

*In the 2024 presidential election in Sri Lanka, the three leading candidates are current president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa and Anura Kumara Dissanayake. This is the first election since the 2022 economic crisis and ensuing mass street protests. In the lead-up to the 21 September 2024 election, the key candidates have launched their presidential manifestos which articulate their positions on key economic and political issues.*

## Introduction

The 2024 Sri Lankan election is set to be a pivotal moment in the nation's political and economic history. This election is significant because it is the first electoral process in over four years and follows the widespread protests that shook the nation in 2022. These protests, known as *Aragalaya* (Struggle), were driven by widespread dissatisfaction with economic mismanagement under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government. It culminated in the resignation of the president, prime minister and cabinet, creating a sense of urgency for political change.<sup>1</sup>

In July 2022, Ranil Wickremesinghe was elected president through a parliamentary vote. Under his leadership, the government secured approximately US\$2.9 billion (\$S3.79 billion) bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>2</sup> Some indicators of this government's economic stabilisation drive and the IMF-led reforms programme are a reduced rate of inflation and increased foreign reserves to approximately US\$5.4 billion (\$S7 billion) by May 2024. However, since 2022, poverty and inequality have increased exponentially.<sup>3</sup>

The election will serve partly as a referendum on the current government's handling of the economic crisis and its recovery efforts. The election campaigns are also in response to the strained social contract and deficit in political legitimacy that contributed to the *Aragalaya*.

## Key Contenders

The three major candidates – Wickremesinghe, who is running on an independent platform, Sajith Premadasa from the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), and Anura Kumara Dissanayake from the National People's Power (NPP) – have launched their campaign manifestos.

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<sup>1</sup> Naila Rafique, "Beyond the Protests: Sri Lanka's Aragalaya Movement and the Uncertain Future", *Freedom House*, 26 October 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beyond-protests-sri-lankas-aragalaya-movement-and-uncertain-future>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ganeshan Wignaraja, Dirk, Willem Te Velde (eds.), "Introduction: overview and policy proposals", in *Sri Lanka from debt default to transformative growth* (ODI Publications, 2024), pp. 1-3.

## Ranil Wickremesinghe

Wickremesinghe is running for presidency on an independent platform. Despite leading the United National Party (UNP), the president's decision to run on an independent platform was likely driven by the need to accommodate support from various political groups. It is claimed that around 90 Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) members of parliament (MPs) have declared their support for the president.<sup>4</sup> The president's break with the Rajapaksas has enabled him to broaden his political base and accommodate those who did not wish to support him while he was allied with the Rajapaksas.

Wickremesinghe's economic policy has been closely aligned with the IMF-led recovery programme. His campaign narrative is of economic stability, claiming that he (and his team of MPs) was the only one who stepped up to the task during the 2022 crisis when allegedly no one else was willing to take on such an enormous risk. The government is championing that it achieved certain macroeconomic indicators such as easing inflation and built foreign reserves up to US\$5.4 billion (S\$7 billion) by May 2024. The president's campaign manifesto, *Puluwan Sri Lanka* ('Sri Lanka Can'), includes the vision of a Theravada Trade Economy which claims to be an economic system based on the concept of Theravada Buddhist (which is likely to appeal to the Sinhala Buddhist majority vote) but essentially advocates for highly competitive and export-oriented trade over economic policies that are primarily focused on domestic production.<sup>5</sup>

On the national question, Wickremesinghe has committed to fully implementing the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution (including land and police powers), which mandates power-sharing with the Tamil minority through the provincial council system.<sup>6</sup> On the reconciliation front, some efforts have been made under the Wickremesinghe government since 2022, such as establishing a Truth, Unity and Reconciliation Commission and passing the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation Bill. However, despite promising a resolution to the national question since assuming office, substantial progress on this front has been made second to the task of economic recovery.

The president has also faced critiques for undemocratic actions, including a failed attempt to extend the Attorney General's tenure beyond what was legally mandated, clashes with the judiciary over a gender equality bill and the suggestion of appointing a parliamentary committee to override the Supreme Court's decisions. This, alongside the non-appointment of an Inspector General of Police (IGP) after the existing IGP was suspended due to a Supreme Court ruling, has raised concerns about potential executive overreach.<sup>7</sup> As part of his government's reforms programme, laws passed such as the Online Safety Act and the Anti-terrorism Act have also been criticised by Human Rights Watch as detrimental to democratic freedoms and rights.

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<sup>4</sup> "92 MPs meet President Ranil to pledge their support", *Ada Derana*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.adaderana.lk/news/100884/92-mps-meet-president-ranil-to-pledge-their-support>.

<sup>5</sup> Ranil Wickremesinghe, Election Manifesto, Colombo, 2024, <https://www.ranil2024.lk/manifesto>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Despite Wickremesinghe's campaign rhetoric of having stabilised the economy, the growing poverty and inequality in the country have made him increasingly unpopular. Election polls conducted by the Institute of Health Policy indicate that Dissanayake and Premadasa are leading, with the current president in third place.<sup>8</sup> Since 2022, poverty has doubled to 25 per cent of the population, with increasing issues such as inequality, food insecurity and debt vulnerability. A United Nations report found Sri Lanka to be one of the top five countries in the Asia-Pacific region in terms of wealth inequality.<sup>9</sup> In response to increasing poverty and inequity, Wickremesinghe launched a poverty alleviation programme called *Aswesuma* and the *Urumaya* programme, the latter of which involves distributing freehold land titles to two million households. In addition to these, there have been several state subsidies and freebies in the lead-up to the election, along with announcements of salary hikes, fertiliser subsidies and ongoing efforts to reduce Pay As You Earn tax rates.

### **Sajith Premadasa**

The second key presidential aspirant, Premadasa, is the leader of the SJB. It was formed in 2020 as a breakaway of the UNP. Premadasa lost the 2019 presidential election, coming second after securing 41.99 per cent of the vote. The SJB is a broad-tent party, and its current alliance, the Samagi Jana Sandhanaya, includes members from a wide range of political camps and parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the People's Freedom Congress (a SLPP-breakaway), the Tamil Progressive Alliance and a faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Being a breakaway of the UNP, the SJB advocates largely for economic liberalism. However, the SJB under Premadasa attempts to position itself to be slightly left of the current government's economic policy. Premadasa's manifesto ('A Win for All') characterises its economic policy as "social democratic". Premadasa has worked to cultivate a pro-poor image, leveraging his father's (former President Ranasinghe Premadasa) legacy to appeal to the economically marginalised and with campaign promises of state-linked patronage and subsidies.<sup>10</sup> For example, his manifesto outlines plans to provide government-owned land for the construction of low-income and middle-class housing schemes, aiming to address housing challenges faced by these groups.<sup>11</sup> It also promises to negotiate within the existing IMF deal for terms that are more favourable for the more economically vulnerable sections of society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "AK Dissanayake and Sajith Premadasa lead neck and neck in July voting intent, but support for Pres. Ranil Wickremesinghe surges", Presidential Election Press Release by Institute of Health Policy, July 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Saman Gunadasa, "UN report finds Sri Lanka's social inequality among the worst in Asia," World Socialist Web Site, 26 December 2023, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/12/27/svae-d27.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Harindra B Dassanayake, Rajni Gamage, "Countering NPP's rise: Emerging political alliances and election strategies", *Daily FT*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Countering-NPP-s-rise-Emerging-political-alliances-and-election-strategies/4-760229>.

<sup>11</sup> Samagi Jana Sandhanaya, Election Manifesto, "A win for all", Colombo, 2024, <http://ads.newswire.lk/pdf/election/sajith/manifesto-e.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Harindra B Dassanayake, Rajni Gamage, "Countering NPP's rise: Emerging political alliances and election strategies", *Daily FT*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Countering-NPP-s-rise-Emerging-political-alliances-and-election-strategies/4-760229>.

The Premadasa campaign presents itself as a competent team with governance experience yet distinct (at least in degree) from the corruption associated with the SLPP. The manifesto has promised strong anti-corruption measures and has committed to changing the present constitution through consultations with religious dignitaries, political parties and civil society members, aiming to transition to a parliamentary system with maximum devolution based on the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>13</sup>

### **Anura Kumara Dissanayake**

The third frontrunner presidential candidate is Dissanayake, who heads the NPP which is a political alliance in which the Communist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is the main political party. The NPP has had a sharp rise in popularity since 2022, having secured only around three per cent of the vote in the last presidential election. Its anti-corruption message and promise of a change in political culture resonate strongly with voters who are demanding ‘system change’ – a key slogan during the *Aragalaya*.

Historically, the NPP has opposed IMF programmes, but its recent endorsement of the current programme (although with a renegotiation of its terms) as seen in its manifesto, ‘A Rich Country, A Beautiful Life’, marks a significant shift.<sup>14</sup> The NPP’s leadership has made pragmatic concessions, seen during a more recent visit to India, where it expressed alignment with foreign investment interests despite earlier opposition. Its current platform advocates a state-directed mixed economy, and this is evident in its stance on privatisation of only some state-owned enterprises.<sup>15</sup> The party’s economic growth policy prioritises industrialisation and domestic manufacturing.

The NPP’s election campaign has a left populist tone, including promises of cutting taxes and increasing government employee salaries. On the national question, the NPP’s stance has undergone notable evolution. While it has not fully endorsed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, it has committed to maintaining the provincial council system.<sup>16</sup> This nuanced position reflects a significant shift in the party’s approach, driven by its growing popularity and the need to appeal to a broader electorate, particularly as it remains uninterested in forming alliances ahead of the election.

Despite this shift, the NPP’s discourse on reconciliation and power-sharing remains less forthcoming compared to the other two candidates. There is a possibility for latent Sinhala Buddhist nationalist tendencies to later surface as electoral pressures mount, especially given the nationalist lobbying the JVP has led since the late 1980s, and in supporting Mahinda Rajapaksa coming into power in 2005 and that government’s war effort. The NPP has remained silent on the issue of downsizing the military and has instead mobilised ex-military collectives across the country and stated that it would not seek to persecute alleged human rights violations and war crimes during the ethnic conflict.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Newswire Editorial, “NPP Anura Kumara Dissanayake Election Manifesto”, 26 August 2024, *Newswire*, <https://www.newswire.lk/2024/08/26/npp-anura-kumara-dissanayake-election-manifesto-sinhala-tamil/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Namal Rajapaksa

In August 2024, Namal Rajapaksa was announced as the SLPP presidential candidate. The SLPP, led by the Rajapaksa family, faces a crisis of legitimacy following the economic downturn and widespread public disillusionment as manifested in the *Aragalaya*. This disillusioned voter base is numerically significant because it gave the SLPP the largest-ever majority in the parliament in 2020. At present, the SLPP is fractured, with most of its MPs supporting Wickremesinghe's campaign.<sup>18</sup>

In a bid to distance the SLPP from the current Wickremesinghe administration, Namal has opposed policies such as privatisation, taxation policy, the full implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and economic integration with India. While Namal is expected to gain a smaller section of the vote compared to the main three candidates, the SLPP is likely to retain some of its voter base. Among the reasons for this is the absence of any real contender for the left nationalist space that the Rajapaksa ideology had occupied since 2005 with the NPP increasingly becoming a catch-all party. Moreover, the current SLPP campaign is widely seen as platforming Namal to prepare him as a more serious political contender in the next presidential election.

## Smaller Parties and Coalition Potential

In countries that have defaulted on debt payments, elections often fail to produce clear winners, necessitating post-election coalitions. Sri Lanka is no exception, with most candidates actively seeking alliances to maximise their electoral chances.<sup>19</sup> Sri Lanka's presidential electoral system is one where if a candidate is unable to secure a simple majority in the first round of voting, second and third preferences (of voters whose first preference is eliminated) are used to determine the winner out of the top two candidates. The 2024 election has three strong candidates and could be the first time when the second round is activated. As a result, forming alliances with smaller parties, especially minority parties are even more significant than before for the main candidates, as the latter forms around 25 per cent of the electorate. The NPP, which has in the past (as the JVP) formed alliances (formal or informal) with political parties across the ideological spectrum, has declared it will not form any pre-election alliances with any other mainstream establishment party.

Tamil political parties have been pivotal in past presidential elections. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the main political party within the Tamil National Alliance, pledged its support for Premadasa.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, a Tamil common candidate, former ITAK MP, P Ariyanethran, has been nominated. However, this is not expected to significantly split the Tamil vote as it is backed by a group of smaller Tamil parties. Much of the Northern Tamil

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Uditha Devapriya, "Sri Lanka's complex dance of Sinhala and Tamil nationalist politics", *Himal South Asian*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.himalmag.com/politics/sri-lanka-sinhala-tamil-nationalism-ranil-wickremesinghe>.

<sup>20</sup> Meera Srinivasan, "Sri Lanka's main Tamil Party to back Sajith Premadasa in polls", *The Hindu*, 1 September 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankas-main-tamil-party-to-back-sajith-premadasa-in-polls/article68593305.ece>.

vote is expected to be split between supporting Wickremesinghe and Premadasa. Similarly, with the hill-country Tamil constituency, the political representatives (Ceylon Workers' Congress and Tamil People's Alliance) are split between Wickremesinghe and Premadasa. Meanwhile, the Muslim Congress and All Ceylon Muslim Congress have backed Premadasa, although there should be some support for Wickremesinghe, due to traditional patronage and voting preferences. The NPP, in contrast, is unlikely to have a significant amount of support from the minority communities, due to historically not having nurtured deep relationships with these communities.

Meanwhile, the SLFP, which has been caught in internal power struggles, has splintered into three groups. The Dayasiri Jayasekara faction backs the SJB, a second faction backs the Wickremesinghe camp and a third faction comprising former president Maithripala Sirisena, is not backing any candidate. The SLFP is a smaller party (with 13 MPs in parliament) but retains the ability to mobilise some votes for its preferred candidate due to its traditional grassroots mechanisms.

Besides these parties, new smaller parties such as the Sarvajana Balaya and People's Struggle Alliance are unlikely to win many votes but have the potential to significantly influence the ideological discourse post-election, as they provide alternatives to the increasing consensus of the three main candidates. Dilith Jayaweera, the presidential candidate from the Sarvajana Balaya, adopts an economic nationalist and anti-power sharing stance.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Nuwan Bopage, the presidential candidate of the People's Struggle Alliance, advocates left-leaning economic policies such as an economic alternative to the IMF programme and a renegotiation of debt restructuring, alongside supporting substantial power sharing, that goes beyond the current constitutional provisions. The Alliance comprises the Frontline Socialist Party, other left parties and Aragalya activists.

## Conclusion

The Sri Lankan election is occurring at a critical juncture in the nation's political and economic history, marking the first electoral process since the widespread protests in 2022. The major candidates include Wickremesinghe, running on an independent platform with a focus on IMF-led economic recovery, Premadasa, who emphasises social democratic policies and pro-poor initiatives and Dissanayake of the NPP, who advocates for systemic change and anti-corruption measures. The election is expected to be highly competitive, with the possibility of a second-round vote if no candidate secures a simple majority. If the second-round vote is activated, the possibility of post-election instability in the interim, and low legitimacy of the incoming president is likely. Post-election coalitions may be necessary, reflecting the fragmented political environment and the ongoing search for stable governance amidst economic recovery efforts.

The outcome of the election could also significantly influence the nation's geopolitical dynamics, particularly its relationships with regional powers such as India, key Western powers and China. While all three main contenders appear to be inclined towards a

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<sup>21</sup> Harindra B Dassanayake and Rajni Gamage, "Emerging presidential election campaigns in Sri Lanka: Liberal Consensus and fringe politics", *Daily FT*, 26 June 2024, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Emerging-Presidential-election-campaigns-in-Sri-Lanka-Liberal-consensus-and-fringe-politics/4-763468>.

balanced foreign policy, in practice, all governments in the past and present have (perceived or real) tilted slightly towards one geopolitical camp. While a Wickremesinghe or Premadasa government is expected to lean more towards India and the Western powers, a NPP government is expected to build closer ties with China. Additionally, the influence of the smaller parties, especially those opposing deep economic ties with India or advocating for alternative economic strategies, could further complicate Sri Lanka's foreign policy direction, impacting its positioning within the broader South Asian region and beyond.

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