



Center for Asian Democracy

Sri Lanka General Election 2024 Post-Election Report

CAD Research Brief

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Cover Image: Source: EPA

Country Profile

Overview

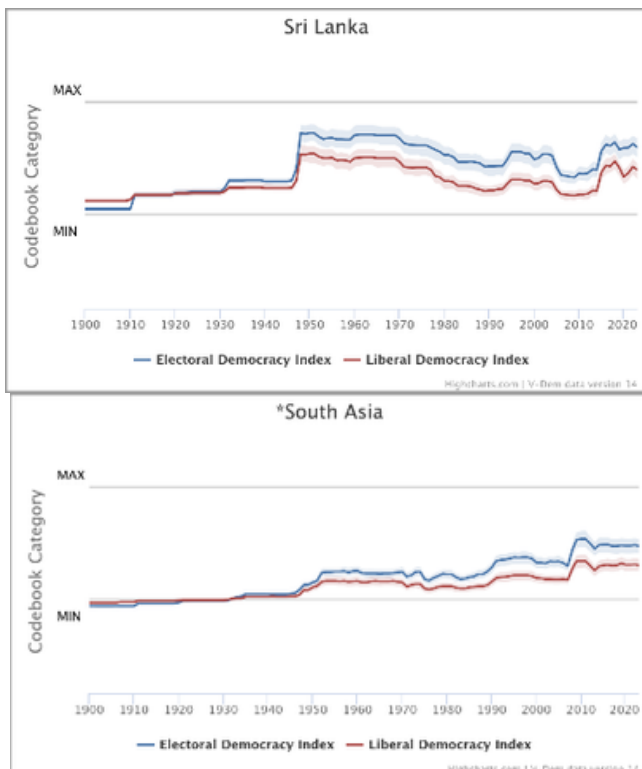
The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a dual executive republic located in South Asia off the southern coast of India with a population of 22 million as of 2022. The country became a republic with the passage of the 1972 constitution which also saw its name changed to Sri Lanka. That constitution was replaced in 1978, leaving the country with its current title and governmental structure. Sri Lanka's executive branch is headed by a president who serves as the chief executive, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the head of state. The president appoints a prime minister to serve as their deputy and to head the legislature, which consists of a unicameral parliament. The country has an independent judiciary headed by the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka.



Map/[Constitution](#)/[Population](#)
Population as of 2022: 21,982,608
(Projections)

Measures of Democracy

Sri Lanka's electoral and liberal democracy rankings peaked in 1948, just after it gained independence, with scores of 0.68 and 0.53 respectively. Both scores declined during the beginning and final phases of the civil war and have been generally rising since its conclusion. Sri Lanka's 2023 rankings of 0.58 and 0.42 are above average for South Asia which has regional average scores of 0.48 and 0.35. Its scores are also significantly higher than those of its neighbor, India, which has an electoral democracy score of 0.38 and a liberal democracy score of 0.28.



Media Freedom

In 2023 Reporters Without Borders ranked Sri Lanka 150th out of 180 countries in terms of media freedom. Much of the issue stems from the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act, initially passed as a temporary measure in 1979. It has since been used to detain and harass journalists and political activists, particularly those that are part of the Tamil ethnic minority and Muslims. In January of this year, the Sri Lankan parliament passed a new bill, the Online Safety Act, which created an Online Safety Commission and provided it with broad censorship abilities. Additionally, the commission has the authority to disable internet access for offenders.

	INDEX 2024	INDEX 2023
	150 / 180	135 / 180
	Score : 35.21	Score : 45.85
POLITICAL INDICATOR	147 30.43	146 40.94
ECONOMIC INDICATOR	154 32.16	76 48.53
LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR	139 42.19	143 43.40
SOCIAL INDICATOR	165 29.61	148 42.05
SECURITY INDICATOR	140 41.68	116 54.32

Election Profile

Sri Lanka held its presidential election on September 21st, 2024. This was the first presidential election in the country since Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed to the office by former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, after he left office in the face of popular protest. In total 39 candidates contested the office. However, 4 of these candidates were of particular interest.

Candidates and Parties

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)

The center-left nationalist Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) selected former Minister of Youth and Sports Namal Rajapaksa as their nominee. He is the eldest son of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and the nephew of former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and campaigned to continue the work of what he describes as Sri Lanka's political "Golden Era", the decade his father spent as president. Policy-wise, he promised to lower a number of taxes and tariffs to ease the financial burden on the lower classes. He received 2.57% of the vote and was eliminated after the first round of counting.

Ranil Wickremesinghe

Incumbent president and six-time former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe contested the election as an independent. His campaign focused heavily on economic stability and the success his administration had in lowering inflation and increasing Sri Lanka's foreign reserves. He faced criticism from some for passing the Online Safety Act which curtailed media freedom and freedom of expression, and from others for the country's ongoing economic difficulties. Wickremesinghe received 17.27% of the vote and was eliminated after the first round of counting.

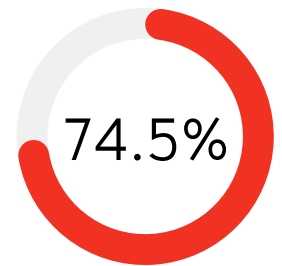
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)

The centrist Samagi Jana Sandhanaya alliance led by the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party chose Leader of the Opposition and former Minister of Housing, Construction, and Cultural Affairs, Sajith Premadasa as its nominee. The Premadasa campaign focused on poverty and negotiating within the bounds of Sri Lanka's current International Monetary Fund loan deal to ease burdens placed on poor communities. In terms of structural change, Premadasa planned to alter the constitution in order to transition into a parliamentary system of governance with many central powers being devolved into the provincial counsels. Premadasa received 32.76% of the vote in the first round of counting and 44.11% in the second round in which he was defeated.

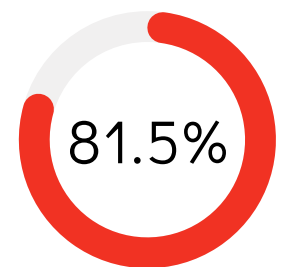
National People's Power Alliance

The National People's Power alliance headed by the Marxist-Leninist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party nominated JVP leader and MP Anura Kumara Dissanayake to contest the election. The NPP, which received only 3% of the total vote in the 2019 election, was able to drastically increase the popularity of their party by appealing to voters dissatisfied with the political status quo. As the NPP has grown more successful, its positions have become more moderate, advocating for a state-directed mixed-economy, committing to preserving Sri Lanka's provincial council system, and supporting the IMF loan but seeking to renegotiate its terms. Some have criticized Dissanayake for his vague positions on issues such as reconciliation, and see his party as one of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Dissanayake received 42.31% of the vote in the first round of counting and 55.89% in the second, securing him the presidency.

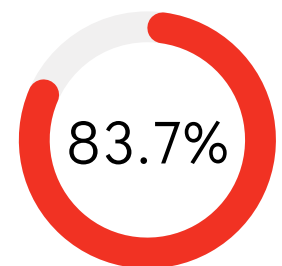
Recent Voter Turnout



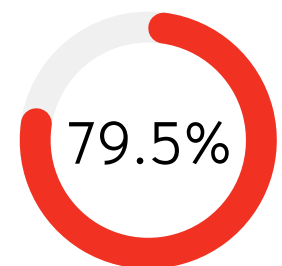
2010



2015



2019



2024

Source: [International IDEA](#)

The End of the Post-War Era?

The Rajapaksa family, which had been politically powerful in the south of Sri Lanka for decades, established its national political dynasty while directing the brutal end stages of the government's civil war against the Tamil separatists known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected to the presidency in 2005. He appointed his brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, to be Secretary to the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development, and by May 2009, declared victory in the war. Estimates of the full death toll in the final months often exceed 80,000. In 2011, the U.N. declared sources to be credible that estimated up to 40,000 civilian deaths in the same time frame. Multiple investigations, including from the U.N., have found credible allegations that Rajapaksa's government violated international humanitarian law in this period, including through shelling civilian populations and hospitals. In spite of international criticism, battlefield victory fueled Mahinda Rajapaksa's 2010 reelection. During his second term he imprisoned an electoral opponent, appointed roughly 20 family members to government, and passed the 18th Amendment, which removed presidential term limits.

Mahinda called for an early presidential election in November of 2014, but lost that election to Maithripala Sirisena. Sirisena won with the backing of a broad coalition of opposition parties, on an anti-corruption platform focused on democratic reform. Early in his presidency, he passed a right-to-information bill and the 19th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution which restored presidential term limits, limited the powers of the presidency, and increased the powers of the prime minister. However, progress on his policy promises slowed, in part due to opposition from pro-Rajapaksa legislators. On October 26th, 2018, he suddenly dismissed then-Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa to take his place, throwing the country into a constitutional crisis. The Supreme Court declared the move unconstitutional and reinstated Wickremesinghe. Sirisena opted not to run in the 2019 presidential elections, which were ultimately won by Gotabaya Rajapaksa. During three years in office, Gotabaya undid many of the previous administration's reforms and resumed appointing Rajapaksas to high-level positions. He was forced to vacate the office by a student-led movement protesting his mishandling of the economy and nepotism within his administration. Just before fleeing the country, Gotabaya appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe as acting president.

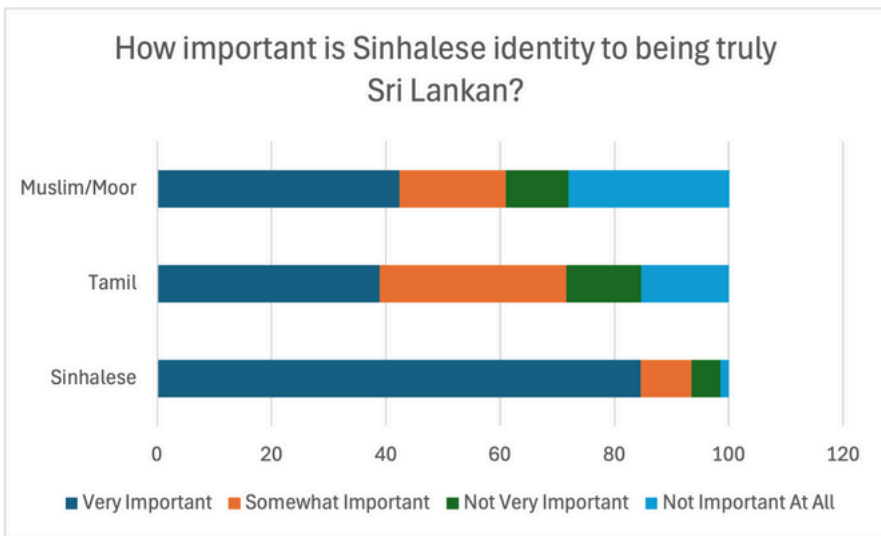
Wickremesinghe focused his presidency primarily on working with the International Monetary Fund and financial organizations to stabilize the country's economy, with some success. However, he did not deliver political reforms protestors demanded, and economic conditions for average Sri Lankans remained precarious. In 2024 Wickremesinghe ran for reelection, but lost to Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who ran on the promise of systemic change and economic relief. Dissanayake is now in the beginning stages of his presidency, building his cabinet and scheduling parliamentary elections. There are reasons to believe that the recent election signals a transition away from post-war politics on the island. Namal Rajapaksa produced poor performance in this race. The new president is a member of the JVP, a party that earned the ire of many Sri Lankans after leading an insurgency during the civil war. Dissanayake has appointed Dr. Harini Amarasuriya as Prime Minister, making her the third woman, the first academic, and the first woman without family ties to a political dynasty to hold the office.



President Anura Kumara Dissanayake delivering remarks after being sworn in at the presidential secretariat. Source: President's Media Division, Sri Lanka

Public Opinion

All data drawn from Pew Research Group's 2022 Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia Survey

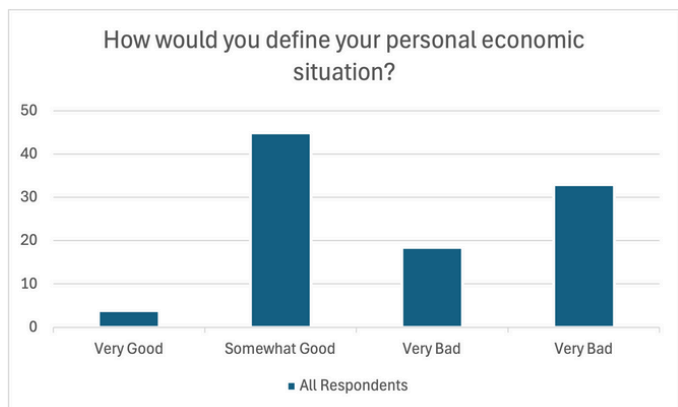


Ethnicity and National Identity

The Pew Research Center asked Sri Lankans to rank how important being Sinhalese is to being truly Sri Lankan. Among the majority Sinhalese population, 84.6% of respondents claimed being Sinhalese was very important, while only 39.9% of all other ethnic groups agreed. The result for Sinhalese is predictable given the prevalence of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism on the island. However, significant portions of other ethnic/religious groups on the island share this perception.

Religious Conversion

When polled concerning the acceptability of attempting to convert others to join one's religion, 83.8% of respondents claimed the practice was unacceptable, with similar resistance across religions. The taboo surrounding conversion likely comes from the tension across the island between Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim communities. Some organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) have leveraged accusations against Christians and Muslims claiming that they have attempted to convert people away from Buddhism in order to legitimize their harassment of these communities.



Personal Economics

When asked about their economic state 48.5% of respondents said they were doing good or very good, while 51.2% said they were doing bad to very bad. Interestingly, only 3.8% of respondents claimed to be doing very good, while 32.8% said they were doing very bad. On this question, minimal religious divisions emerge in the data. This skew towards the negative is likely explained by the economic crisis in the country and the deal it entered with the International Monetary Fund.

Forces Shaping Democratic Consolidation

Economic Crisis

Sri Lanka has struggled to develop its economy post-independence, and in 2019 it entered a state of financial crisis. The country saw rising prices, frequent power cuts, shortages of essential goods such as food and fuel, and a spiking inflation rate. The crisis was caused by a multitude of issues, chief among them being Sri Lanka's foreign debts. In 2022 Sri Lanka was importing 3 billion dollars more than it was exporting, quickly depleting its foreign reserves, and in May of that year, the country defaulted on its first foreign debt payment in history, damaging its reputation with lenders. The crisis was also exacerbated by the mishandling of the economy by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration, which passed tax cuts in 2019 and banned the import of chemical fertilizer resulting in widespread crop failure. Efforts to combat the crisis began after Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed to the presidency in 2022. After negotiations, China and India agreed to alter loan repayment plans, and the country entered into an arrangement with the International Monetary Fund, which lent the island roughly 3 billion dollars on the condition that it participate in a program designed to reform its economy, including through implementing multiple austerity measures.

2022 Student Protest Movement/Gota Go Gama

The difficulties experienced during the economic crisis inspired a number of protests which began in March of 2022. When the Rajapaksa government failed to act, protests became more contentious. For example, a group of protestors burned two military buses that were blocking the street to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's residence. After this incident, Rajapaksa assumed emergency powers and instituted a curfew across the country. Two days later on April 3rd, all 26 ministers of the president's cabinet resigned. On April 9th, a large group of protestors gathered in an urban park to chant and hold signs that read "Gota Go Home." This quickly developed into an occupation movement referred to as "Gota Go Gama" or Gota Go Village. From here the movement grew rapidly, with rallies and marches becoming larger and small Gota Go Villages sprouting around the island. On May 9th the movement had one of its demands met when Mahinda Rajapaksa, Prime Minister and brother of Gotabaya, turned in his resignation. A month later thousands of protestors overcame anti-riot efforts and entered the presidential secretariat, swimming in the president's pool and raiding his offices. Gotabaya promised to resign after this incident, however, he opted instead to appoint Wickremesinghe as acting president while he fled to the Maldives in a military jet.

Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

Members of parliament are elected to a five-year term. However, the president has the authority to dissolve parliament upon the parliament's request or at any time two years and six months from the date of the body's first meeting. On September 24th of this year, in keeping with post-presidential election practice, President Dissanayake did just this. Parliamentary elections have been scheduled for November 14th. The move came as a surprise to no one due not only to the fact that Dissanayake promised to do exactly this before being elected, but also because it provides an opportunity for the NPP to shift the ideology of the legislature. As it stands, of the two hundred fifty-five members of the Sri Lankan parliament, only three of them are members of the NPP. By scheduling elections so close to his presidential win, Dissanayake hopes to capitalize on his momentum and popularity to make his coalition the dominant force in parliament.



Protestors storm the presidential secretariat in Colombo, Sri Lanka on July 9th 2022. Source: AP Photo/Thilina Kaluthotage



2 men waiting in a fuel line in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Source: EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock

Spotlight on the Campaign Trail



Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya during her swearing-in ceremony at the Presidential Secretariat. Source: President's Media Division, Sri Lanka / REUTERS.



Former Minister of Youth and Sports and eldest son of Mahinda Rajapaksa, Namal Rajapaksa greeting supporters at Rathgama, Sri Lanka on Aug. 4, 2024. Source: X/Namal Rajapaksa



Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa greet supporters in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2019. Source: Tharaka Basnayaka/NurPhoto/Getty Images



Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe participates in the final Randoli procession of the annual Esala Perahara at the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, Sri Lanka, August 19, 2024. Cite: [X/President's Media Division of Sri Lanka](#)



Leader of the SJB Sajith Premadasa waving to supporters at a campaign rally for the 2024 election. Source: Facebook/Sajith Premadasa



Sri Lankan Tamils pray for loved ones at a ceremony commemorating the 1983-2009 civil war. Source: Getty Images

Further Reading

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About the Center for Asian Democracy

The mission of the Center for Asian Democracy, established at the University of Louisville in 2006, is to promote research and teaching about democracy and the prospects for democratization in Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. Through publications, conferences, workshops, visiting scholars programs, colloquia, and research projects in Asian countries, the Center creates a forum for studying political dynamics in this vital region. The Center is led by Dr. David Buckley, Paul Weber Chair of Politics, Science and Religion, and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Louisville.

About the Author

Wade McGuire is a junior at the University of Louisville majoring in Political Science and Humanities. Her academic interests are American Law and South Asian religious traditions. Over the summer she worked as an intern for the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights.

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