



European Union
Election Observation Mission

SRI LANKA 2024

Final Report



Presidential Elections

21 September 2024



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Abbreviation	Full Name
ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
ANCL	Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited
ATB	Anti-Terrorism Bill
CaFFE	Campaign for Free and Fair Elections
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIABOC	Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption
CMEV	Centre for Monitoring Election Violence
CPLS	Sri Lanka Communist Party
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECSL	Election Commission of Sri Lanka
ELPP	<i>Eksath Lanka Podujana Party</i>
EU	European Union
EU EOM	European Union Election Observation Mission
EUR	Euro
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IRES	Democratic Reforms and Electoral Studies
ITN	Independent Television Network
JVP	<i>Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna</i>
LKR	Sri Lankan Rupee
MoMM	Ministry of Mass Media
MoT	Ministry of Technologies
NDF	National Democratic Front
NPP	National People's Power
OAS	Organization of American States
OSA	Online Safety Act
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PAFFREL	People's Action for Free and Fair Elections
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
SJB	<i>Samagi Jana Balawegaya</i>
SLBC	<i>Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation</i>
SLPI	<i>Sri Lanka Press Institute</i>
SLPP	<i>Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna</i>
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises
SPF	Socialist People's Forum
SPOs	Senior presiding officers
TISL	Transparency International Sri Lanka
UN	United Nations
UNFF	United National Freedom Front
UNP	United National Party

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 presidential election was the first pivotal step after the unprecedented mass protests, known as *Aragalaya*, to reinvigorate the democratic process through the ballot box. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) conducted the process independently and with resolve, ensuring transparency at all key stages of the election. The contest itself was pluralistic, with fundamental freedoms broadly respected. The campaign was peaceful and energetic, yet the advantage of incumbency tilted the playing field, and some manipulative digital campaigns aimed to confuse voters. Respect for the democratic process from across the political and civil society spectrum outweighed the minor deficiencies in law and practice. The calm election day, followed by an efficient tabulation of results and candidates' swift acceptance of the outcome, attested to the resilience of Sri Lanka's democracy.

The election was conducted under a well-developed legal framework, that offers an adequate basis for the conduct of a democratic election. Recent legal reforms addressed several previous EU EOM recommendations, advancing privacy rights, introducing regulations for campaign finance and ensuring that youth turning 18 in the months preceding an election are no longer disenfranchised. Yet, legislation with the potential for arbitrary and repressive application against political dissent, in particular the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the ICCPR Act and the Online Safety Act, was also in force, falling short of international standards.

The ECSL implemented the election efficiently and with professional integrity, upholding principles of transparency and accountability, while also enjoying broad stakeholder trust at national and district levels. The Commission held stakeholder meetings and closely collaborated with civil society to provide voter information and monitor the campaign. Election-related information of public interest was placed on the ECSL's website and commission members were responsive to media queries. The Commission also took an active public stance against violations of campaign rules and the misuse of state resources, although they had limited powers of, and capacity for, enforcement.

Technical preparations for election day were well thought through and made on time, ensuring smooth and orderly voting, counting and tabulation of results. Polling stations opened on time and voting proceeded in a peaceful and festive atmosphere. Election workers were knowledgeable and professional, following procedures robustly during all stages of the process. The large presence of party agents and citizen observers enhanced the transparency and integrity of the polls. No major violations of electoral law were recorded, but the political campaign on social media continued in full swing on election day even if campaign silence rules were to be observed.

Issues related to the secrecy of the ballot in some polling stations were the only shortcoming identified by EU EOM observers on election day. In a quarter of observations, the layout of the polling station, and the positioning of the voting booth in particular, did not safeguard the secrecy of the vote. Also, the 54-centimetre-long ballot did not always fit on the voting table, and its position made it possible, at times, to guess the voter's intention.

Clarity and integrity were ensured during the tabulation and the count of preferential votes. Nevertheless, the ECSL's public announcement that a count of preferential votes would be needed to establish the winner came late, with the actual counting of ballots being already well underway; by then only a handful of polling division results was published. Although this delayed communication did not infringe any existing regulation and did not undermine stakeholders' trust in the outcome of the election, better timing and enhanced clarity in public statements would have served to prevent speculations, enhance transparency and maintain voters' confidence at that important juncture.

Overall, the presidential election was competitive and offered voters genuine political alternatives. For the first time in recent political history, there was a three-way race for the presidential office, in a record field of 39 contestants. The incumbent president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, having been elected president by parliament in July 2022, sought a popular mandate. The other two prominent contestants

were the leader of the opposition, Sajith Premadasa of the *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB), and Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the National People's Power (NPP), who earned popularity with his promises to change the social, economic and political system.

To advance equity between candidates, limits on campaign spending were introduced for the first time. However, there were no caps on individual donations and no disclosure requirements until after the election. Besides, there were also no legal obligation for all candidates to follow the same format of reporting, as there was no forms to be filled in digitally, which made it more difficult to analyse and compare the reports. Furthermore, the ECSL does not have the obligation, and lacks the legal power, to scrutinise election expenditure reports. Neither do they have any obligation to collaborate with other institutions to verify or crosscheck reported data to ascertain their accuracy. Media and social media are also not obliged to disclose advertising prices and income generated from political publicity. These legal deficiencies reduce the effectiveness of the well-intended campaign finance reform.

The campaign itself was peaceful and energetic, allowing for the freedom of assembly and expression. All leading candidates held large-scale rallies, sought alliances with minority groups and religious communities, mobilised grassroots support down to the village level, and deployed online campaign teams. Their campaigns focused primarily on economic issues, attempting to attract voters from all social strata and crossing historical ethno-religious divisions. However, closer to the election, hostile, aggressive rhetoric and interpersonal mudslinging increased, heightening the tone of political debate in the public space, including online.

The advantage of incumbency distorted the playing field. Salary increments for public sector employees, social benefit schemes, an interest-free student loan plan and monetary support programmes for small businesses, all announced by the executive during the campaign and covered in a positive tone on state media, were aligned with the incumbent's re-election bid. The line between governing and campaigning was further blurred by the participation of state and local officials in some of the incumbent's rallies. This was aggravated by the fact, that provinces and districts were governed by administrations appointed by the president and not elected due to the postponement of provincial and local elections.

The very high number of complaints during the election period attested to the active participation of voters and CSOs in upholding the campaign rules and preserving the peaceful campaign environment. The ECSL received over 4,000 complaints prior to the election and 600 on election day, mostly of minor infringements of the law and possible misuse of state resources. Throughout the process, the ECSL aimed at mitigation and prompt prevention rather than punishment, an approach generally accepted by candidates and CSOs alike.

The 2024 presidential campaign underscored the acute underrepresentation of women in politics. While the Constitution provides for affirmative action to foster gender parity and the law requires political parties to have at least one woman amongst party officials, women were not involved with campaigns in a meaningful way. In half of the rallies observed by the EU EOM, there were no female speakers and parties rarely had women in leadership positions, with media coverage of campaigning only confirming this deficit. While many factors were cited to explain the scant progress made in advancing gender parity in public life, a clear political will to improve the situation is also needed.

Broadcast media coverage of campaigning, while being lively and energetic, also highlighted the long-standing problems that have for years undermined the independence of journalists and media outlets and reduced the level of pluralism in the public sphere. State-run broadcasters are dependent on the government in power, while the editorial outputs of several leading commercial media houses primarily serve the political interests of their owners. As a result, while airtime was rather equitably divided among the leading candidates, very limited non-partisan scrutiny or analysis was offered.

Social media was used by all electoral stakeholders to inform, to mobilise, to engage and to exchange. However, it was also the platform through which manipulated content was spread to confuse voters. Whenever leading candidates made accusatory statements against each other, their digital teams inserted these political messages in non-partisan entertainment and gossip groups and created memes that ridiculed their rivals, polluting the online information environment.

National fact-checking initiatives, jointly with other civil society organisations and the ECSL, took important steps in countering disinformation, weeding out harmful content and striving to hold global tech companies to account. However, their efforts were often slowed down by a limited commitment from global tech companies to preserve the integrity of the campaign environment on their platforms. Disrespect of campaign silence rules was the most striking example observed.

Collaborative engagement of the ECSL and civil society organisations (CSOs) made a positive contribution to the electoral process, enhancing the transparency and propriety of the election. Well-established citizen observer groups monitored election preparations, the campaign environment and election day proceedings. CSOs were also agile in tracking violations of election rules and drawing public attention to the misuse of state resources. Their voter information efforts enhanced awareness of various aspects of the election at national and district levels.

Meaningful efforts were made by CSOs and the ECSL to foster inclusion. The ECSL introduced various measures to vindicate the voting rights of persons with disabilities, while CSOs carried out a targeted voter education campaign. Improving accessibility of polling stations and introducing special voting arrangements for voters with disabilities, such as postal voting or voting through a mobile ballot box on election day, would, however, further fulfil their right to participate in elections on an equal basis with others.

Overall, the 2024 presidential election underscored a clear commitment among Sri Lankans, from across the political and social spectrum, to the democratic process, while also evidencing an indisputable need for further reforms, focusing on inclusion, transparency in political finance and the advancement of women. The EU EOM is offering 16 recommendations for improving the way elections are organised, managed, and conducted and to uphold regional and international commitments. There are five priority recommendations:

1. Ensure enforcement of legal restrictions on the misuse of state resources and of incumbency for campaign purposes.
2. Amend the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023, to expand the responsibilities and powers of the ECSL, by obliging the Commission, in collaboration with other institutions, to verify the financial reports submitted by candidates. Introduce reporting requirements for media outlets and online platforms on prices of and revenue from paid political advertising and digitalised, standardised reporting by candidates.
3. Adopt special measures to promote the equal participation of women in public and political life. These measures could target political parties requiring a minimum of 30 per cent women among party nominees for national, provincial and local elections. Waiver of deposits for women contesting elections could be considered as another temporary special measure to advance women in politics.
4. Expand the use of special voting arrangements to enable all eligible voters to exercise their right to vote. Specifically, consider extending postal voting to other voters who cannot vote at their polling station on election day and introduce additional voting arrangements such as mobile ballot boxes for persons with disabilities.
5. Protect freedom of political expression by repealing the Online Safety Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, as well as Section 3 of the ICCPR Act.

II. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) deployed an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to observe the 21 September presidential election in Sri Lanka, following an invitation from the Election Commission of Sri Lanka. The EU EOM was present in the country from 14 August to 11 October 2024.

The EU EOM was led by the Chief Observer, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Member of the European Parliament from Spain. The EU EOM comprised a core team of 10 experts based in Colombo and 26 long-term observers who were deployed to all nine provinces of Sri Lanka on 29 August; 32 short-term observers scaled up the mission for election day observation and were present in Sri Lanka from 16 to 25 September. At full strength, the EU EOM comprised 70 international observers, drawn from EU Member States and partner countries.

The mission's mandate was to observe all aspects of the electoral process and assess the extent to which the elections complied with regional and international commitments for elections, as well as with national law. The EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions. The mission followed an established methodology and adhered to the "Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation", endorsed under United Nations auspices in October 2005 and now espoused by over 50 organisations.

III. POLITICAL CONTEXT

The 2024 presidential election was the first electoral contest after the unprecedented economic and political crises of 2022 and was crucial to bolstering democratic processes. The economic crisis had caused a sharp increase in poverty and decline in living standards, triggering mass protests known as the *Aragalaya* (*Sinhala* for struggle). The movement had called for a change of the political system, demanded wide-ranging governance reforms, more transparency and greater accountability of the President and other public office holders. The protests led to the ousting of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (*Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* (SLPP)). The persisting economic hardship, alongside continued articulation of the demands made during the *Aragalaya*, largely shaped the presidential election campaign.

The *Aragalaya* profoundly shook the foundations of the political order and accelerated the fragmentation of the old party system. The parties could no longer encompass the divergent political and economic interests of large parts of society across the social spectrum. Instead, through the mass protests, Sri Lankans established a new channel that enabled their grievances and demands to be heard. The movement did not structure itself as a permanent political force and did not have any power aspirations of its own, hence all leading presidential candidates sought to accommodate the citizens who were mobilised by the movement and aligned to its goals. The protests, caused by a severe and unparalleled economic crisis that culminated in the country declaring default in May 2022, called for ending corruption and improving governance.

For the first time in recent political history, there was a three-way race for the presidential office, in a record field of 39 registered contestants. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, a veteran politician and six-time Prime Minister, sought a popular mandate after having been elected president by parliament in July 2022. Standing as an independent candidate, he was supported by a majority of SLPP members of parliament, as well as some from smaller parties. He was opposed by Sajith Premadasa of the *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB), the runner-up in the 2019 presidential elections, leader of the opposition in parliament and son of the second executive president Ranasinghe Premadasa (1989-1993). Until 2019, both Wickremesinghe and Premadasa had been leaders of the country's first political party, United National Party (UNP). Anura Kumara Disسانayake of the National People's Power (NPP), who came a distant third in the 2019 elections, had grown in popularity over his promises of a comprehensive change of the social, economic and political system.

The nomination of former member of parliament Pakkiaselvam Ariyanethiran as the common Tamil candidate was supported by a wide range of small Tamil organisations and parties, but strongly opposed by Tamil political heavyweights, like Mathiaparanan A. Sumanthiran, who pledged support to Premadasa. Other candidates with a high public profile included Namal Rajapaksa, son of former president Mahinda (2005-2015), running for the SLPP, media tycoon Dilith Jayaweera of the *Sarvajana Balaya* alliance, and a former military commander, Sarath Fonseka, publicly known for his key role in ending the civil war and standing as an independent.

The economic crisis¹ and the subsequent recovery programme, with strict austerity measures, based on an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)², strongly influenced the political environment in which the presidential election campaign took place. A growing part of the population, including the middle class, suffered a decline in living standards and was fearful of further social descent.³ The Wickremesinghe government was both given credit for macro-economic stabilisation success and criticised for exacerbating the socio-economic hardships.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION OF PREVIOUS EU EOM RECOMMENDATIONS

Important progress was made in the implementation of the 2019 EU EOM recommendations.

Twenty-three recommendations were offered in 2019, advocating reform of electoral law and practice, six of which were accorded priority status over the others. Ten were partially implemented and two were implemented in full. No change was observed in the subject matter of 11 of the recommendations.

The enactment of new legislation was the principal source of success in implementation of recommendations. The new data protection law, for example, represented an important advance for privacy rights, including online. An amendment to the legislation on voter registration provided for the inclusion of young people in advance of turning 18, who had previously been disenfranchised. The introduction of a regime for the regulation of campaign finance represented a substantial measure of fulfilment of the priority recommendation which advocated such an initiative, though lacunae in the legislation meant that the aspirations proposed were not realised in full.

The majority of recommendations were offered to the legislature and to the ECSL. The success of many proposals required strong political will, as constitutional and legislative change could only have been achieved with support to advance such measures through parliament. Such will was not evident, in areas including the independence of the media and the creation of legal rights for election observers. While the ECSL made important improvements in their conduct of the election, in accessibility, transparency and public communication, progress was incomplete towards satisfaction of all recommendations. As recommended, the ECSL and CSOs jointly took resolute steps to secure a more formal engagement with global tech companies, yet reaction from most of those corporations was disappointing.

V. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Electoral law provides an adequate basis for democratic elections, but prevailing and proposed laws create powers which could restrict political freedom.

¹ The economy slid into a recession in 2020, the GDP declined by 4.6 per cent. In 2021, the economy recovered briefly, growing by 4.2 per cent. However, in 2022 and 2023 the economy registered significant negative growth with -7.3 per cent and 2.3 per cent respectively, see: [GDP growth \(annual %\) - Sri Lanka | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/SD/GDP.GS.ZS).

² In March 2023, the IMF approved a 48-month arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility for an amount of USD three billion, to be released in eight tranches; see: [IMF Executive Board Approves US\\$3 Billion Under the New Extended Fund Facility \(EFF\) Arrangement for Sri Lanka](https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/03/23/23-03-23-imf-executive-board-approves-us$3-billion-under-the-new-extended-fund-facility-eff-arrangement-for-sri-lanka)

³ According to the World Bank the poverty rate more than doubled from 11.3 per cent in 2019 to 25.9 per cent in 2023 see: World Bank, Sri Lanka Development Update, April 2024; [Sri Lanka Development Update 2024 \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sri-lanka/development-update).

The legal framework for the presidential election is conducive to the conduct of a democratic election, but complete compliance with relevant treaty obligations has yet to be attained. Electoral law provides protection for fundamental political rights, but prevailing and draft laws have the potential to be used to restrict political freedom. Respect for rule of law was stable during the election period, with the Supreme Court playing an important role in this domain, but a more robust separation of powers is needed to better guarantee the independence from the executive of the appointment process to constitutional commissions, including the ECSL.

a. International principles and commitments

Sri Lanka is a state party to many of the principal human rights treaties containing principles for and commitments to the conduct of democratic elections. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (accession in 1980); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1981); the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1982); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2016); and the UN Convention against Corruption (2004), all without reservation. Sri Lanka has not acceded to the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness nor to the International Labour Organisation Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention.

As a member state of the Commonwealth, Sri Lanka has undertaken the human rights commitments of the Commonwealth Charter, and, as a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Sri Lanka has undertaken the obligations of their Social Charter.

While greater compliance with international treaty obligations has been achieved since the last presidential election, there are still lacunae in national law. The Constitution establishes a dualist legal system, requiring incorporation of international treaty instruments into domestic law in order to establish direct applicability. The international obligations apply to the State, on the international plane, regardless of incorporation. The CRPD and CEDAW have not yet been fully implemented in national law, while there are areas of inconsistency between the provisions of the ICCPR and national law.

b. Fundamental political rights

Fundamental political rights are established by law, but equality is not adequately protected. An extensive catalogue of rights is set out in the Constitution, promulgated in 1978, as well as a set of directive principles of state policy and fundamental duties. Civil and political rights, including the right to vote and to stand for election and the freedoms of expression, assembly and association, are provided for, but not always fully protected in practice. The right to equality is elaborated, but only on the grounds of “*race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, and place of birth*”, omitting sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ Affirmative action is allowed under the Constitution, for the advancement of women, children and persons with disabilities, but has so far been utilised only to advance a quota for women in local government elections. The measure in place for the local authorities requires only 25 per cent women, below the 30 per cent minimum advocated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.⁵ At the same time, there are no other special measures to promote equal participation of women, such as quotas for national lists of candidates, waiver of deposits, and provision of public funding for campaigns of female candidates.

PRIORITY recommendation: Adopt special measures to promote the equal participation of women in public and political life. These measures could target political parties requiring a minimum of 30 per cent women among party nominees for national, provincial and local elections. Waiver of

⁴ See below on minority rights regarding the chilling effect on political participation due to this gap in the legal protection for this minority group.

⁵ See below section *Participation of women* for data on the political marginalisation of women.

deposits for women contesting elections could be considered as another temporary special measure to advance women in politics.

Political rights were respected during the election period, but current and draft laws may be used to restrict political participation.⁶ The EU EOM observed that candidates and their supporters were free to exercise freedoms of association and assembly, conducting their campaign events without hindrance. Freedom of speech was also upheld, though the ECSL Code of Conduct for campaigning restricted the use of posters and billboards, prohibited processions and limited the numbers involved in canvassing. Nevertheless, those limitations were agreed to by stakeholders, even though not always respected in practice. There is a history of the repressive use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 1979, and of Section 3 of the ICCPR Act, 2007, repeal of both of which is necessary to bring the legal framework into line with the ICCPR. The Online Safety Act, 2024, the draft Anti-terrorism Bill, 2024, and an anticipated NGO bill also represent threats to fundamental freedoms if given full force of law.⁷

The ever-growing jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in the adjudication of fundamental rights cases has been an important instrument in the vindication of political rights in recent years. The Constitution creates the opportunity to seek judicial review of draft legislation prior to enactment, facilitating cases filed by individuals as well as by CSOs. There is, however, no avenue for the judicial review of prevailing legislation. In the absence of a constitutional amendment to alter this situation, the Supreme Court has been active in opening access to legal remedy by way of fundamental rights petitions to challenge administrative action, which can now be submitted by individuals as well as by CSOs. This jurisdiction of the Supreme Court has been important in upholding the rule of law and underpinning the legitimacy of the democratic process. This was manifest in August 2024, in the decision in a group of cases taken by CSOs, that the delay in conducting local government elections was in violation of the fundamental rights of citizens, contravening the right to vote.⁸ This echoed the Court's earlier decision to temporarily restrain the Inspector General of Police from functioning in office, due to a strong *prima facie* case that his appointment had been unconstitutional.

c. Electoral law

The legal framework comprises the Constitution, legislation and subsidiary instruments, with reform of both the system of government and the electoral system being a vibrant and persistent topic in the political sphere. The Constitution has been amended 21 times since promulgation in 1978, indicating the ease with which this can be achieved. In June 2022, the Parliamentary Select Committee Report on Reforms of Election Laws and the Electoral System was published, with a resulting proposal for change in the electoral system approved by Cabinet in March 2024. It was not subsequently advanced. A Presidential Commission of Inquiry into election law, established in October 2023, concluded its mandate in August 2024, but the report was not published at the time of writing. Constitutional reform was advocated by many candidates during the electoral campaign. This echoes similar demands from CSOs, reflecting disappointment at the failure of previous constitutional reform initiatives.

The legal framework was settled and certain in advance of the presidential election, without any amendment during 2024. It is important that changes to election law are made long before any election, and only upon consultation with stakeholders. Decisions taken by the government during the year, to increase the scale of deposits to be paid by presidential candidates, and to extend the facility of advance (postal) voting to greater categories of voters, did not become law. In July 2024, the government approved the Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution Bill, to clarify that the term of office of the president is five years (renewable once), but a subsequent decision was taken not to proceed with the amendment.

⁶ [UN Human Rights Council, Situation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka, 22 August 2024, A/HRC/57/19](#)

⁷ See the relevant EU EOM recommendation in the section Social Media and Digital Rights.

⁸ Supreme Court Fundamental Rights [Applications Nos. 69, 79, 90 & 139/2023](#), see 21/8/24.

The post-*Aragalaya* twenty-first amendment to the Constitution, introduced in October 2022, restored the role of the Constitutional Council to limit the presidential power of appointment to the superior courts and to commissions including the ECSL, but scope for more robust protection for the independence of the pertinent institutions remains. The members of the ECSL are to be recommended by the Constitutional Council to the President, with three nominees to be advanced for chairperson. Concerns have been raised as to whether the composition of the Council allows it to be sufficiently distant from party political interests or sufficiently representative of civil society views. The UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concern due to the dominant membership of the political parties in parliament,⁹ while the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions is of the opinion that the recommendation process “is not sufficiently broad and transparent and does not formalise the participation of civil society”.¹⁰ The mechanism does not provide for public scrutiny of prospective candidates nor facilitate public debate on their merit, which would enhance the independence of the institutions.

Recommendation: *Strengthen the independence of the ECSL by reviewing the selection process preceding the recommendation of members of the ECSL by the Constitutional Council, to ensure that there is a transparent, competitive process and a public debate, promoting appointment of independent individuals.*

d. Electoral system

The Constitution establishes that the President of the Republic of Sri Lanka is the head of state, head of the executive and of government, and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The President is directly elected and may serve two five-year terms of office. There is a unicameral parliament, with two-hundred and twenty-five members, elected by proportional representation at district and national level. Provincial councils are elected within each of the nine provinces, and 341 local authorities are elected across the island, though both are vacant at present due to delayed elections.

Voting for the office of president is by way of a single vote, which is transferable between up to three preferences. Voters are permitted to vote for their first choice, and then, if they wish, to specify, numerically, a second and a third choice. A candidate receiving more than half of the valid votes cast (50 per cent plus 1) wins the election. Should no candidate cross this threshold, all but the leading two candidates will be eliminated and the second or third preference votes on their ballots (if for either of them) will be added to the totals of the two leaders. The candidate with a plurality of votes wins.

VI. ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

The ECSL operated professionally and transparently, delivering a well-run election.

a. Structure and composition of the election administration

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL), the constitutional body in charge of organising elections, acted independently during this presidential election, yet the nomination process of ECSL members can be improved. The Commission consists of five members, appointed by the President of the Republic. The Twenty-First Amendment to the Constitution (2022) changed the appointment process to include the recommendation of the Constitutional Council, but there are no further requirements as to the selection of Commission members. A public hearing for nominees could be considered among the measures to strengthen the perception of the Commission’s political independence. While the current Commission includes one woman, one Tamil and one Muslim member, there are no diversity criteria in the law.

⁹ [ICCPR, Human Rights Council, Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Sri Lanka, UN CCPR/C/LKA/CO/6, 26 April 2023](#)

¹⁰ [Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, sub-committee on accreditation, Sri Lanka 9/5/ 2024](#)

Election Commission members enjoy security of tenure, but there have been several recent changes in composition due to constitutional amendments. The Twentieth Amendment (2020) increased the number of commissioners from three to five. With the Twenty-First Amendment, the mandate of the previous Commission was terminated and new commissioners were appointed, starting from June 2023. Commission members serve a term of five years, with a possibility of re-appointment, and have the same guarantees against removal from office as high court judges.

The ECSL's secretariat preserves professionalism and institutional memory in election administration. It is led by a commissioner-general chosen by the ECSL, and has permanent offices in each of the 25 administrative districts of the country. The Constitution also requires that one of the ECSL members must be a retired officer of the Commission who has held office as a deputy commissioner of elections or above. All public servants are required to apply for election day duties, and more senior officials, with prior experience, are usually chosen to serve as presiding officers of polling stations and chief counting officers at the counting centres.

The Constitution vests broad powers in the Commission, charges it with securing the enforcement of all laws related to holding of any election, and puts law enforcement capacity at the Commission's disposal. All law enforcement authorities are required to co-operate with the Commission, and the inspector-general of police is obliged to make available to the ECSL the facilities and officers it deems necessary for the conduct of an election. The Commission also has the power to prohibit the use of any movable or immovable state property for promoting or preventing the election of any candidate. With the announcement of the election, the ECSL issued detailed Directions which, in addition to prohibiting the use of any public assets and funds for promoting or disadvantaging candidates, also warned public officials against using their skills, knowledge and time for any campaign activities, including on social media.¹¹

Prior to the calling of the presidential election, uncertainties related to the timing and sequence of elections were prominent in public discourse. This was largely due to the government's failure to abide by the ECSL's decision to hold local elections, initially called for 9 March 2023, but eventually postponed indefinitely, after the Minister of Finance (at the time, President Wickremesinghe) refused to release the funds allocated for the elections in the budget. In August 2024, the Supreme Court ruled against the government and directed the ECSL to schedule local elections as soon as possible. While the government released the funds for the holding of the presidential election, the earlier stand-off prompted questions as to whether the Commission enjoys sufficient financial independence.

b. Administration of the election

The election administration operated in an open manner, maintained the confidence of stakeholders and proactively shared election-related information with the public. However, the ECSL's lack of public communication about the count of preference votes departed from this positive practice. Throughout the process, the ECSL held meetings with political parties, candidates, police, civil society, journalists and social media influencers. Similar confidence-building measures were also observed by the EU EOM at the district level. Before the election, the ECSL regularly informed the public about electoral issues through press releases, media appearances, and social media posts. Its website featured election-related data and information in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Election officials at all levels were accessible and shared information with citizen and international observers; CSOs appreciated the Commission's engagement and cooperation.

The ECSL used its constitutional authority to act against the misuse of state resources and took a public stance on a number of occasions. In particular, the Commission ordered suspension of a land

¹¹ See [Directions](#) to Prevent the Direct or Indirect use of Movable or Immovable Properties belonging to the State, State Corporations or Statutory Boards during the Period of an Election for the promotion of or in prejudice to any party, group or candidate or obstructing the conduct of the election, The Gazette, No. 2394/56, 26 July 2024.

distribution programme conducted by the President's office, criticised the government's approval of a special monthly allowance for pensioners, and spoke against the incumbent President's announcement of a public sector salary increase. Overall, the ECSL put effort into preventive measures, aimed to stop the implementation of decisions and inhibit events involving potential misuse of state resources. However, no orders given by the Commission have been published, nor was there an announcement of any specific legal action taken. Concerns about misuse of public resources and the need for more decisive action by the ECSL were frequently raised by EU EOM interlocutors.

Electoral preparations were timely and well organised at the national and district levels. The ECSL and its district offices, supported by local administrations, undertook measures to identify polling and counting locations, procure election supplies and materials, arrange their secure storage and transportation, and recruit temporary election personnel. The Commission established a joint election emergencies operation unit to co-ordinate activities with various government agencies involved in crisis management. All election district offices visited by the EU EOM were observed to be professionally run and adequately resourced.

Training sessions for election day personnel attended by the EU EOM were observed to be efficient and informative. District election officials gave presentations and distributed manuals to presiding officers of polling stations and chief counting officers of counting centres. In turn, these officers were tasked with explaining duties to the respective polling and counting staff. The effectiveness of training for all polling and counting personnel could be increased through the use of instructional videos and online modules, which could also include mandatory tests of knowledge.

c. Postal voting

Public servants, law enforcement and army officers engaged in election duties, as well as candidates, are eligible to cast their votes in advance by postal ballot. Postal voting is carried out in person, with ballots sent by post to the place of the voters' employment. Those ballots are then returned by post to the respective electoral districts and counted on election day after the closing of polls. Some 712,000 postal voters were registered, and voting took place on 4, 5, and 6 September, with additional days on 11 and 12 September at district election offices.

The EU EOM assessed postal voting as well-organised and efficient in all 34 locations observed. Observers noted, however, that voters do not sign the list for the receipt of a postal ballot, and a ballot paper account is not prepared after each day of voting. These additional safeguards would strengthen the integrity of the process.

Other voters who are unable to cast a ballot in their polling station on election day are disenfranchised. There are no alternative arrangements for people employed in essential services who cannot take leave, nor for homebound voters or those who cannot travel to their polling station due to distance and cost, such as students and voters working abroad, with the latter being of particular concern for many interlocutors. No provisions were put in place to allow eligible prisoners to vote. This lack of accommodation of voters is at odds with Sri Lanka's commitment under international law to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right.¹² The ECSL has developed some proposals to expand the use of postal voting, as well as plans to offer mobile voting and advance voting, but it is not yet clear whether these proposals will be taken up by the new parliament.

PRIORITY recommendation: *Expand the use of special voting arrangements to enable all eligible voters to exercise their right to vote. Specifically, consider extending postal voting to other voters who cannot vote at their polling station on election day and introduce additional voting arrangements such as mobile ballot boxes for persons with disabilities.*

¹² See ICCPR Art 25, General Comment No. 25 of the UN Human Rights Committee (General Comment), at paragraph 11: "States must take effective measures to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right."

d. Voter education

The ECSL and several civil society organisations were active in voter education throughout the electoral cycle, particularly targeting young voters, and covering the topics of registration and identification on election day. A number of CSOs also engaged in civic and voter education, reaching out to voters in rural and remote communities, voters with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups. These efforts, often dependent on availability of external funding, are commendable and should continue. The ECSL is best placed to take the lead in developing civic and voter education materials targeting different groups of voters, in a variety of formats.¹³

During the election period, voter information from the ECSL was relatively scarce. Information about the marking of ballot was provided shortly before election day, however, the use of preferential votes was not addressed in detail. It proved to be particularly important, as for the first time in a presidential election, no candidate was on track to win an absolute majority of votes outright. Overall, there was little public awareness of and discussion about marking a second and third preference on the ballot, and how these choices might affect the election outcome. All candidates urged voters to mark the ballot with only one preference (a cross); the ECSL, CSOs and media limited themselves to explaining the correct ballot marking if voters chose to rank up to three candidates.

An unusually high number of invalid ballots also attests to insufficient voter information efforts regarding the preferential vote. In the final result, the number of invalid ballots nationwide was 2.2 per cent, more than double compared to the 2019 presidential election (1.01 per cent), and in some districts it reached as much as 6.39 per cent (Jaffna) and 4.14 per cent (Vanni). In the ballot counts observed by the EU EOM, a higher number of invalid ballots was often attributable to incorrectly marked preferential votes, indicating the lack of voters' understanding of the procedure.

Recommendation: *Voter education programmes carried out by the ECSL and district election offices between elections, including in collaboration with civil society organisations, should include information on electoral systems used in different elections, on voter registration, as well as voter identification on election day, special voting arrangements, and marking of the ballot. Materials should be developed targeting different groups of voters, in a variety of formats.*

The cooperation between ECSL and CSOs in the field of voter information was also visible on social media. Digital voter information content was professionally prepared, but more targeted efforts would have been beneficial. During the campaign, the ECSL posted 51 times and it was complemented with 122 posts made by CSOs. Among all election-related posts analysed by the EU EOM, voter information was found in only 446 posts (less than 6 per cent of the total). Voter education messages on social media were rather general, informing how to mark the ballot and how to find polling premises. There were also some posts related to the postal voting, and posts encouraging the participation of persons with disabilities.¹⁴

VII. VOTER REGISTRATION

Supplementary lists ensured greater inclusion of youth on the voter lists.

The right to vote is set out in the Constitution and is generally well protected in law and in practice. Citizens of 18 years of age are entitled to vote. Voting is dependent upon being included in the register of electors. Disqualifications apply for several years upon conviction for certain offences, including bribery and corruption. Persons of “unsound mind” are disqualified, with a determination of status made by the District Court, under the Mental Diseases Ordinance. There is also a ban upon voting by

¹³ See also Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections](#), Article 4.1: “In particular, States should: [...] Initiate or facilitate national programmes of civic education, to ensure that the population are familiar with election procedures and issues.”

¹⁴ See Annex III, Chart 13.

all prisoners serving (or having served within the preceding seven years) terms of imprisonment of six months or more. No arrangements were made in practice to facilitate the voting rights of any prisoners, including those on remand.

The voter registration system is considered to be reliable and most EU EOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the accuracy and completeness of the voter registers. The voter register for each electoral district is maintained by the registering officer, appointed by the ECSL, and is revised annually. The revision process involves house to house visits by a local official (*grama niladhari*), who distributes and collects an application form to be filled in by the “chief occupant” of the household.¹⁵ *Grama niladhari* met by the EU EOM did not report any difficulties in the revision process. Students and household members working abroad usually rely on their family to ensure their continued inclusion in the register.

Young voters can be added to supplementary voter lists. While the law sets 1 February as the annual cut-off date for determining the age and residence to be included in the voter register, legal amendments in 2021 introduced provisions for supplementary lists, which allow voters who turn 18 after 1 February to apply and be included. Since an application is needed from the voter, it is important that young voters are aware of this option. Some 76,000 voters were added to the supplementary register for this election. In total, 17,140,354 voters were registered, an increase of 7.2 per cent compared with the 2019 presidential election (15,992,096). The electoral districts with the highest increase are Batticaloa (12.9 per cent), Trincomalee (12.4 per cent), and Puttalam (10.8 per cent). An official population estimate in June 2024 was 21,916 million.¹⁶

VIII. REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES

Candidate registration took place without legal incident, yet the record-high number of candidates proved to be burdensome to the process.

Eligibility rules to contest the presidential election protect the right of political participation, in line with international standards. The nomination process was without legal incident, with all nominees registered. Candidates for the election may be nominated by political parties or contest as independents, with few nominators and low deposits required (LKR 75,000 (EUR 226)) for independents; LKR 50,000 (EUR 151) for those nominated by a party). The current system facilitates candidacy, with 39 contenders registered. Among them, 22 stood on a party ticket, while 16, including the incumbent, contested as independents. One candidate, who registered as independent, died before the election. All candidates were men, indicating the absence of measures to support the candidacy of women for the presidential office.

The consequences of the high number of aspirants, such as the considerable amount of free airtime on state-run media and costs for the election materials, raised questions on how to reinforce the examination of the seriousness of presidential candidacies. Indeed, around half of the candidates appeared to have no electoral support and did not even campaign, and some acted as proxies for the leading contenders.

The ECSL proposed to deter non-genuine candidacies through a substantially increased monetary deposit. International good practices on this matter include, for example, electoral deposits that are not excessive and are refundable upon obtaining a reasonably low percentage of votes, and other filters such as supporting signatures to candidates.¹⁷

¹⁵ “Chief occupant” is a term used in the registration form. In practice this tends to be the male head of the household.

¹⁶ See the [mid-year population estimate](#) by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka.

¹⁷ See also European Commission for Democracy through Law, [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#), Guidelines, section 1.3: (i) “[t]he presentation of individual candidates or lists of candidates may be made conditional on the

IX. CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

Competitive and peaceful campaign, affected by the misuse of incumbency.

The effects of the economic crisis boosted the campaign of Dissanayake, and also, to a lesser extent, of Premadasa, whereas they rather proved to be a liability for the incumbent President Wickremesinghe. EU EOM interlocutors stressed that the President's electability was negatively impacted by his close connection to the previous Rajapaksa administration and the strong anti-elite sentiments that have been driving the political dynamics since the *Aragalaya*. Dissanayake coming from a less privileged social background, competed with Premadasa for the votes of the disenchanted and the middle class. In line with his father's heritage,¹⁸ Premadasa focussed on social protection and advocated for a more moderate path between continuity and renewal, whereas Dissanayake promised a more fundamental change from the past.

Voters had a genuine choice between distinct political alternatives, with economic policies being at the centre of the campaign. Each of the main candidates presented a political manifesto soon after the nomination.¹⁹ There was consensus among all three about the inevitability of the IMF programme, though Premadasa and Dissanayake, to different degrees, demanded rebalancing of the austerity measures with stronger safeguards for the vulnerable population and promised to seek renegotiation with the IMF to that effect. Wickremesinghe claimed that he assumed responsibility during the economic crisis in 2022, when no one else did, and that his stewardship stabilised the country. Whereas Dissanayake and Premadasa put the fight against corruption and the expansion of social welfare measures at the centre-stage in their campaigns, Wickremesinghe's pledges focused on fiscal discipline, economic modernisation and job creation, assigning foreign investment an important role.

The campaign was peaceful, allowing broadly for the freedom of assembly and expression, with the tone of the public messaging becoming more aggressive in the final stage. The EU EOM observed 80 rallies and campaign events, which were all peaceful, orderly and calm. In almost all of them, economic issues played a key role in the speakers' messages with the manifestos' key points being echoed.²⁰ Closer to the election day, however, the main candidates increasingly resorted to tactics of denigrating opponents in public statements, during rallies and online. Wickremesinghe and Premadasa repeatedly warned publicly against voting for Dissanayake, alluding to the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) led violent insurgencies in the 1970s and late 1980s.

Of the 39 candidates, only the main three conducted country-wide campaigns. Six other candidates, including Rajapaksa of the former ruling SLPP, Jayaweera, and Fonseka undertook some canvassing for votes, while some 19 did not stage any visible activity;²¹ one candidate died after nomination. The Tamil common candidate, Ariyanethiran, campaigned only in the eight administrative districts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, with a sole focus on the Tamil vote. Some candidates did not use

collection of a minimum number of signatures; [...] (vi) [i]f a deposit is required, it must be refundable should the candidate or party exceed a certain score; the sum and the score requested should not be excessive."

¹⁸ Ranasinghe Premadasa, country's third President (1989-1993), is remembered for starting many social development projects.

¹⁹ Wickremesinghe presented his manifesto ("Five years of winning the country with Ranil") on 29 August in Colombo. That same day, Premadasa launched his manifesto ("A win for all") in Kandy (Central Province) and presented it also to the Chief Monks/Prelates of the Asgiriya and Malwathu Chapters. Dissanayake launched his manifesto ("A thriving nation, a beautiful life") on 26 August in Colombo.

²⁰ Economic crisis and recovery, socio-economic hardship and soaring living conditions were mentioned in 88 per cent of campaign events observed by EU EOM observers.

²¹ Of the 80 campaign events observed by the EU EOM, 26 (32 per cent) were conducted by Dissanayake, 22 (27 per cent) by Premadasa, 19 (24 per cent) by Wickremesinghe, 6 (7 per cent) by Rajapaksa, 3 (4 per cent) by Fonseka and 2 (2 per cent) by Ariyanethiran. One campaign event of each Nuwan Bopage and Suranjeewa de Silva were observed. From 29 August EU EOM observers were present in all 22 electoral districts until after the declaration of results.

campaign opportunities to promote their own candidacies, but to disparage one of the three main candidates, mostly targeting Dissanayake, a practice that suggests they could have been proxies.

Conduct of the campaign is strictly regulated, with legal limitations on the public display of campaign materials, on the distribution of leaflets, on undertaking gatherings and processions and on canvassing door-to-door with more than five people. Posters, flags and other publicity items could only be used during rallies or fixed on campaign offices. The three major candidates each rented houses in villages to serve as campaign offices and to constantly remain in the public eye. The restrictions that at times depart from international standards, however, were widely accepted as neither campaign teams nor citizens voiced criticism publicly or to the EU EOM, seeing those prohibitive provisions as fostering a more peaceful campaign and as being beneficial for the environment. A few interlocutors, however, stressed that candidates with less financial means who could neither afford to rent offices throughout the country nor to have campaign adverts on TV and radio, were significantly disadvantaged.

There are inconsistent timelines for campaign silence. The campaigns on the ground and in traditional media stopped 48 hours before the election, in line with the legal requirements. However, media was allowed to report on the last campaign rallies in the news on 19 September, while campaign activities on social media continued even on election day.

Recommendation: *Establish unified campaign silence rules for contestants across traditional, online and social media for campaign advertising, with clear, enforceable sanctions for non-compliance.*

The misuse of incumbency distorted the playing field. The EU EOM noted the active participation of governors and/or other officials at 11 out of 19 of Wickremesinghe's rallies observed (58 per cent). CSOs also complained of multiple instances of public officers, legally required to be neutral, actively campaigning for the President and using public resources.²² This lack of separation between the state administration and the incumbent's campaign also stemmed from the executive's control of the local administration, with appointed instead of elected officials governing the provinces and districts.²³

Several decisions by the president made during the campaign contravened the legal stipulations related to prohibition of misuse of state resources and were met with strong criticism by the ECSL, PAFFREL and TISL. For example, President Wickremesinghe announced substantial salary increments for employees in the public sector just two days before the start of postal voting. On 18 August, Wickremesinghe appointed two former SJB MPs as presidential advisers who then campaigned full-time for his re-election although receiving salaries from the government budget.²⁴ In early August, the ECSL ordered the government to suspend, for the period of the elections, its *Urumaya* programme of granting free land rights to up to two million citizens.²⁵ This programme featured prominently in Wickremesinghe's manifesto and it is generally unknown if the government adhered to the order.

There were also several decisions and announcements by the government that blurred the line between governance and campaigning. While the government argued that they were part of its wider economic recovery programme, timings of specific measures suggest they were also intended to boost

²² Using its constitutional powers (Article 104B/04/a) the ECSL issued Gazette Notice 2394/56 on 26 July, 2024, detailing what constitutes a misuse of state resources.

²³ All nine provincial councils were dissolved in October 2019 and no elections have been held since. Instead the president appointed governors to administer the provinces. Wickremesinghe appointed three governors in May 2023 (Northern, Eastern and North Western Province) and a fourth in May 2024 (North Western), shifting the previous governor to Southern Province. A decision to dissolve local councils came in 2023; new elections were postponed.

²⁴ Harin Fernando and Manusha Nanayakkara declared support for Wickremesinghe in 2022 and became ministers in his cabinet. The SJB then expelled them from the party and, on 9 August, the Supreme Court ruled that the expulsion was justified. Consequently, both lost their parliamentary seats.

²⁵ The government started the programme in March 2024. The programme aimed to formalise land ownership by granting legal titles to those who have lived on state land or private land without formal ownership.

Wickremesinghe's electoral chances, thereby giving him an undue advantage. These included interest free loans for students,²⁶ a monetary support package for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) on 18 July,²⁷ daily wage increases for plantation workers on 1 May, and future debt restructuring for farmers.

PRIORITY recommendation: *Ensure enforcement of legal restrictions on the misuse of state resources and of incumbency for campaign purposes.*

This campaign was less divisive along ethnic and religious lines than those of past elections, as noted by all interlocutors across the political spectrum. Often Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu religious figures, including clergy, shared the stage. Religious leaders were present in about 57 per cent of rallies observed by the EU EOM. In about 59 per cent of those rallies, religious leaders from at least two different faiths were present.²⁸ Wickremesinghe, Premadasa and Dissanayake also paid public visits to the key religious leaders and/or places of worship of the four different faiths in Sri Lanka during the election campaign, thereby showcasing the friendly co-existence of the different groups.²⁹ They targeted equally the votes of the Sinhalese majority and those of the Tamil speaking minority. However, Sinhalese nationalist sentiments were still an influential underlying factor, and each of the main candidates pursued strategies to accommodate those views.

X. CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Campaign spending limits were introduced, but transparency of campaign funding remains low.

The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023, imposes limits on expenditure but does little to improve the transparency of campaign funding. There is no obligation to disclose campaign donations before election day, nor is there any limit on donations. Election campaigns are funded entirely from private sources. The Act prohibits donations from public corporations and state-owned companies, but not from companies benefitting from public procurement contracts. There is no explicit regulation of third-party spending. Spending limits were set, after consultation with stakeholders, at LKR 109 (EUR 0.32) per registered voter, to a maximum of LKR 1.8 billion (EUR 5.6 million). Sources of campaign funding and campaign expenses were to be reported to the ECSL within 21 days of the declaration of the election result, on 13 October 2024.

Recommendation: *Strengthen transparency in political finance by introducing a requirement to disclose campaign donations above a certain limit before election day.*

The law does not provide for the ECSL to act as an oversight body, as it lacks powers to scrutinise expenditure reports or to initiate prosecutions for breaches of the law. The Act requires that the ECSL receive reports from candidates and make these accessible to the public, which was promptly done. The ECSL published all documents submitted by candidates on its website. Failure by candidates to submit reports, or falsification of their reports, amounts to the offence of an illegal practice under electoral law.

There is no obligation on the ECSL to examine the reports, nor to collaborate with the police or with any other institution, to verify data included in the report and to ascertain the accuracy. Crosschecking

²⁶ Between 9 September and 20 October 2024 students could apply for interest free loans. This is an annual loan scheme; the 2024 is the eighth of such intake. Yet only this year the president singled out the programme during his campaign meetings with youth.

²⁷ The package includes working capital loans at 8 per cent interest rate and investment loans at 7 per cent interest rate.

²⁸ In 15 of Dissanayake's campaign events (57.7 per cent) religious figures were present with Buddhists in almost all of them (14 events), followed by religious representatives of the Muslim (6), Hindu (49) and Christian community (4). The picture was broadly the same for the other two main candidates.

²⁹ In particular, Dissanayake and Premadasa visited Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith on 17 and 18 August respectively, whereas as Wickremesinghe met with Catholic Bishop of Mannar on 16 June. All three visited the Chief Prelates of the Malwathu and Asgiri Buddhist Chapters in Kandy. They all also paid visits to Muslim and Hindu places of worship.

of expenditure reports might also be difficult for several reasons. Firstly, there were no legal requirements for candidates to follow standardised digital reporting format, that would ease the verification. The level of details varied greatly with one candidate submitting every single receipt, while others were just providing totals of donations received and amounts spent. Secondly, there are no reporting requirements for media outlets and online platforms, either on prices of or revenue from paid political advertising. The ECSL invited civil society to bring any flaws in candidate reports to the attention of the police to investigate the matter. As with other alleged electoral offences, prosecutions are initiated by the Attorney General, who is the legal adviser to the government. This could result in a conflict of interest, arising from the absence of a separate office of public prosecutor.

PRIORITY recommendation: *Amend the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023, to expand the responsibilities and powers of the ECSL, by obliging the Commission, in collaboration with other institutions, to verify the financial reports submitted by candidates. Introduce reporting requirements for media outlets and online platforms on prices of and revenue from paid political advertising and digitalised, standardised reporting by candidates.*

The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) implemented a new transparency measure for the presidential election. The Anti-Corruption Act, 2023, requires candidates to declare their assets and liabilities to CIABOC, and – now for the first time – the commission to publish them on their website. However, CIABOC decided not to display all information provided by the candidates and not to mention certain financial details concerning properties and assets of the candidates³⁰, a decision criticised by TISL for undermining the transparency promoted by the Act.³¹ The CIABOC is obliged to verify the declarations and has the power in doing so to access the records and databases of other public authorities including the Inland Revenue Authority. It also has the power to initiate investigations into false statements and to initiate prosecutions before the courts, but currently lacks the centralised electronic system to compile and analyse all data. As a result, those declarations were neither crosschecked nor vetted for the accuracy by the CIABOC.

A CSO initiative³², *Chanda Salli Meetare*, to monitor the campaign spending of the presidential candidates supported the implementation of the campaign spending limits. It has been an awareness raising and empowerment tool for the participating organisations and citizens, upon whose reporting the initiative depended. At the same time, it has also been a tool to enhance transparency in political finance as the expenses were displayed on the initiative's website.³³ The initiative was particularly useful as the ECSL has not been mandated to verify campaign expenditure.

Transparency in digital campaign spending was minimal. With no reporting requirements for global tech companies, the only available tool to track expenses on social media was the Facebook *Ad Library*. Google failed to introduce its *Ads Transparency* tool for Sri Lanka, although it is available in the region; costs related to the boosting of posts on X are not known. The official Facebook accounts of Premadasa and Wickremesinghe, alongside numerous support pages, spent up to EUR 150,000 each.³⁴ There were negative ads placed against Dissanayake and Premadasa by anonymous accounts supporting other candidates, as well as by a government minister.

Equally, transparency in candidates' spending in broadcast and print media was limited and not all advertisements were clearly marked as such, even those aired during the news bulletins. Prices for advertising in broadcast media were not public and outlets are not obliged to report on the income

³⁰ [CIABOC - Asset Declaration System](#)

³¹ [On 25 September 2024, TISL urged CIABOC to “reconsider unwarranted redactions”.](#)

³² The organisations behind the initiative are: Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL), People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE), Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), Hashtag Generation and the Institute for Democratic Reforms and Electoral Studies (IRES).

³³ [Chandha Salli Meetare \(chandhasallimeetare.lk\)](#). At the time of writing the website is still being updated.

³⁴ For further details see Annex III, charts 15 and 16.

generated from political advertising. The bulk of the ads on state and private media supported Wickremesinghe's and Premadasa's campaigns, according to the EU EOM media monitoring.³⁵

XI. MEDIA

Several media outlets strived to provide fairly equitable airtime and space to the three frontrunners, but did not offer neutral or analytical information to help voters make an informed choice.

a. Media environment

The media environment is diverse, yet dominated by a handful of private media groups, accounting for most of the audience and readership. While most of the media houses are based in the capital, distributing information in all three languages nationwide, Jaffna has its own, region specific media scene offering news in Tamil. Television is the main source of news for those above 35 years, while the younger generation turns to social media.

Overall, journalists were free to cover the campaign. However, several in the Northern and Eastern provinces noted that longstanding practices of intimidation and threats of legal proceedings when reporting on politically sensitive topics resulted in self-censorship. During the campaign, EU EOM observers reported isolated cases of intimidation in Badulla and Vavuniya, as well as received information on cyberbullying cases of Tamil journalists.³⁶

The State authorities maintain a sizeable presence in the media environment through two state-owned TV channels, the *Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation* (SLRC) and the *Independent Television Network* (ITN), one radio station, the *Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation* (SLBC), and a publishing house, *Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited* (ANCL/Lake House). State-run outlets operate under the purview of the Ministry of Mass Media and the Ministry of Finance, their management is directly appointed by the Minister of Mass Media and has no security of tenure, which was illustrated by the change of board immediately after the new president assumed office. Such legal standing does not provide for editorial independence, at odds with international standards, possibly leading to coverage beneficial to the government of the day.³⁷

Recommendation: Transform state media into genuine public service outlets by establishing legal safeguards for their editorial independence, financial sustainability and autonomy. The management should be appointed through an open and competitive process.

Political affiliation of private media owners determined the content of some media during the campaign.³⁸ There are no legal requirements to put in place measures shielding newsrooms from owner's interference with editorial decisions. Consequently, although the media landscape is diverse, plurality of views offered by each outlet was limited. For example, Dilith Jayaweera, the candidate of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, is the chairman of one of the country's most watched TV channels Derana TV which gave him as much news coverage as the frontrunners. Some three commercial media

³⁵ For further details see Annex II, chart 6 and 7.

³⁶ In Badulla, a journalist who was severely beaten-up in the past due to his work, was publicly called out several times during the incumbent's rally, also by a State minister. This video was uploaded to Facebook, making the journalist fear for his safety. In Vavuniya, a politician pressured a journalist not to air a video capturing an argument during Premadasa's rally. Journalists from the Jaffna Press Club were targeted online, mainly after criticising Tamil leaders.

³⁷ ICCPR, General Comment 34, paragraph 16: "States [...] should ensure that public broadcasting services operate in an independent manner. In this regard, States [...] should guarantee their independence and editorial freedom. They should provide funding in a manner that does not undermine their independence."

³⁸ The EU EOM observers in Amapara, Galle, Trincomalee reported that journalists must align with the political affiliation of the outlets' owner. In a 2024 survey by the Sri Lanka Federation of Media Employee Trade Unions and the International Federation of Journalists, digital journalists estimated that adhering to the agenda of the owner was the number one reason why they broke professional standards.

houses captured the largest share of the TV audience and had the largest pool of followers on social media. Those are the *Capital Maharaja Organisation (Sirasa TV, Shakthi TV, TVI)*, *Power House (Derana TV)*, and the *Asia Broadcasting Corporation (Hiru TV)*.

b. Legal framework for the media

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, of publication, and the right of access to information, while also introducing restrictions on freedom of expression that depart from international standards.³⁹ The Right To Information (RTI) Act of 2016 set procedures to request public information, and established the RTI Commission. Still, the RTI Commission lacks financial and human resources to carry out its duties in a timely manner, and the Act does not foresee a mandatory pro-active disclosure of information held by public offices, as recommended by international standards.⁴⁰

Recommendation: Amend the RTI Act to introduce pro-active disclosure of information of public interest, including the results of the ECSL media monitoring and warning letters sent by them to media, in a timely manner and in an easily accessible format.

Repressive laws are in place that could be used against journalists and activists, and reportedly disproportionately affect the Tamil population.⁴¹ The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979 provides for prolonged periods of detention without being charged, including for vaguely defined offences related to terrorism.⁴² The possibility of remand is used to intimidate journalists. Section 3 of the ICCPR Act has also been misused to curtail free speech. The Online Safety Act (OSA) of 2024 criminalises the communication of a “false statement” but fails to define it, at odds with international standards.⁴³ Journalists have not been charged under the OSA during the campaign, yet they feel that the OSA restricts their freedom of reporting.

There is no independent media regulator and the licensing system departs from international standards.⁴⁴ Broadcasting licenses are granted by the Ministry of Mass Media (MoMM); licenses to operate public frequencies by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission. The use of public frequencies by private media is not subjected to compliance with professional or ethical guidelines, nor there are any requirements to protect editorial decisions from undue interference. Linking the issuance of licenses with compliance with sets of requirements, including so called shield agreements between owners and the editorial board of the outlet, as well as with the respect for professional standards, would foster independence of the media, which consequently would also facilitate voters’ access to diverse information.⁴⁵

³⁹ The Constitution states that any restrictions may be prescribed by law, in the interest of racial and religious harmony or in relation to parliamentary privilege, defamation or incitement to violence. The [ICCPR, General Comment 34](#), paragraph 22 : “Restrictions may be imposed [...] and must conform to the strict tests of necessity and proportionality.”

⁴⁰ [ICCPR, General Comment 34](#), paragraph 19: “States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest.”

⁴¹ Journalists in the Northern province indicated that after 2015, physical violence against journalists took a turn towards surveillance, pressure and intimidation. In October 2023, Tamil journalists [Punniyamoorthy Sasikaran](#) and [Valasingham Krishnakumar](#) were questioned about their work and later ordered by a court to hand over the unedited footages of a Buddhist monk threatening violence against Tamils.

⁴² In 2022, Tamil journalist, [Murugupillai Kokulathasan](#), and [Divaniya Mukunthan](#), the director of the YouTube channel TubeTamil, were released after being held in detention for over 15 months under the PTA, over alleged attempts to promote the LTTE, without being formally charged.

⁴³ [ICCPR, General Comment 34](#), paragraph 25 “a norm, to be characterized as a “law”, must be formulated with sufficient precision to enable an individual to regulate his or her conduct accordingly”

⁴⁴ [ICCPR General Comment 34](#), paragraph 39 states that “States parties [...] should establish an independent and public broadcasting licensing authority, with the power to examine broadcasting applications and to grant licenses.”

⁴⁵ Applications for broadcasting and public frequency licenses require the payment of a fee and a submission of a set of financial, technical, and professional information.

Political disagreements, and the political agenda of media owners have not allowed the establishment of a media regulator to date. Moreover, the proposed Broadcasting Regulatory Commission Bill of 2023, was sharply criticised by media professionals for vagueness and a potential for abuse, while the MoMM Code of Media Ethics stayed at the draft stage. While CSOs, and media professionals are wary of new media-related legislation, most media owners are reluctant to commit their outlets to professional standards. To overcome this impasse, the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI) calls for the establishment of a co-regulation mechanism which would allow for a system of checks and balances between state and private actors.

Media coverage of the campaign was governed by the ECSL Media Guidelines, which encouraged both public and private media to offer impartial and balanced reporting.⁴⁶ However, the ECSL has the power to impose Guidelines only on state-owned media. Private media are constitutionally bound to comply with the Guidelines, yet there is no enforcement mechanism.

The ECSL adopted a nuanced approach to media through regular meetings and warning letters requesting compliance with the Guidelines. The MoMM and the SLPI monitored media on behalf of the Commission.⁴⁷ Based on it, the ECSL several times requested the two state TV channels to reduce the airtime allocated to the President, and sent warning letters to Hiru TV to decrease Premadasa's coverage, and to Derana TV to refrain from showing candidates who campaigned for others. State media complied to a certain extent, while Hiru TV did not alter its coverage. The ECSL did not publish those letters or the results of the broadcast media monitoring, although it could have had enhanced transparency.

c. Media monitoring findings

Television was the most active medium in covering the campaign. More than a quarter of the prime-time airtime was allocated to election-related content, through newscasts, advertisements and political talk shows.⁴⁸ While scarce on radio, election-related content in newspapers took up to one fifth of their space. News bulletins mostly focused on rallies, with the economy being the major topic across all media. Voter education represented only four per cent of election-related prime time TV coverage and 24 per cent of that of radio stations.⁴⁹

State media adhered to legal requirements and provided free airtime to candidates, but only 27 availed themselves of this. Wickremesinghe and Premadasa did not use this opportunity. Each candidate could use up to 90 minutes of free airtime, divided into 15-minute slots. Segments were aired on state TV and radio and later placed on broadcasters' social media accounts, allowing for broader access. The MoMM provided an additional hour for an interview with a journalist on cable TV, if candidates requested it. Providing slots of free airtime to all candidates, even those who did not use it, was financially costly for the state-media.

Broadcast media offered lively news coverage of the campaign. However, the coverage was largely devoid of journalistic scrutiny and analysis. TV stations reported daily on rallies and meetings, with direct speech of candidates and their supporters filling from 57 to 76 percent of their prime-time newscasts.⁵⁰ Media rarely tried to assess candidates' manifestos or records in office. Furthermore, as leading candidates disregarded the presidential debate, voters could not compare them directly. Overall, this limited voters' access to the information necessary to make a well informed choice.

⁴⁶ [ESCL Media Guidelines in English](#)

⁴⁷ The MoMM measured the airtime given to candidates on 9 TV channels, daily sharing the results with the ECSL, the SLPI measured the space given to the 38 candidates on the front pages of 17 daily and 18 weekly newspapers.

⁴⁸ See Annex II, chart 2.

⁴⁹ See Annex II, chart 2.

⁵⁰ See Annex II, charts 4 and 5.

Wickremesinghe, Premadasa, and Dissanayake received some 68 per cent of the prime-time news coverage, while most of the remaining candidates and parties had limited access to media. The common Tamil candidate P. Ariyanethran received substantial coverage in Tamil speaking media only. Wickremesinghe was the most quoted candidate within the news, while on average 11 per cent of election-related prime time news featured the government. Among political parties, SJB got most exposure in broadcast media.

Out of six private TV and radio stations monitored by the EU EOM, four provided balanced coverage. *Hiru TV* remained biased towards Premadasa, granting him in half of its prime-time news coverage in a positive tone and frequently airing his quotes disparaging opponents. *Derana TV* allocated some 24 per cent of its airtime to its owner and the frontrunners received a similar share of news. Election-related content in morning shows aired by the private radio *Neth FM* was limited, while *Sooriyan FM* gave more time to Premadasa. *Sirasa TV* and *Shakthi TV* divided airtime fairly equitably among the leading contestants. In addition, *Sirasa TV* also granted some prime-time coverage to five of the less prominent candidates.⁵¹

During the last two weeks of the campaign, the EU EOM media monitoring detected an increased use of aggressive language towards Dissanayake by other candidates, their supporters and some religious figures, as well as alarmist and fear-mongering content about the prospective return of the economic crisis. Such content was rarely balanced out with non-partisan journalistic commentary. While there was adversarial rhetoric, hate speech was not aired.

State-run broadcasters provided more airtime to the incumbent president, covering him in his official duties and as a candidate, which was against Media Guidelines and proved state broadcasters' alignment with the executive. The tone of news was largely positive. After warning and summoning by the ECSL, *Rupavahini* and, to a lesser extent, *ITN*, provided more airtime to six less prominent candidates.⁵² In total, 54 per cent of *Rupavahini* coverage went to 30 candidates other than the three frontrunners. However, the two channels provided 19 and 20 percentage points larger share of news to the president than to Premadasa and Dissanayake. The state-run radio *SLBC* news coverage was similar.⁵³

Print media offered more analytical content than broadcasters, although, overall, newspapers granted the incumbent with more space than the others. The state-owned newspaper *Daily News* granted more than half of its election-related coverage to the incumbent. Private newspapers *Lankadeepa*, *Sunday Divaina* and *Sunday Times* divided the space fairly equally among the frontrunners. *Lankadeepa* and *Sunday Times* were mostly neutral in tone; *Sunday Divaina* covered Premadasa positively. Apart from Namal Rajapaksa, less prominent candidates were marginally covered. *Virakesari*, while providing more space to the incumbent, was the only outlet giving substantial coverage to the Tamil candidate P. Ariyanethran (11 per cent).⁵⁴

XII. SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL RIGHTS

Mudslinging carried by proxy accounts marred the online campaign, while ECSL and CSOs efforts against disinformation collided with an inconsistent response from global tech companies.

a. Social media environment

Sri Lanka's social media environment is energetic and engaging, yet also clearly divided along political, ethnic and religious lines, which was evident during the election campaign. Some 56.3 per cent of Sri Lankans have access to internet, with some 60 per cent of them having at least one social

⁵¹ See Annex II, chart 8.

⁵² See Annex II, chart 8.

⁵³ See Annex II, chart 8.

⁵⁴ See Annex II, chart 10.

media account.⁵⁵ Consequently, more than half of the electorate, particularly younger voters, turn to social media to find information on politics and election-related matters.

The general and digital literacy rate is high, while the habit to fact-check information found on social media is not wide-spread among the general public. Digital literacy stands at 68 per cent, while overall adult literacy rate is 93.3 per cent. In the positive, gender gaps in the general and computer literacy rates are below five per cent.⁵⁶ Yet, the urban – rural divide is still pronounced, often related to difficulties in accessing quality secondary education and more visible in the former conflict zones in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

YouTube and Facebook are the two most popular social media platforms and their policies on political communication shaped the pre-election environment.⁵⁷ TikTok is the fastest growing network and was the key avenue for reaching the youth. X is the prime platform for opinion leaders and politicians to converse and during the campaign. X was used to pass important messages, that later reverberated in the traditional media space. WhatsApp is the most popular instant messaging platform, with political parties creating numerous support groups and channels. Sinhala is the most commonly used language of communication on social media, followed by English and Tamil.

Conversations on social media were driven by a handful of highly popular influencers and by accounts administered by traditional media outlets which have the highest number of followers on Facebook and YouTube. Many influencers used memes and/or political satire to attract attention, including to election-related topics. Political parties and candidates, who generally have fewer followers than meme or media pages, tried to replicate this style of communication, focusing primarily on photos and videos.

Civil society, human rights and digital rights activists strove to uphold a constructive online debate, contributing positively to voter awareness. However, they had far fewer followers, and their engagement with the audience was numerically much smaller, than that of media and politicians.

Disinformation, cyberbullying, as well as manipulated and divisive content, undermined the integrity of the online information environment prior to the election. Content moderation efforts made by tech companies were insufficient, especially during the campaign silence period.

National fact-checking initiatives made a very positive contribution to the overall campaign environment. They not only de-bunked false stories, but also, in collaboration with the ECSL, called for greater accountability and transparency from global tech companies. There are three national fact-checkers recognised by Facebook (Hashtag Generation, Fact Crescendo and AFP Fact check), with some of them also being national trusted partners of Meta, Google and/or TikTok. Fact-checking was undertaken in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

b. Legal framework for social media and digital rights

There are several legal barriers to full enjoyment of the freedom of expression online. The legal limitations imposed on free speech by the ICCPR Act, the Parliament (Powers and Privileges) Act, the Penal Code and the recently adopted Online Safety Act do not accord with international standards and have the potential for arbitrary and repressive application against political dissent, including online.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB), which had been designed to replace the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979, would have further curtailed political rights, including

⁵⁵ [Digital 2024 report](#)

⁵⁶ [Digital, computer literacy continue to increase, by Ceylon Today \(09/03/2024\), based on press release from the Department of Statistics and annual report by Central Bank of Sri Lanka.](#)

⁵⁷ For further details see Annex III, chart 1.

⁵⁸ ICCPR, General Comment 34, paragraph 35: “When a state party invokes a legitimate ground for restriction of freedom of expression, it must demonstrate in specific and individualized fashion the precise nature of the threat, and the necessity and proportionality of the specific action taken, in particular by establishing a direct and immediate connection between the expression and the threat.”

freedom of expression online. The ATB was found by the Supreme Court to be in violation of the Constitution. All the above mentioned laws contain vague definitions of prohibited speech, which, coupled with broad powers conferred on different law enforcement agencies, and limited judicial oversight, can lead to self-censorship at the individual and editorial level alike. Even if no sanctions based on those laws were applied during the campaign period, such legal instruments reduce space for social activism online and are detrimental to the freedom of expression, including in the context of 2024 presidential election.

PRIORITY recommendation: *Protect freedom of political expression by repealing the Online Safety Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, as well as Section 3 of the ICCPR Act.*

The Ministry of Technologies (MoT) and several government agencies have regulatory and oversight powers over the ICT industry and cybersecurity. The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission is the key regulatory body, tasked with protecting “public interests” and empowered to place restrictions on online content, based on a court order or following a request by the Minister of Defence or by the Minister of Public Security.⁵⁹ These powers were not used during the election.

The Personal Data Protection Act established a regulatory framework for the protection of citizens’ personal data. The Data Protection Authority, established in August 2023, is under the MoT supervision and was not engaged with election-related matters during the campaign period.

The ECSL Media Guidelines were the only legal instrument intended to regulate campaigning on social media, but they did not have any tangible effect on the tone, content or methods of digital canvassing used by the contestants. The ECSL guidelines were meant to be applicable to the administrators of social media sites, requiring them to ensure a balanced and merit-based debate on politics and elections in their respective pages, groups and channels. The guidelines also entailed adherence to the 48-hour campaign silence period and stipulated that political statements made on election day could be re-played only after the closing of the polls. In practice, all those rules were violated by many highly popular social media accounts, including by some based abroad, evidencing a disregard for a respectful online debate on politics and elections.

c. Social media monitoring findings

Digital campaigning was key to reaching young, urban voters, for whom social media is the prime source of news. All leading candidates made inroads into online communities, beyond their traditional support bases, using different platforms, and, with the start of their campaign, began inserting their messages into popular non-partisan infotainment groups on Facebook. Similarly to the in-person campaign, only nine aspirants were active on social media.⁶⁰ Overall, from 16 August to 21 September, the EU EOM social media monitoring assessed the tone and content of 13,331 posts, among which 7,483 were election-related, attesting to a high volume of political debate.⁶¹

All three leading campaigns employed a top-down, cross-platform strategy to garner more votes, yet only Dissanayake’s pool of online followers grew substantially during the four-week long campaign.⁶² Jointly, all the three leading candidates posted 3,220 posts on their official accounts.⁶³ For all of them, Facebook was the prime channel of communication, followed by YouTube, X and Instagram. The most common tactic was to send the same message to all social networks, from where partisan support groups, pages and accounts picked up the video, photo or text and shared further, including in comment

⁵⁹ In line with the [Sri Lanka Telecommunications Act](#), that establishes the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.

⁶⁰ Those were Dissanayake, Premadasa, Wickremesinghe, Namal Rajapaksa, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe (NDF), Dilith Jayaweera (CPSL), Sarath Fonseka (independent), Nuwan Bopage (SPF) and Janaka Ratnayake (ULPP).

⁶¹ See Annex III, Chart 11.

⁶² See Annex III, Chart 10.

⁶³ Rajapaksa, Rajapakshe and Fonseka posted another 1.342 posts. For more details see Annex III, Chart 4.

sections of news stories and on discussion walls of non-partisan groups on Facebook. Dissanayake's posts were shared almost twice as often as those others; Wickremesinghe's posts got most comments.

The President made use of public resources to amplify his online reach. During the campaign period, the official website of the President's office directed visitors to Wickremesinghe's campaign accounts on Facebook and X, while the President's media division ran advertisements on Facebook up until 25 August, promoting Wickremesinghe's record in office.⁶⁴ The linking of official websites with personal social media channels continued after the elections, with the website of the President's office directing visitors to Dissanayake's official personal accounts on Facebook and X, as soon as he took office.⁶⁵

The election campaign itself was the main topic of more than 70 per cent of coded posts, placed either by traditional and digital media and influencers or by candidates. At the start of the campaign period, the main topic in all the posts by the leading candidates was self-presentation, followed by their political manifestos. This positive content was replaced by mutual mudslinging during the second week of the campaign and lasted almost until the election day.⁶⁶

Hostile and accusatory rhetoric, including by the leading candidates, marked the online campaign. During the initial stage, most negative rhetoric came from leading candidates themselves, with up to 50 per cent of messages being negative in tone.⁶⁷ During the last week of the campaign, candidates themselves put a stop to mudslinging, while their supporters and partisan opinion leaders continued to utilise fear mongering tactics. Such posts were quickly amplified through a net of interlinked pages and groups, aiming to deride rival candidates or to misinterpret their statements. Dissanayake was the most frequently targeted candidate. His own campaign, however, was also often negative in tone towards other candidates.⁶⁸

False and manipulated content gradually entered the campaign discourse, confusing and misleading voters. Examples of such content included manipulative "opinion polls" widely spread on Facebook, which prompted the ECSL to issue a caution against such publications. Another example was the spread of fake "results" of postal voting on 4 September across all online platforms monitored. Outright false content was identified in only 13 posts, and manipulated material was found in another 53 posts, yet they were shared more than 2,000 times and viewed by almost 120,000 people on Facebook alone.

During the campaign, two main fact-checkers initiatives, Hashtag Generation and Fact Crescendo, checked 24 and 41 election related posts, respectively.⁶⁹ Almost half of them were about the country's future development, if the NPP would win the elections. For example, there was a campaign claiming that Buddhism in Sri Lanka would be banned by Dissanayake. The fact-checkers also noted that, for this election, they had a rather limited access to Facebook's data, and the tools at their disposal were not always efficient in detecting disinformation.⁷⁰

Collaboration between the ECSL, CSOs and global tech companies was a positive step to debunk and counter content that harmed election integrity. The ECSL and CSOs held coordination meetings with Meta, Google and TikTok and tech companies organised trainings. There was also a direct communication channel between the ECSL and Meta. At the same time, however, during stakeholder

⁶⁴ Wickremesinghe's accounts placed 125 videos with 3,765 interactions on average, 105 tweets with 87 interactions on average and 93 posts with 2,240 interactions on average. For more information, see Annex III, Charts 5 and 6.

⁶⁵ [President's office website](#)

⁶⁶ See Annex III, Charts 12a - 12d.

⁶⁷ See Annex III, Chart 14.

⁶⁸ See Annex III, Chart 14.

⁶⁹ [Hashtag Generation](#) and [Fact Crescendo](#) websites.

⁷⁰ On August 14, Meta switched off CrowdTangle, a tool that was used by independent researchers around the globe to analyse Facebook data. The access to the replacement tool, Meta Content Library, is timely and cumbersome, and the tool itself is by far less effective than CrowdTangle.

meetings, while acknowledging problems, tech companies were reluctant to make additional investments in their content moderation tools and resources, allowing harmful content to proliferate.

The campaign silence period and the election day were striking examples of insufficient efforts by the global tech companies to align their policies with national legislation for the benefit of the voter as paid political advertisements continued running on Meta and Google platforms. Furthermore, many requests for content removal made by the ECSL during this period were left without a response. In total, the ECSL made 793 post removal requests, with 15 per cent of them approved by Meta. A total of 116 requests were rejected, while over 70 per cent (556) were still awaiting a decision one day before the election. Removal or labelling content as false was also undertaken hesitantly and inconsistently. For example, at the end of the first day of postal voting, posts falsely claiming to have the results of postal voting started to circulate on all social media platforms. It was swiftly debunked, yet only a few original posts on Facebook were marked as false and blurred, while all re-posts and screenshots of those posts continued to circulate.

Recommendation: *Strengthen the formal collaboration between the election administration and the main social platforms. The ECSL, CSOs and tech companies (Meta, Google, TikTok and X) should aim to develop more effective mechanisms to enhance the transparency of online campaigning and to strengthen the respect for existing campaign rules, including, but not limited to, the campaign silence period.*

XIII. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Male-domination of politics was among the central features of the presidential election.

Political life is dominated by men. Women comprised fewer than five per cent of the membership of the out-going Parliament, at 10 among 225 members. A potentially powerful provision in the Constitution, providing for affirmative action, was relied on in 2017 to introduce a 25 per cent quota for women in local authority elections. However, this constitutional provision has not yet been used to advance women in parliament.

Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, but progress towards implementation has been extremely slow.⁷¹ Patriarchal norms and cultural practices impose social barriers against the political participation of women. Constitutional provisions allow for the imposition of religious and customary personal status laws,⁷² with the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, 1951, being particularly egregious in permitting the unequal treatment of girls and women. With a dualist legal system, CEDAW cannot be relied on before domestic courts. The Women Empowerment Act, 2024, provides for the establishment of a National Commission on Women, expected to serve as the national machinery to advance women's rights required under CEDAW, but the timetable for appointment of the commissioners has not been met.

Women were not involved in the campaigns of the candidates in a significant way. While the law requires political parties have at least one woman amongst party officials in order to be registered, parties lack women in leadership positions. There was not a single female speaker in about 50 per cent of the rallies and campaign events observed by the EU EOM. Most campaign events of Dissanayake had female speakers (73 per cent). The NPP also held district-level campaign events exclusively for women, while Wickremesinghe held one at national level. The EU EOM interlocutors also pointed to a wide array of cultural impediments for stronger female political participation.

Media coverage of campaigning clearly illustrated the absence of women from politics. TV channels allotted around one per cent, and newspapers about 2 per cent, of their election-related coverage to

⁷¹ [CEDAW/C/LKA/CO/8: Concluding Observations](#) on the eighth periodic report of Sri Lanka, 9 March 2017.

⁷² Article 16 of the Constitution provides that all existing law remains valid, despite any conflict with fundamental rights, including equality. Muslim, Kandyan and Thesawalami personal status laws apply to particular communities.

female political actors, featuring them primarily during rallies.⁷³ If parties were to be compared, most of the women featured were from the SJB, followed by the NPP and the SLPP. The participation of women in politics, as a topic, was to some extent covered in print media, while, in broadcasting, discussions on inclusion were held outside prime-time hours.

There were very few women among journalists outside of the capital and there are only a few women among senior editorial staff and in executive positions in the major media houses in Colombo. In addition, female journalists reported that they face offensive comments on social media, questioning their competencies and sexualising them.

XIV. PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

The Generation Z entered the political life and echoed *Aragalaya* demands for system change.

Youth was at the forefront of the *Aragalaya* and, as a distinct social interest group, has entered the political life of the country. The manifestos and election pledges of the main presidential candidates acknowledged this development by trying to address key issues concerning young people, from improvements in the educational system to job creation initiatives tailored to their needs.

Sri Lanka's Generation Z shaped, to some degree, the 2024 presidential election narrative through a combination of efforts and initiatives.⁷⁴ There was youth activism on social media, participation in youth-driven organisations and in citizen election observation. The young generation also became more engaged with political party youth wings. Major advocates of a systemic change, they focussed on economic growth and opportunities, environmental sustainability, and called for greater accountability in governance.

The country's national youth policy has not been updated since its first launch in 2014. Under the Ministry of Youth, and with the support of the National Youth Services Council, the National Youth Parliament has been established since 2010, an initiative that provides a platform for youth to engage in governance issues and to advance their entry into politics. However, in practice, only a few have been successful, with the outgoing parliament having only five members of 29 years of age or younger (2.2 per cent)⁷⁵ one of whom was appointed as minister during Wickremesinghe's presidency.⁷⁶

A youth quota, currently at 25 per cent, has been an intermittent feature of local government elections but has yet to be applied at the national level.⁷⁷ The 2023 amendments brought in a mandatory quota of 25 per cent youth among party lists of candidates, which awaits implement for the first time in the imminent local elections. There are no quota at provincial level.

The youth's share of the population is close to a quarter (23.2 per cent).⁷⁸ Their unemployment stood at 20.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2024, substantially above the national average of officially 4.5 per cent and the highest of any age group in the country.⁷⁹

⁷³ For further details see Annex II, Chart 12.

⁷⁴ Generation Z refers to the youth born between 1997 and 2012.

⁷⁵ Youth in Sri Lanka is defined as the age group from 15 to 29 years of age.

⁷⁶ In January 2023 Wickremesinghe appointed Jeevan Thondaman, then 28 years of age, as Minister of Water Supply and Estate Infrastructure Development.

⁷⁷ Initiated in the late 1980s, a youth quota was mandatory from 1990 in local authority elections, then discretionary from 2012, and is now mandatory again since 2023. The initial quota required that political parties include 40 per cent youth within their nominees. This was reduced to 20 per cent in 2012, and became discretionary.

⁷⁸ [Unlocking the potential of youth - UNDP in Sri Lanka](#)

⁷⁹ statistics.gov.lk/LabourForce/StaticInformation/QuarterlyReports/1stQuarter2024, p.3

XV. PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Important measures were taken to ensure voting rights of persons with disabilities, but more efforts are needed.

Legislation supporting the voting rights of persons with disabilities is in place, but more rights-based provisions are needed to promote political participation. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 1996, predates accession to the CRPD in 2016, and displays a welfare perspective towards this vulnerable group. The Act addresses health, education, employment, rehabilitation, transportation, and poverty alleviation. There is no coordination or monitoring mechanism in place to ensure compliance with the CRPD, as required under the instrument. Article 12(4) of the Constitution allows affirmative action, permitting “*special provision being made.... for the advancement of ...disabled persons.*” A parliamentary caucus on the inclusion of persons with disability was formed in 2023, and a Disability Rights Bill was approved by cabinet in the same year, but not yet tabled in parliament. The Special Provisions Act, 2011, addresses access to voting rights for persons with disabilities, but requires voting in-person, while facilitating transportation and assisted voting.

The ECSL introduced a number of measures ahead of these elections to facilitate participation of voters with disabilities, in partnership with civil society organisations and with external donor support. In particular, identify cards for voters with disabilities were created and issued to the initial target group of 5,000 individuals. Electoral vocabulary in sign language was developed, information posters designed, and basic training in sign language provided to presiding officers of polling stations. Tactile ballot stencils for visually impaired voters were distributed nationwide, after having been piloted in previous elections. On election day, 62 per cent of polling stations visited by the EU EOM were assessed as accessible for voters with reduced mobility.

Still, more efforts are needed to ensure participation of voters with disabilities, on the basis of equality with others. Apart from transportation and assisted voting in polling stations, there were no special voting arrangements for disabled voters, such as postal voting or a mobile ballot box. If voters with disabilities wish to be assisted by a particular person on election day, a prior application and medical certification is required, which is cumbersome. The EU EOM observed that most voters requiring assistance in polling stations were assisted by polling staff. While tactile ballot stencils were available, not all visually impaired voters knew how to use them. Awareness among voters about the possibility for applying for transportation to a polling station on election day also varied, according to EU EOM observers in the districts.

Recommendation: *Incorporate the CRPD into national law, to give full domestic legal effect to the instrument, ensuring respect for the right of persons with disabilities to participate in political and public life. Build on the established good practice paying particular attention to provisions and measures enabling persons with disabilities to vote independently.*

XVI. PARTICIPATION OF DISADVANTAGED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

Minority groups were marginalised in different ways.

While there are no direct legal barriers against participation of the LGBTIQ+ community in elections, equality on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation is absent from the Constitution, deterring their political participation. The Penal Code, 1883, criminalises same-sex relations. Accession to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, allowing direct complaints, resulted in the finding by the treaty body in 2022 that Sri Lankan law breached the convention through the legal treatment of same-sex relations between women.⁸⁰ The Supreme Court ruled in 2023 that the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill, 2023, was constitutional and could be enacted by Parliament, but this has not happened, allowing the chilling

⁸⁰ [Rosanna Flamer-Caldera v Sri Lanka, 134/2018, CEDAW Committee, 21/2/2022](#)

effect of criminalisation to continue.⁸¹ A Gender Equality Bill was struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional on 7 June 2024, furthering the marginalisation of those already marginalised, while advocacy of a separate trans protection bill is undertaken by the transgender community.⁸²

The marginalisation of some other communities was noted by EU EOM observers. Approximately one million Sri Lankans live and work on tea and rubber plantations, remote from the administrative structures of the country. Their standard of living is significantly below the national average by all indicators, including education. While they can register to vote, plantation workers are disengaged from political life they rely on trade unions to represent them, and, as noted by EU EOM interlocutors, voter information efforts in those communities were scarce.

XVII. CITIZEN AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

Civil society actively contributed to the integrity of the process.

Civil society was active and engaged with the ECSL, enhancing the transparency and inclusiveness of the process. The largest number of observers was deployed by the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), which also issued regular public reports. The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence also undertook long-term election observation. These and other organisations co-operated in a joint civil society initiative to monitor candidates' campaign expenses, led by Transparency International Sri Lanka. A televised candidate debate was the result of another civil society initiative. Citizen observers also frequently called attention to the misuse of state resources, breaches of campaign regulations, and other irregularities, both in media appearances and through complaints to election offices.

The ECSL facilitated election observers, accrediting more than 10,000 national and some 120 international observers, yet the electoral legal framework is silent on their rights and duties. A prior EU EOM recommendation on this matter remains unaddressed.

Recommendation: *Introduce provisions on election observation into the electoral legal framework.*

XVIII. ELECTORAL JUSTICE

Few prosecutions were initiated for violations of election law, despite voluminous complaints of same.

a. Complaints and appeals

Campaign activity and use of public office during the campaign period are highly regulated, under ECSL and police oversight, with myriad allegations of breaches of the rules submitted to both. In addition to the prevailing Presidential Elections Act, three instruments entered into force on 26 July, the code of conduct for campaigning,⁸³ the Media Guidelines, and a set of directions for public sector conduct.⁸⁴ There is much acquiescence among stakeholders in the need for such rules, in the light of a troubled election history, married with the environmental protection achieved through some of the restrictions on the display of publicity materials. Nonetheless, allegations of violations of the rules were abundant, complaints emanating principally from CSOs, as well as from political parties and from individuals.

⁸¹ [Penal Code \(Amendment\) Bill, Supreme Court SD No.13/2023](#)

⁸² [Gender Equality Bill, Supreme Court, SD Nos. 54/2024 and SD 55/2024](#)

⁸³ Code of Conduct for contesting Political Parties/ Independent Groups and Candidates of the Elections

⁸⁴ Directions to Prevent the Direct or Indirect use of Movable or Immovable Properties belonging to the State, State Corporations or Statutory Boards during the Period of an Election for the promotion of or in prejudice to any party, group or candidates or obstructing the conduct of the election

The ECSL managed the 4,295 complaints received efficiently, aiming at prevention rather than punishment. Election dispute resolution units were established at the national level and within the 22 electoral districts. Well-staffed, with both permanent ECSL personnel and temporary assignees from other government departments, these units collaborated with temporary offices of the Sri Lanka Police created within ECSL offices. A database of complaints was maintained, and the ECSL frequently published information on the number and nature of the issues raised. The principal practical response was that the ECSL and the police jointly intervened attempting to prevent or halt any illegal activities from occurring. The subject of complaints was predominantly minor matters, such as the illicit display of posters. There were also many allegations of misuse of public office. Lacking investigative and punitive powers, accountability for infringements of the law could not be pursued by the ECSL. Instead, the approach of the ECSL was conciliatory, aiming to maintain a harmonious campaign environment.

b. Electoral offences

About four percent of complaints received by the ECSL were reflected in charges of election offences. In total, 146 arrests were made, on charges of violations of election law and of election violence, indicating a relatively trouble-free election. Allegations of infringement of the law were made directly to the Police, or the ECSL communicated concerns to them based on complaints received. The Police received a total of 582 complaints, all characterised legally as minor offences, to be dealt with before the Magistrates' Courts. Over 800,000 posters were seized nationwide, by the 1,500 temporary staff employed for the purpose, and 17 vehicles were impounded.

c. Electoral disputes

No disputes concerning the presidential election were heard in court, but access to fundamental rights petitions was available to raise matters before the judiciary. A ruling related to the local government elections was delivered by the Supreme Court during the presidential election campaign period, in which it determined that the right to vote had been violated by the delay in conducting the election.

The rules on petitions to challenge presidential election results have been revised since the last election, extending the filing period from 21 to 42 days. Rules on legal standing to submit such a case remain narrow, granting status only to defeated candidates and their nominators to bring a challenge to results, denying access to an effective remedy to any individual or CSO which may wish to contest the election outcome.

XIX. VOTING, COUNTING AND TABULATION OF RESULTS

Transparency preserved on a peaceful and orderly election day and during the ballot count.

The election day was orderly and calm, with polling staff efficiently facilitating voting in all polling stations observed by the EU EOM. The ballot count was equally well-organised, maintaining transparency of the process. The ECSL pro-actively informed the public about the rules to be followed on election day, complaints received, and the result totals. Voting took place in 13,421 polling stations, and for the counting of ballots 1,713 counting centres were formed (including 439 for postal votes) at 49 locations across the country; tabulation was carried out in 22 results' offices in the districts and at the national level at the ECSL.

The turnout was 79.46 per cent, a drop of 4.26 percentage points if compared with the 2019 presidential election. There is no obvious regional trend except for in the two northern districts of Jaffna and Vavuniya. With a well-below average decrease (minus 1.1 and 2.5 percentage points, respectively), these districts with large Tamil populations had already had a substantially lower turnout in the past, mainly due to the complex political situation.

The relatively high number of invalid votes in certain parts of the country can be attributed in part to insufficient voter information on how to mark the ballot with a preference. There was an increase in invalid votes, from 1.01 per cent in 2019 to 2.20 per cent in 2024. The 6.39 per cent of invalid votes in the Jaffna district was particularly striking, with EU EOM observers noting that, during the counts, many ballots were invalidated due to the incorrect marking of preferences. The ECSL plans to evaluate the reasons for the high number of rejected votes. However, it was obvious that in the run-up to the election there was a lack of timely and adequate civic and voter education on the use of the preferential ballot, while political parties were reluctant to explain the preferential voting system to their supporters even if the relevance of the three votes had increased in this three-way race.

a. Opening, voting and closing

The opening was assessed by the EU EOM observers as transparent and timely. All necessary materials were present in the 32 polling stations where the EU EOM observed opening. Ballot boxes were shown to be empty and were sealed in the presence of party agents and observers. EU EOM rated the opening process positively in all observed polling stations and all these stations opened on time at 7:00.

The voting process was orderly and calm, with prescribed procedures being mostly followed. In all 247 polling stations observed during the day, voters were always required to show identification, their names were crossed off the voter list, and their fingers were marked with indelible ink before ballots were issued. While the ballots were always stamped before being issued to voters, in more than half of observations the stamp on the ballot was never shown to the polling staff before the ballot was cast, departing from the ECSL procedures.

Inadequate secrecy of the ballot was the only recurring shortcoming identified by the EU EOM observers. In 63 observed cases (26 per cent), the layout of the polling station did not sufficiently protect ballot secrecy. In 32 observations (13 per cent), voters were often unable to mark their ballot in secrecy. As also noted in the 2019 EU EOM report, instructions regarding the positioning of the voting booths did not safeguard secrecy, and the respective recommendation remained unaddressed. In addition, the long ballot (54 cm) did not always fit on the voting table, and its position at times made it possible to guess the voter's intention.

Recommendation: *Revise instructions to presiding officers of polling stations to ensure that the positioning of voting booths enables voters to mark their ballots in secrecy.*

Citizen observers and party agents were present in most polling stations observed, enhancing the transparency of the process. Among electoral districts, Vanni, Jaffna and Batticaloa districts, all of them with large minority populations, stand out with noticeably fewer NPP party agents in polling stations, as compared to others. Among citizen observer groups, the EU EOM most frequently encountered observers from PAFFREL (83 observations), followed by the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (19 observations).

Closing was largely assessed positively in the 30 polling stations observed by the EU EOM. Visited polling stations closed on time at 16:00, and there were no voters waiting in the queue at the time of closing. Ballot boxes were sealed promptly after closing in all but one case. In three EU EOM observations, presiding officers had difficulties with preparing the ballot paper account, which indicates the need to give this aspect more attention during training.

b. Count and tabulation of votes

Counting was well-managed in all 29 counting locations observed by the EU EOM, although, in some cases, premises were crowded, reducing observers' and agents' ability to fully follow the process. Counting staff followed the procedures, first verifying the number of ballots in each ballot box, then proceeding with sorting and counting the votes for each candidate. Candidates' agents were present in all EU EOM observations, in some cases in high numbers, since the law allows up to five agents per

candidate in each counting centre. With each counting centre responsible for some 10 ballot boxes, counting staff numbered 20 or more. Some counting centre rooms were too small to accommodate all those present, and the lack of airflow due to sealed windows made counting conditions arduous. Observers noted that it was not always possible to follow the process, yet there was a general trust in the work of counting officials.

Recommendation: *Ensure transparency during the vote count by establishing minimum criteria for the choice of counting premises, including requirements for adequate space and accessibility.*

Tabulation took place in parallel to the vote count and proceeded without irregularities in the results centres observed. The results centres for each electoral district were located in one of the district's counting locations, facilitating faster transmission of counting centre results. Transparency was enhanced by issuing copies of counting centre results to candidates' agents and posting them in the results centres. Each results centre tabulated voting results by polling division, and, after that, transmitted the totals to the ECSL electronically and sent the manually filled forms by fax. The ECSL began announcing results shortly before midnight on election day and released final voting results by polling division as soon as they were verified, maintaining stakeholders' confidence.

c. Count and tabulation of preference votes

The count of preferences was assessed by the EU EOM as speedy and efficient, but the ECSL's public communication about this process was insufficient. Before midday on 22 September, the ECSL's preliminary results showed that no candidate had received the absolute majority of votes required to win outright, and that the count of second and third ballot preferences would be necessary. The EU EOM observed that in many counting locations the count of preference votes commenced at some point in the morning. Although the ECSL stressed, that all candidates' agents at the national level were informed about the start of the second count well in advance, it appeared that not always this information reached candidate agents at the district level.

The official ECSL statement publicly announcing the count of ballot preferences came later, only during the afternoon of 22 September, when the preference vote count was already well underway. The ECSL stated to media that neither of the two leading candidates had reached the winning threshold, and the counting of ballot preferences was ongoing. Since the ECSL does not publish preliminary results, at the time of this statement the results from only a handful of polling divisions were known. Some candidates' agents were reportedly caught unprepared, as they had already left the counting premises. According to the ECSL, all candidates were notified when the decision to proceed with the second count was made. Although the lack of timely and clear public communication did not undermine stakeholder trust in the outcome of the election, a more detailed explanation to the public would have been beneficial at this important juncture.

The count of preference votes, observed by the EU EOM in 27 counting locations, was carried out swiftly, despite the counting personnel's evident fatigue. A smaller number of ballots to be examined required fewer counting staff, and no overcrowding was observed. No candidates' agents were present in eight out of the 22 district counting centres, while citizen observers were present in two cases. Tabulation of the second vote count was smooth and no irregularities were observed.

The majority of election staff in the polling stations and counting centres observed were women. In about a third of the EU EOM observations, chief counting officers were women, while 96 per cent of senior presiding officers (SPOs) in polling stations were men. The EU EOM observers were informed that this disparity is primarily due to the requirement for SPOs to spend the night before the election in the polling station, safeguarding election materials, which is culturally objectionable for women. Allowing for this duty to be carried out by a male junior presiding officer would presumably facilitate an increase in the number of women assuming leading roles in polling stations.

A nation-wide curfew was enforced while the counting was still on-going. There was a certain disconnection between the introduction of the curfew and the atmosphere of the election, described by many, including the ECSL, as the most peaceful in Sri Lanka's recent political history. According to the Commission, there was consensus on the advisability of this measure among stakeholders, including the leading candidates. Nevertheless, in such circumstances, more timely and comprehensive communication by the Commission would have been beneficial to prevent the spread of disinformation and unease among the public.

XX. RESULTS AND POST-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

a. Publication of results

During a special *live* broadcast, the ECSL announced the final results on 22 September, around 20:00. Soon afterwards the consolidated final results were published on ECSL website and the transition of power commenced.

Dissanayake was elected with 42.31 per cent of the valid votes and is the first president in the country's history without the mandate of an absolute majority of valid votes cast.⁸⁵ The runner-up, Premadasa, received 32.76 per cent and immediate former President Wickremesinghe came in third, with 17.7 per cent. The combined total vote share of the former two political allies was just over 50 per cent. The presidential candidate of the former ruling party SLPP, Namal Rajapaksa, obtained 2.57 per cent and the Tamil common candidate, P. Ariyanenthiran, 1.7 per cent of the valid votes. All other 33 candidates jointly received 2.96 per cent of valid votes cast, each below 1 per cent. Notably, Dissanayake won the postal vote with 56.7 per cent of valid votes, a result suggesting a strong backing by state employees, who were on duty on election day.

Dissanayake won 15 of the 22 districts, 11 with a relative majority (including Colombo) and 4 with an absolute majority of the votes, including the three districts of the Southern Province, a former key stronghold of the Rajapaksa Presidents, Mahinda (2005-2015) and Gotabaya (2019-2021). His vote share was less than 10 per cent in the Tamil dominated Northern Province and some 20 per cent in the Eastern province, which has a large Tamil and Muslim population, a result that is related to historical tensions between the JVP and the Tamil community. Premadasa won seven districts by a relative majority. They were in the traditional strongholds of UNP/SJB in the six minority-dominated districts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, as well as Central Province (here Nuwara Eliya district) and in Badulla district, with its relatively large minority population (25 per cent) in Uva province.

Ariyanenthiran received 13.9 per cent of the valid votes cast in the five electoral districts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the only districts in which he campaigned. In Jaffna district (Northern Province) he garnered more than half of his 237,000 votes and came a close second to Premadasa.

b. Complaints related to the election results

No case was filed to challenge the election result, while a complaint regarding the counting process was dismissed by the ECSL. The Supreme Court has the exclusive jurisdiction to hear and determine presidential election petitions challenging the results of the election. Such cases may be filed only by defeated candidates or their nominators; none contested the result. The SJB made a complaint to the ECSL that the preferential vote count was commenced prematurely, without a declaration of the results of the first count, and in the absence of their agents in Colombo. This complaint was rejected as without merit as, according to the Presidential Elections Act, the ECSL is statutorily bound only to declare the final results, and counting centres remained accessible to party representatives at all times.

⁸⁵ During the first ever count of preference votes, some 270,000 (around 2 per cent) of such ballots were transferred to either Dissanayake or Premadasa, reducing the margin of Dissanayake's win by about 62,000 votes.

c. Post-election developments

The transfer of power was swift and smooth; no public disturbances were recorded. Anura Kumara Dissanayake was sworn in by the Chief Justice on 23 September, a day after the ECSL had declared him President-elect. Several presidential candidates were present and short speeches by Dissanayake and Premadasa demonstrated the respect for the democratic process across the political divide. Earlier on the same day outgoing President Wickremesinghe had acknowledged defeat. Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena resigned, as did all nine provincial governors. Parliament was dissolved on the evening of 24 September and 14 November was set as a date for the parliamentary elections.

The new cabinet assumed its duties on 25 September, with the transfer of power in ministries also proceeding in an orderly manner. On 24 September Dissanayake appointed Dr. Harini Aramasuriya as the Prime Minister, the first woman in this position since 2004. The NPP had only three members of parliament, therefore each minister took on several portfolios. The President also appointed 15 new secretaries to the ministries, who are key to the effectiveness of state administration. Several secretaries in key ministries, including the treasury, were retained to facilitate a transition of responsibilities. Further appointments included new governors for all nine provinces.

Dissanayake's first official visits to religious authorities aimed to disperse fears about a more secular approach to politics. Immediately after the inauguration, he visited the two Chief monks in Kandy, the centre of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and received their blessings. He also paid visits to the most senior Christian, Hindu and Islamic leaders, thereby continuing the tradition of previous presidents. After his meeting with the catholic Cardinal, he pledged fresh investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks – a series of coordinated terrorist suicide bombings, targeting three churches and three hotels in Colombo, killing 269 people and injuring more than a thousand.

XXI. RECOMMENDATIONS

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
LEGAL FRAMEWORK						
1	11 and 29	Affirmative action for the advancement of women is allowed under the Constitution, but has been used only to introduce a 25 per cent quota for women in local government elections. The number of women elected to political office is extremely low, with less than 5 per cent of women in the outgoing parliament and no woman among presidential aspirants. All leading presidential candidates were members of parliament, indicating that parliamentary office is an important precursor to contention for the presidential office. More women in parliament will foster female participation in the presidential election.	PRIORITY: Adopt special measures to promote the equal participation of women in public and political life. These measures could target political parties requiring a minimum of 30 per cent women among party nominees for national, provincial and local elections. Waiver of deposits for women contesting elections could be considered as another temporary special measure to advance women in politics.	Amend Parliamentary Elections Act, Provincial Councils Elections Act and Local Authorities Elections Ordinance.	Government, Parliament	Women’s participation in public affairs / Equality between men and women. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Article 4.1: “Adoption by State Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discriminatory.”
2	13	There is scope for a more robust protection of the independence of the ECSL. Members are recommended for appointment by the Constitutional Council,	Strengthen the independence of the ECSL by reviewing the selection process preceding the recommendation of	Amend Article 41A & B of the Constitution.	Government, Parliament	Genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of the voter ICCPR Art 25, General Comment 25 of the UN Human Rights

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		without a formal role for civil society, or any public debate on candidates' merits in the process.	members of the ECSL by the Constitutional Council, to ensure that there is a transparent, competitive process and a public debate, promoting appointment of independent individuals.			Committee (General Comment), paragraph 20: <i>"An independent electoral authority should be established to supervise the electoral process and to ensure that it is conducted fairly, impartially and in accordance with established laws which are compatible with the Covenant."</i>
ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION						
3	15	Voters who are not eligible for postal voting and who cannot cast the ballot in their polling station on election day are disenfranchised. There are no alternative arrangements for people employed in essential services who cannot take a leave, for homebound voters or those who cannot travel to their polling station due to distance, cost or professional engagements, such as students or journalists. No provisions were introduced to allow eligible prisoners to vote.	PRIORITY Expand the use of special voting arrangements to enable all eligible voters to exercise their right to vote. Specifically, consider extending postal voting to other voters who cannot vote at their polling station on election day and introduce additional voting arrangements such as mobile ballot boxes for persons with disabilities.	Amend the Presidential Elections Act	ECSL, Parliament	Right and opportunity to vote ICCPR Art 25, General Comment 25, paragraph 11: <i>"States must take effective measures to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right."</i>
4	16	The ECSL conducts various voter education efforts throughout the electoral cycle, yet interlocutors	Voter education programmes carried out by the ECSL and district election offices	No legal change is required	ECSL	Right and opportunity to vote ICCPR Art. 25, General Comment 25, paragraph 11: <i>"Voter</i>

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		<p>note that topics related to voter registration and identification, and special voting arrangements are not always sufficiently covered. Voter education on how to use a preferential vote was insufficient, with little public debate on marking a second and third preference, and on how these choices may affect the election outcome. All candidates urged voters to mark the ballot with only one preference (a cross); the ECSL, CSOs and media limited themselves to explaining the correct ballot marking if voters chose to rank up to three candidates.</p>	<p>between elections, including in collaboration with civil society organisations, should include information on electoral systems used in different elections, on voter registration, as well as voter identification on election day, special voting arrangements, and marking of the ballot. Materials should be developed targeting different groups of voters, in a variety of formats.</p>			<p><i>education and registration campaigns are necessary to ensure the effective exercise of article 25 rights by an informed community”.</i></p> <p>Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections, Article 4.1: <i>“In particular, States should: [...] Initiate or facilitate national programmes of civic education, to ensure that the population are familiar with election procedures and issues.”</i></p>
CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT						
5	19	<p>There are inconsistent timelines for the campaign silence period. The campaigns on the ground and in traditional media stopped 48 hours before the election, in line with the legal requirements. However, media was allowed to report on the last campaign rallies in the news on 19 September, while campaign activities on social media continued even on election day. The campaign</p>	<p>Establish unified campaign silence rules for contestants across traditional, online and social media for campaign advertising, with clear, enforceable sanctions for non-compliance.</p>	<p>Amend Presidential Elections Act and the ECSL Media Guidelines</p>	<p>ECSL, Parliament</p>	<p>Genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of the voters</p> <p>ICCPR, Article 25, General Comment 25, paragraph 19: <i>“Persons entitled to vote must be free to vote for any candidate for election [...] without undue influence or coercion of any kind which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector's</i></p>

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		silence rules are not applied to cable TV operators.				<i>will. Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of [...], inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.”</i>
6	20	The misuse of incumbency distorted the playing field. The EU EOM observed governors and/or other officials actively campaigning for Wickremesinghe, which is, prohibited by law and was strongly criticised by CSOs. Some executive decisions reinforced incumbent’s campaign. Apparent lack of separation between state administration and the campaign stemmed in part from the executive’s control of the local administration with appointed instead of elected officials governing the provinces and districts. Salary increments for public employees just before the start of postal voting and active campaigning by two presidential advisors on the government’s payroll also solicited strong criticism about the misuse of office.	PRIORITY Ensure enforcement of legal restrictions on the misuse of state resources and of incumbency for campaign purposes.	No legal change is required	ECSL Sri Lanka Police	Genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of voters ICCPR Article 25, General Comment 25, paragraph 7: <i>“Where citizens participate in the conduct of public affairs through freely chosen representatives, it is implicit in article 25 that those representatives do in fact exercise governmental power and that they are accountable through the electoral process for their exercise of that power. It is also implicit that the representatives exercise only those powers which are allocated to them in accordance with constitutional provisions.”</i>

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
CAMPAIGN FINANCE						
7	21	There are lacunae in the law in relation to the powers and duties of the ECSL related to campaign finance oversight. The ECSL is not obliged to undertake scrutiny of campaign expenditure and donation reports, no to collaborate with the police or with any other institution, to ascertain the accuracy of reports. The verification of reports might prove cumbersome also because there are no reporting requirements for traditional, digital and social media either on advertising prices or on revenue generated from political ads. Furthermore, there were no legal requirements for candidates to follow a standardised digital reporting format, that would ease the verification, including by media and civil society.	PRIORITY Amend the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023, to expand the responsibilities and powers of the ECSL, by obliging the Commission, in collaboration with other institutions, to verify the financial reports submitted by candidates. Introduce reporting requirements for media outlets and online platforms on prices of and revenue from paid political advertising and digitalised, standardised reporting by candidates.	Amend the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023	Government, Parliament	Prevention of corruption / Fairness in the election campaign UN Convention against Corruption Article 7 (1, 3): “(1) Each state party shall [...] endeavour to adopt, maintain and strengthen systems for the recruitment, hiring, retention, promotion and retirement of civil servants and, where appropriate, other non-elected public officials (and) (3) [...] shall also consider taking appropriate legislative and administrative measures [...] to enhance transparency in the funding of candidatures for elected public office and, where applicable, the funding of political parties.”
8	20	The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023 does not foresee disclosure of campaign donations prior to the election, hence voters have no opportunity to learn how and by whom their	Strengthen transparency in political finance by introducing a requirement to disclose campaign donations above a certain limit before election day.	Amend the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, 2023	Government, Parliament	Fairness in the election campaign, Prevention of corruption UN Convention against Corruption Article 7 (1, 3): “(1) Each state party [...] (3) shall also consider taking appropriate

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		preferred candidate is financed.				<i>legislative and administrative measures [...] to enhance transparency in the funding of candidatures for elected public office and, where applicable, the funding of political parties.”</i>
MEDIA						
9	22	State-broadcasters are under the purview of the Ministry of Mass Media and the Ministry of Finance. Their chairmen are directly appointed by the Minister of Mass Media and, overall, broadcasters legal and financial standing does not ensure their editorial independence. The ECSL repeatedly asked state-run media to reduce airtime devoted to the President. While they did so, the state media still favoured the incumbent and positive coverage of government’s decisions reinforced Wickremesinghe’s re-election bid.	Transform state media into genuine public service outlets by establishing legal safeguards for their editorial independence, financial sustainability and autonomy. The management should be appointed through an open and competitive process.	Amend Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1966 and Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation Act, 1982	Parliament	Freedom of expression ICCPR, Article 19, General Comment 34, paragraph 16: <i>“States [...] should ensure that public broadcasting services operate in an independent manner. In this regard, States [...] should guarantee their independence and editorial freedom. They should provide funding in a manner that does not undermine their independence.”</i>
10	23	The Right To Information (RTI) Act does not foresee a mandatory pro-active disclosure of information	Amend the RTI Act to introduce pro-active disclosure of information of	Amend the Right to Information Act Amend the ECSL	Parliament, ECSL	Transparency and Access to Information ICCPR, General Comment 34,

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		held by public offices, as recommended by international standards. Neither warning letters nor or results of the media monitoring were made public by the ECSL, although such publication would have had enhanced transparency.	public interest, including the results of the ECSL media monitoring and warning letters sent by them to media, in a timely manner and in an easily accessible format.	Media Guidelines		paragraph 19: <i>“States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest.”</i>
SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL RIGHTS						
11	29	In a positive move, the ECSL and CSOs established a long-term collaboration with global tech companies (Meta, Google and TikTok). While meetings and trainings took place, the response from tech companies to ECSL’s and recognised fact checkers’ (CSOs) requests to remove manipulated or outright false content undermining the integrity of the election was inconsistent, at time confusing voters and letting disinformation to thrive.	Strengthen the formal collaboration between the election administration and the main social platforms. The ECSL, CSOs and tech companies (Meta, Google, TikTok and X) should aim to develop more effective mechanisms to enhance the transparency of online campaigning and to strengthen the respect for existing campaign rules, including, but not limited to, the campaign silence period.	No legal change is required	ECSL, CSOs	Right to participate in public affairs, Freedom of expression and opinion ICCPR, General Comment 25 <i>“Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of [...] compulsion, inducement or manipulative interference of any kind.”</i> UN, OSCE, OAS, ACHPR Joint declaration on freedom of expression and “fake news”, disinformation and propaganda, 3 March 2017, 6(a): <i>“All stakeholders – including intermediaries, media outlets, civil society and academia – should be supported in developing [...]”</i>

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
						<i>initiatives for creating a better understanding of the impact of disinformation and propaganda [...], as well as appropriate responses to these phenomena.”</i>
12	12, 23 and 27	The legal limitations on free speech imposed through the ICCPR Act and the Online Safety Act (OSA) have a potential for arbitrary, repressive application against political dissent online and in real life. The proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill, designed to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979, would further curtail political rights. The ICCPR Act, OSA and PTA contain vague definitions of various types of prohibited speech, which, coupled with broad powers given to law enforcement agencies, and limited judicial oversight, lead to self-censorship and reduce pluralism.	PRIORITY Protect freedom of political expression by repealing the Online Safety Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, as well as Section 3 of the ICCPR Act.	Repeal: the Online Safety Act, 2024, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 1979, and Section 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act, 2007.	Government, The President, Parliament	Freedom of expression and opinion ICCPR, art.19: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression [...]” ICCPR, General Comment 34, para.35 “When a state party invokes a legitimate ground for restriction of freedom of expression, it must demonstrate in specific and individualized fashion the precise nature of the threat, and the necessity and proportionality of the specific action taken, in particular by establishing a direct and immediate connection between the expression and the threat.”

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
CITIZEN OBSERVATION						
13	32	The ECSL facilitated national and international election observers, yet the electoral legal framework is silent on their rights and duties. A prior EU EOM recommendation on this matter remains unaddressed.	Introduce provisions on election observation into the electoral legal framework.	Amend Presidential Elections Act, Parliamentary Elections Act, Provincial Councils Elections Act, Local Authorities Elections Ordinance	ECSL, Parliament	Transparency and Access to Information ICCPR Art. 25 IPU Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections, Article 4.7: <i>“States should take all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure the transparency of the entire electoral process including, for example, through the presence of party agents and duly accredited observers.”</i>
PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES						
14	31	Sri Lanka has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), but the instrument has not been incorporated into domestic law and cannot be relied on before the courts. Also, more efforts are needed to ensure participation of voters with disabilities in election on the basis of equality with others. Apart from transportation and assisted voting in polling	Incorporate the CRPD into national law, to give full domestic legal effect to the instrument, ensuring respect for the right of persons with disabilities to participate in political and public life. Build on the established good practice paying particular attention to provisions and measures enabling persons with disabilities to vote	Amend the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 1996, to bring it into line with the CRPD or Enact the proposed Disability Rights Bill, giving effect	Government, Parliament, ECSL	Right and opportunity to participate in public affairs and hold office/freedom from discrimination Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Article 29: b) <i>“Promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without</i>

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		stations, there were no special voting arrangements, such as postal voting or a mobile ballot box. While tactile ballot stencils were available in polling stations, not all visually impaired voters knew how to use them. Also, awareness about the possibility request transportation to a polling station was limited, as noted by EU EOM observers.	independently.	to the CRPD.		<i>discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs, including: (i) Participation in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country, and in the activities and administration of political parties”</i>
VOTING, COUNTING AND TABULATION						
15	34	During election day, inadequate secrecy of the ballot was the only recurring shortcoming identified by EU EOM observers, who noted that in 63 observed cases (26 per cent), the layout of the polling station did not sufficiently protect ballot secrecy. Instructions to presiding officers on the positioning of the voting booths did not ensure that voters mark their ballots in secrecy.	Revise instructions to presiding officers of polling stations to ensure that the positioning of voting booths enables voters to mark their ballots in secrecy.	No legal change is required	ECSL	Genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of the voter ICCPR Art. 25, General Comment 25, paragraph 20: “States should take measures to guarantee the requirement of the secrecy of the vote during elections [...].” IPU Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections, Article 2.7: “The right to vote in secret is absolute and shall not be restricted in any manner [...].”
16	35	Some counting centre rooms were too small to accommodate the high	Ensure transparency during the vote count by establishing	No legal change is required	ECSL	Transparency

NR	FR page #	CONTEXT	RECOMMENDATION	SUGGESTED CHANGE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK	RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTION	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLE COMMITMENT
		number of party agents and observers. As a consequence, overcrowding made the process difficult to follow.	minimum criteria for the choice of counting premises, including requirements for adequate space and accessibility.			ICCPR Art. 25 IPU Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections, Article 4.1: <i>“In particular, States should: [...] Ensure the integrity of the process for counting votes.”</i>

ANNEX 1 – ELECTION RESULTS

Final results as announced by the ECSL

Total number of valid votes	13,319,616	97.8 per cent
Number of rejected votes	300,300	2.2 per cent
Number of votes polled	13,619,916 including 704,121 postal votes	79.46 per cent (turnout)
Number of registered voters	17,140,354 including 712,307 postal voters	

	Presidential Candidate	First Count			Second count	Total votes
		Party	Total votes	Votes (per cent)		
1.	Anura Kumara Disanayake	NPP	5,634,915	42.31%	105,264	5,740,179
2.	Sajith Premadasa	SJB	4,363,035	32.76%	167,867	4,530,902
3.	Ranil Wickremesinghe	Independent	2,299,767	17.27%		
4.	Namal Rajapaksa	SLPP	342,781	2.57%		
5.	Ariyanethiran Pakkiaselvam	Independent	226,343	1.7%		
6.	Dilith Jayaweera	SLCP	122,396	0.92%		
7.	K. K Piyadasa	Independent	47,543	0.36%		
8.	Dissanayaka Mudiyansele Bandaranayake	Independent	30,660	0.23%		
9.	Sarath Fonseka	Independent	22,407	0.17%		
10.	Wijedasa Rajapakse	JPF	21,306	0.16%		
11.	Anuruddha Polgampala	Independent	15,411	0.12%		
12.	Sarath Keerthirathna	Independent	15,187	0.11%		
13.	K R. Krishan	APP	13,595	0.10%		
14.	Agampodi Prasanga Suranjeewa Anoj de Silva	DUNF	12,898	0.10%		
15.	Priyantha Wickramasinghe	NSSP	12,760	0.10%		
16.	Namal Rajapaksha	SBP	12,700	0.10%		
17.	Akmeemana Dayarathana Thero	Independent	11,536	0.09%		
18.	Nuwan Bopege	SPF	11,191	0.08%		
19.	Ajantha De Zoysa	RJA	10,548	0.08%		
20.	Victor Perera	Independent	10,374	0.08%		
21.	Siripala Amarasinghe	Independent	9,035	0.07%		
22.	Sirithunga Jayasuriya	USP	8,954	0.07%		
23.	Baththaramulle Seelarithna Thero	JSP	6,839	0.05%		
24.	Abubakar Mohamed Infas	DUA	6,531	0.05%		
25.	Pemasiri Manage	Independent	5,822	0.04%		
26.	Mahinda Dewage	SLSP	5,338	0.04%		
27.	Keerthie Wickramaratne	AJP	4,676	0.04%		

	Presidential Candidate	First Count			Second count	Total votes
		Party	Total votes	Votes (per cent)		
28.	Pani Wijesiriwardena	SEP	4,410	0.03%		
29.	Oshala Herath	NIF	4,253	0.03%		
30.	Anuruddha Roshan Ranasinghe	Independent	4,205	0.03%		
31.	Sarath Bandaranayake	NDF	4,070	0.03%		
32.	K. A. Kularatna	Independent	4,013	0.03%		
33.	Lalith De Silva	UNFF	3,004	0.02%		
34.	Pallimulla Kapugamage Anura Sidney Jayarathna	Independent	2,799	0.02%		
35.	Janaka Ratnayake	ELPP	2,405	0.02%		
36.	Mylvaganam Thilakarajah	Independent	2,138	0.02%		
37.	Sarath Manamendra	NSU	1,911	0.01%		
38.	A. S. P. Liyanage	SLLP	1,860	0.01%		

	PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS 2024											
	Ranil Wickremesinghe (independent)	Sajith Premadasa (SJB)	Anura Kumara Dissanayake (NPP)	P. Ariyaratnan (Tamil Common Candidate)	Other	Sajith Premadasa (preferential votes)	Anura Kumara Dissanayake (preferential votes)	Ranil Wickremesinghe (independent)	Sajith Premadasa (SJB)	Anura Kumara Dissanayake (NPP)	P. Ariyaratnan (Tamil Common Candidate)	Other
Islandwide	2,299,767	4,363,035	5,634,915	226,343	795,556	167,867	105,264	17.27%	32.76%	42.31%	1.70%	5.97%
District												
Colombo	281,436	342,108	629,963	3,168	77,711	35,488	17,902	21.09%	25.64%	47.21%	0.24%	5.82%
Gampaha	218,028	349,550	809,410	731	80,670	16,683	12,217	14.95%	23.97%	55.50%	0.05%	5.53%
Kalutara	143,285	236,307	387,764	215	49,947	8,517	6,135	17.53%	28.91%	47.43%	0.03%	6.11%
Galle	107,336	189,555	366,721	165	49,043	5,828	4,714	15.06%	26.59%	51.45%	0.02%	6.88%
Matara	79,249	147,662	287,662	115	33,641	4,505	3,130	14.45%	26.93%	52.46%	0.02%	6.14%
Hambantota	33,217	131,503	221,913	103	40,326	3,093	1,763	7.78%	30.79%	51.96%	0.02%	9.44%
Kandy	162,202	323,998	394,534	433	52,349	9,188	8,020	17.38%	34.71%	42.26%	0.05%	5.61%
Matale	53,829	121,803	140,544	203	23,355	2,211	1,909	15.84%	35.85%	41.37%	0.06%	6.87%
Nuwara Eliya	138,619	201,814	105,057	793	27,652	5,440	3,162	29.25%	42.58%	22.17%	0.17%	5.83%
Batticaloa	91,132	139,110	38,832	36,905	12,669	7,191	4,467	28.60%	43.66%	12.19%	11.58%	3.98%
Ampara	86,589	200,384	108,971	9,985	17,468	4,814	3,391	20.45%	47.33%	25.74%	2.36%	4.13%
Trincomalee	40,496	120,588	49,886	18,524	9,967	4,119	1,930	16.91%	50.36%	20.83%	7.74%	4.16%
Anuradhapura	82,152	202,289	285,944	155	33,146	3,537	2,773	13.61%	33.51%	47.37%	0.03%	5.49%
Polonnaruwa	36,908	100,730	130,880	160	15,123	1,641	1,021	13.00%	35.49%	46.12%	0.06%	5.33%
Kurunegala	146,520	368,290	544,763	225	70,495	7,920	6,408	12.96%	32.58%	48.20%	0.02%	6.24%
Puttalam	60,719	173,382	207,134	375	28,485	3,103	2,149	12.92%	36.88%	44.06%	0.08%	6.06%
Badulla	115,138	219,674	197,283	446	36,383	4,760	3,437	20.24%	38.61%	34.68%	0.08%	6.40%
Moneragala	35,728	134,238	140,269	122	24,725	1,820	1,395	10.66%	40.06%	41.86%	0.04%	7.38%
Ratnapura	145,038	257,721	291,708	250	47,183	6,022	4,888	19.55%	34.74%	39.32%	0.03%	6.36%
Kegalle	106,510	185,930	247,179	205	29,855	4,314	3,869	18.70%	32.64%	43.39%	0.04%	5.24%
Jaffna	84,558	121,177	27,086	116,688	22,179	21,511	8,174	22.75%	32.60%	7.29%	31.39%	5.97%
Vavuniya	52,573	95,422	21,412	36,377	11,485	6,162	2,390	24.20%	43.92%	9.86%	16.74%	5.29%

ANNEX 2 – MEDIA MONITORING RESULTS

From 22 August until 19 September, the EU EOM monitored a sample of broadcast and print media. Media monitoring included quantitative and qualitative analysis of the coverage of the campaign and other socio-political issues, assessing the amount of time and space allocated to candidates, political parties, public officials, and other politically relevant subjects, as well as evaluating the tone of the coverage and the gender balance across the media landscape. The media monitoring aimed at providing reliable data on the distribution of time and space to relevant political actors and to assess if the media guaranteed a sufficient level of information on political alternatives in a balanced manner.

The monitoring sample for audio-visual media included three state owned broadcasters, four private TV channels and two private radio stations with a nationwide reach, as well as five print outlets. The media outlets monitored by the EU EOM were as follows:

Six TV channels were monitored daily from 18:00 till 00:00, from 22 August until 19 September

- Rupavahini – state-owned (Sinhala)
- ITN – state-owned (Sinhala)
- Sirasa TV – private (Sinhala) owned by Capital Maharaja Group
- Shakthi TV – private (Tamil) owned by Capital Maharaja Group
- Hiru Tv – private (Sinhala) owned by Asia Broadcasting Corporation.
- Derana TV – private (Sinhala) – owned by Power House Ltd

Three radio stations were monitored daily from 06:00 till 10:00, from 27 August until 19 September

- SLBC – state-owned (Sinhala)
- Neth FM – private (Sinhala) owned by ASSET Radio Broadcasting
- Sooriyan FM – private (Tamil) owned by Asia Broadcasting Corporation

Three daily and two weekly newspapers were fully monitored from 21 August until 19 September

- The Daily News – state-owned (English)
- *Lankadeepa* – private (Sinhala), owned by Wijeya Newspapers.
- *Virakesari* – private (Tamil), owned by Express Newspapers (Ceylon) Pvt.
- Sunday Divaina – private (Sinhala), owned by Upali Newspapers
- The Sunday Times – private (English), owned by Wijeya Newspapers.

How to read the charts

- The bar/column charts show the distribution of airtime or space (in percentage) allocated to candidates by each media outlet, as well as the tone of the coverage (negative, neutral, positive) and share of voice, both in total and per category.

Colour keys for the three leading candidates:

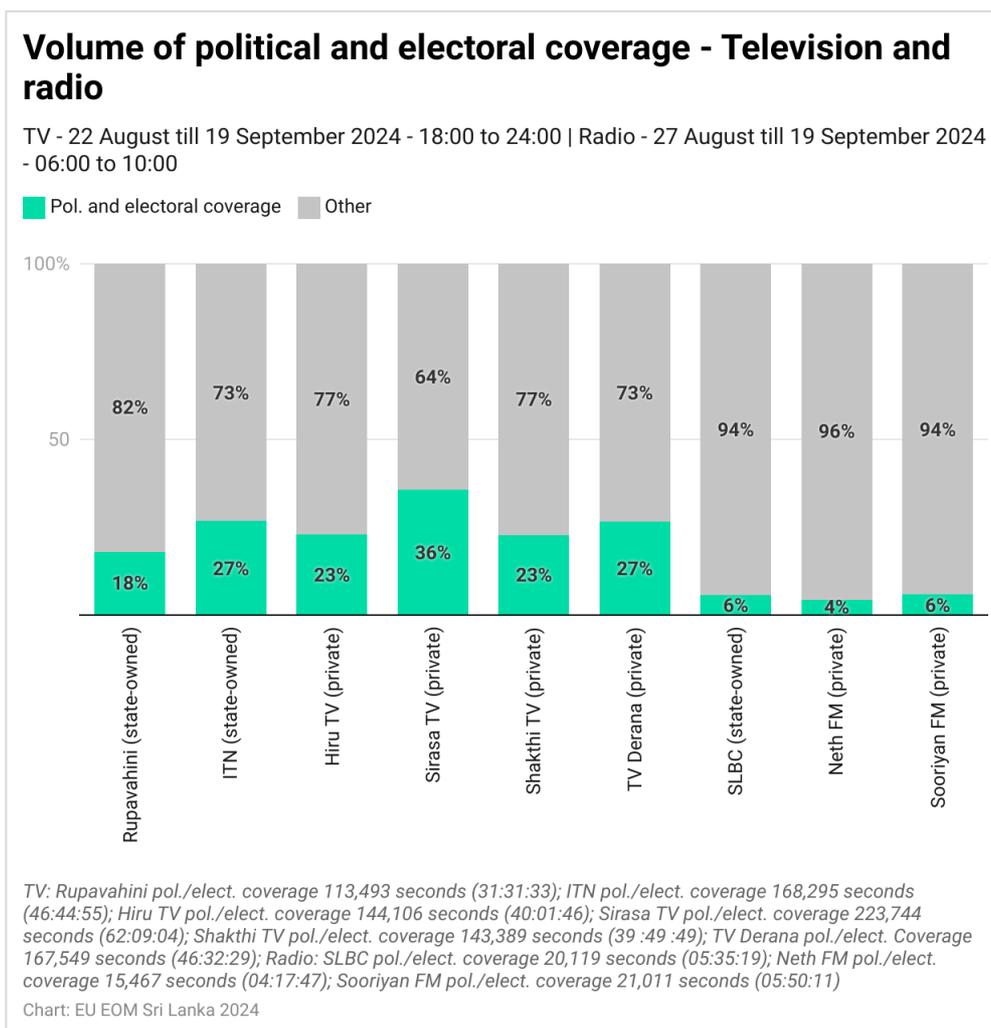
■ Ranil Wickremesinghe ■ Sajith Premadasa ■ Anura Kumara Dissanayake

- The time is monitored in seconds for the electronic media (and converted in hh:mm:ss between brackets) and space is measured in cm² for print media.

A. Total time allocated to political and electoral coverage in TV stations’ primetime programming and radio channels morning shows

During the 29-day-long monitoring period, the EU EOM coded TV broadcasts lasting 1,004 hours, with an average of 25 per cent being allotted to electoral and political content. During the 24-day monitoring period, the EU EOM coded radio broadcasts lasting 288 hours, with an average of 5.5 per cent being granted to political communication. [Chart 1](#) shows the share of airtime each media outlets devoted to the coverage of electoral and other socio-political issues.

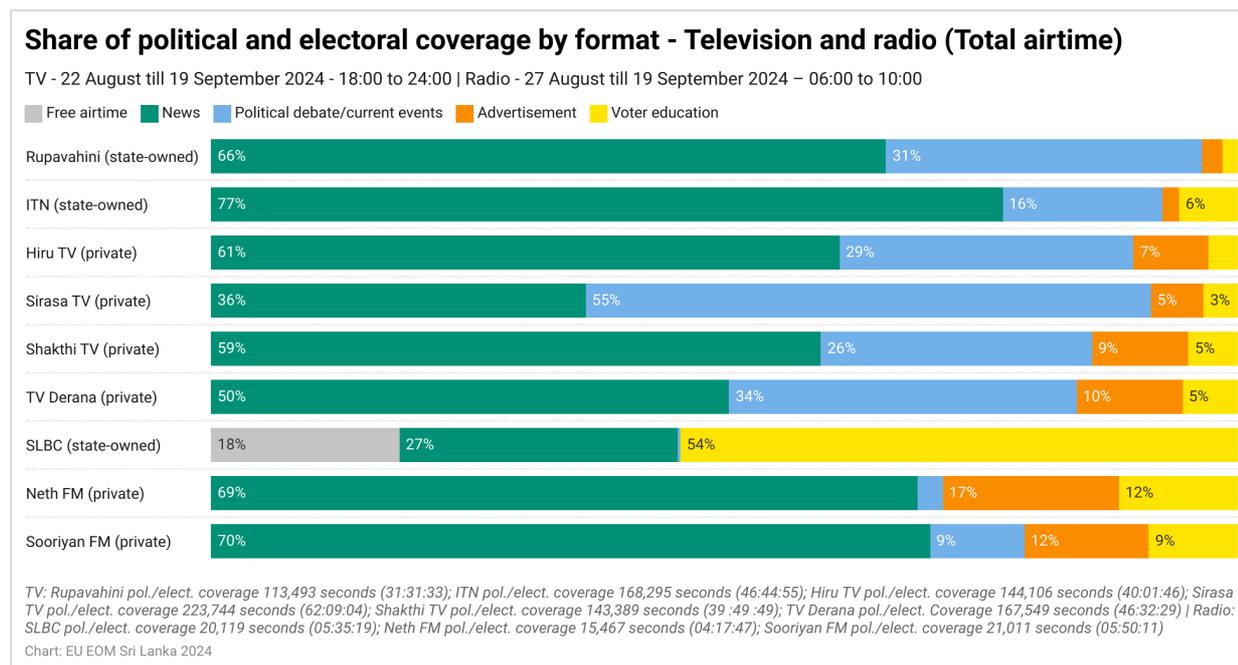
Chart 1



B. Broadcast media political and electoral coverage by format

[Chart 2](#) shows the breakdown of types of radio and TV broadcasts featuring political communication. Political debate includes political discussion shows, interviews with electoral contestants and other programmes of editorial choice featuring political matters. Voter education programmes include short voter information clips produced by the ECSL and civil society organisations. Advertisement includes short paid-for political publicity clips that were marked as such. It should be noted, that not always clips that were similar to marked political advertising were marked as such, hence such content is included in the TV broadcasts category “political debate”.

Chart 2



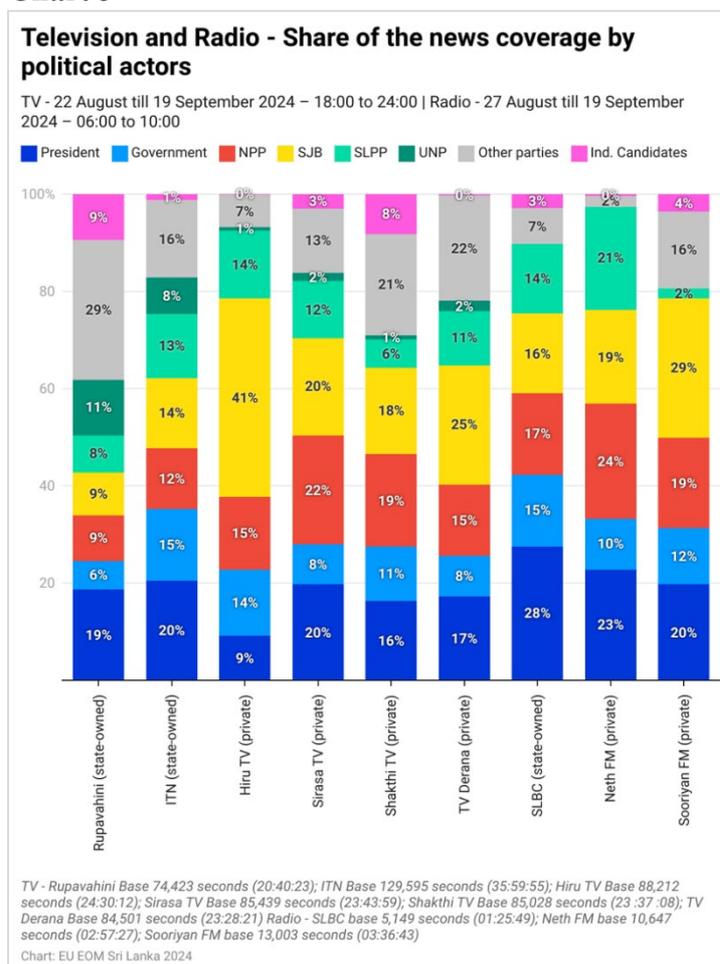
C. Broadcast news coverage by type of actors (president, government and political parties)

Chart 3 shows proportional distribution of airtime among political actors. Those include political parties and their candidates, the president, and the government ministers.

The category “independent candidates” includes coverage granted to 11 contestants who stood as independents, but does not include the airtime granted to the President Ranil Wickremesinghe who also contest the election as an independent candidate. The coverage of Wickremesinghe is singled out in a category “the president”.

Some 72 per cent of the airtime granted to “other parties” on TV Derana in fact was given to the presidential candidate of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka Dilith Jayaweera, who was one of the owners of the TV channel.

Chart 3



D. Share of direct speech of the candidates during newscasts on television

Direct quotes from various political actors amounted to 67 per cent of prime-time news coverage on average. [Chart 4](#) shows the proportional divide between direct quotes of political actors and journalistic commentary and [Chart 5](#) shows the most quoted candidates (in seconds).

Chart 4

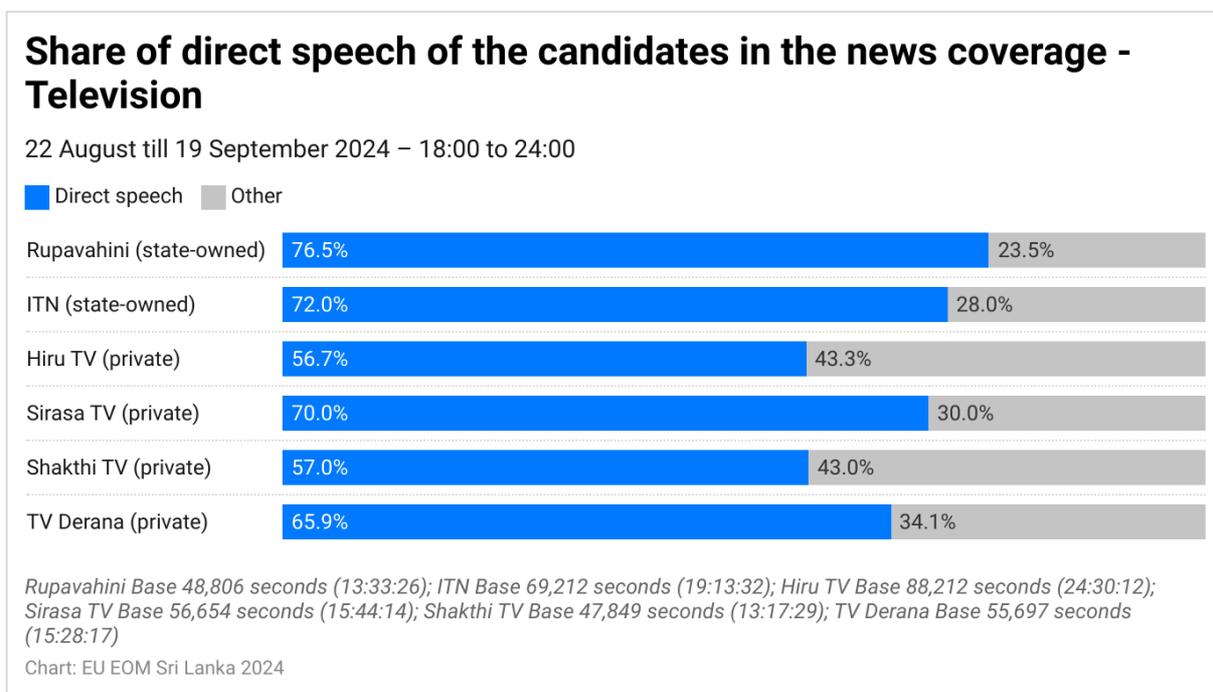
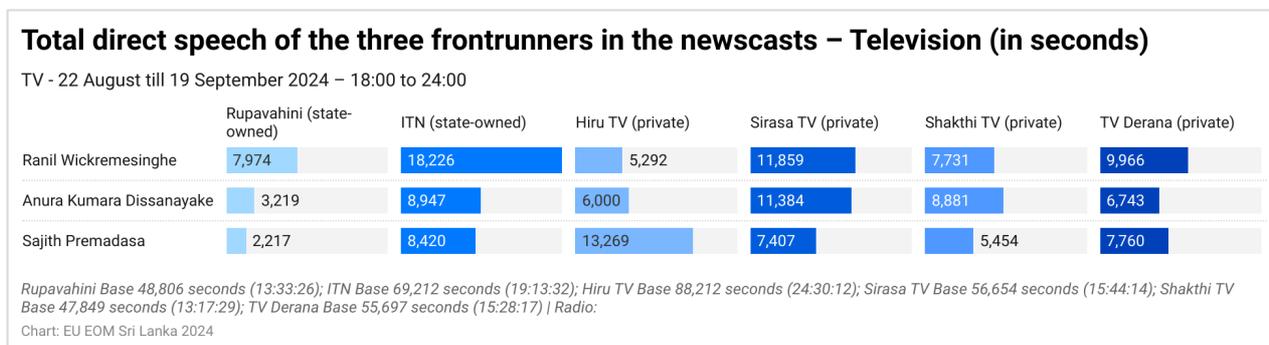


Chart 5



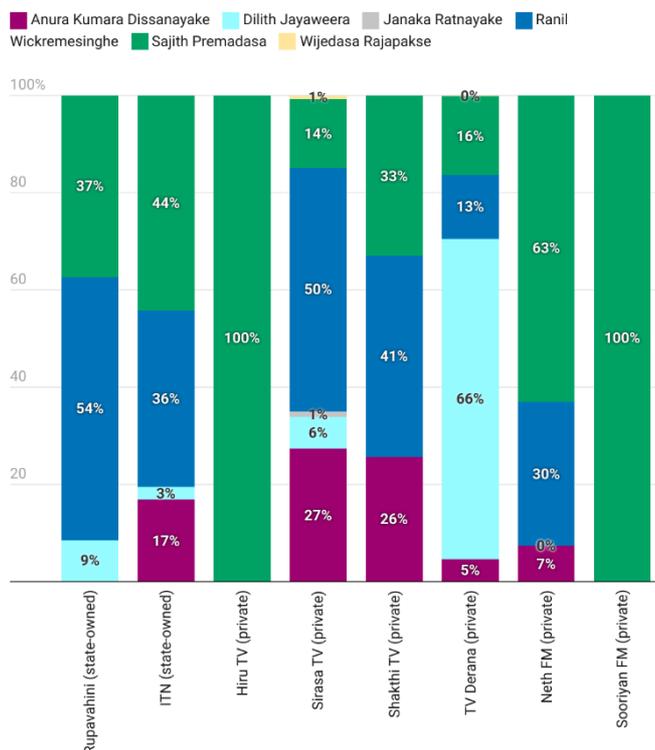
E. Advertisement in broadcast and print media

Airtime sold to candidates during prime-time programming reached some 6.3 per cent on average of the election-related content, ranging from 2 to 10 per cent on television channels and to 0 to 24 per cent on radio stations. Charts 6 and 7 show the proportional distribution of paid-for airtime per candidate per media outlet.

Chart 6

Advertisement - Television and radio

TV - 22 August till 19 September 2024 – 18:00 to 24:00 | Radio - 27 August till 19 September 2024 – 06:00 to 10:00



TV: Rupavahini Base 2,224 seconds (00:37:04); ITN Base 2,665 seconds (00:44:25); Hiru TV Base 10,485 seconds (02:54:45); Sirasa TV Base 11,553 seconds (03:12:33); Shakthi TV Base 13,501 seconds (03:45:01); TV Derana Base 17,290 seconds (04:48:10) | Radio: Neth FM base 2,655 seconds (00:44:15); Sooriyan FM base 3,236 seconds (00:53:56)

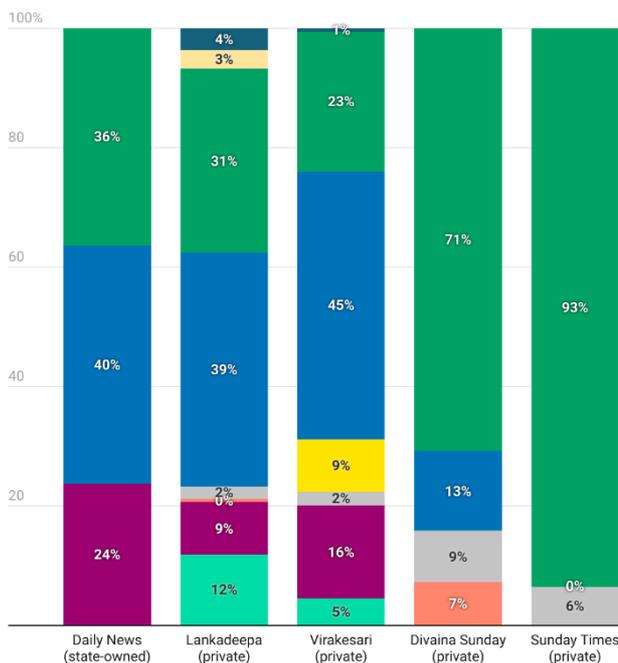
Chart: EU EOM Sri Lanka 2024

Chart 7

Advertisement - Print media

21 August till 19 September 2024

Ajantha De Zoysa Anura Kumara Dissanayake J. D. K. Wickremaratne Janaka Ratnayake P. Ariyanethran Ranil Wickremesinghe Sajith Premadasa Wijedasa Rajapakse Other candidates



Daily news base 9,439cm²; Lankadeepa base 29,047.25cm²; Virakesari base 33,741cm²; Sunday Divaina base 11,936cm²; Sunday Times base 9,197cm²

Chart: EU EOM Sri Lanka 2024

F. TV channels – News coverage of the candidates

Chart 8 shows the distribution of airtime between candidates during newscasts on broadcast media, while chart 9 shows the tone of the news for the three frontrunners on each TV channel and radio station. With up to three quarters of direct speech by the candidates and limited journalistic commentary, the tone of the news as represented in the charts is largely positive, as candidates’ direct speech is always measured as being positive, since the candidate is given the opportunity to address the audience directly, while journalists mostly refrained from any commentary. Hiru TV was the most unbalanced broadcaster, allocating half of its airtime devoted to candidates to Premadasa, while state-owned broadcasters gave up to 20 percentage points larger share of news to the president.

Chart 8

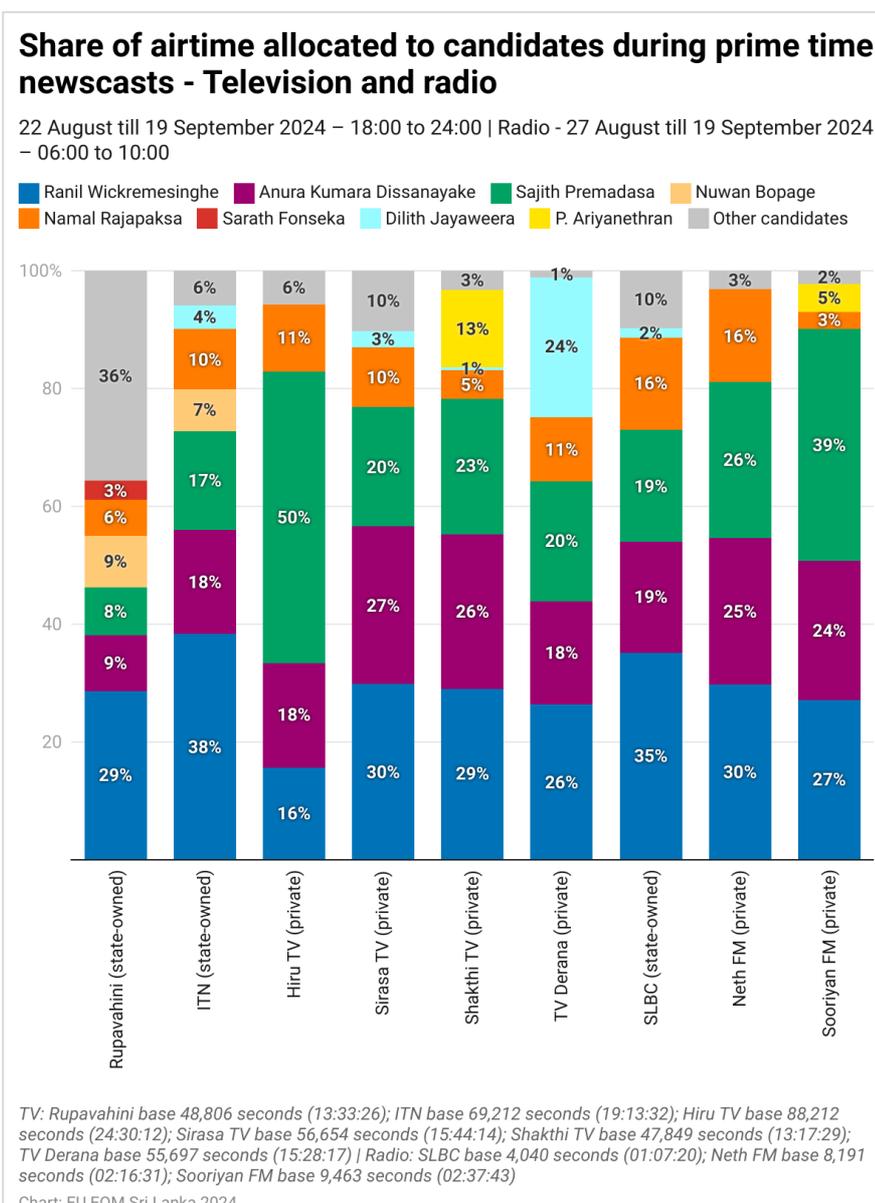
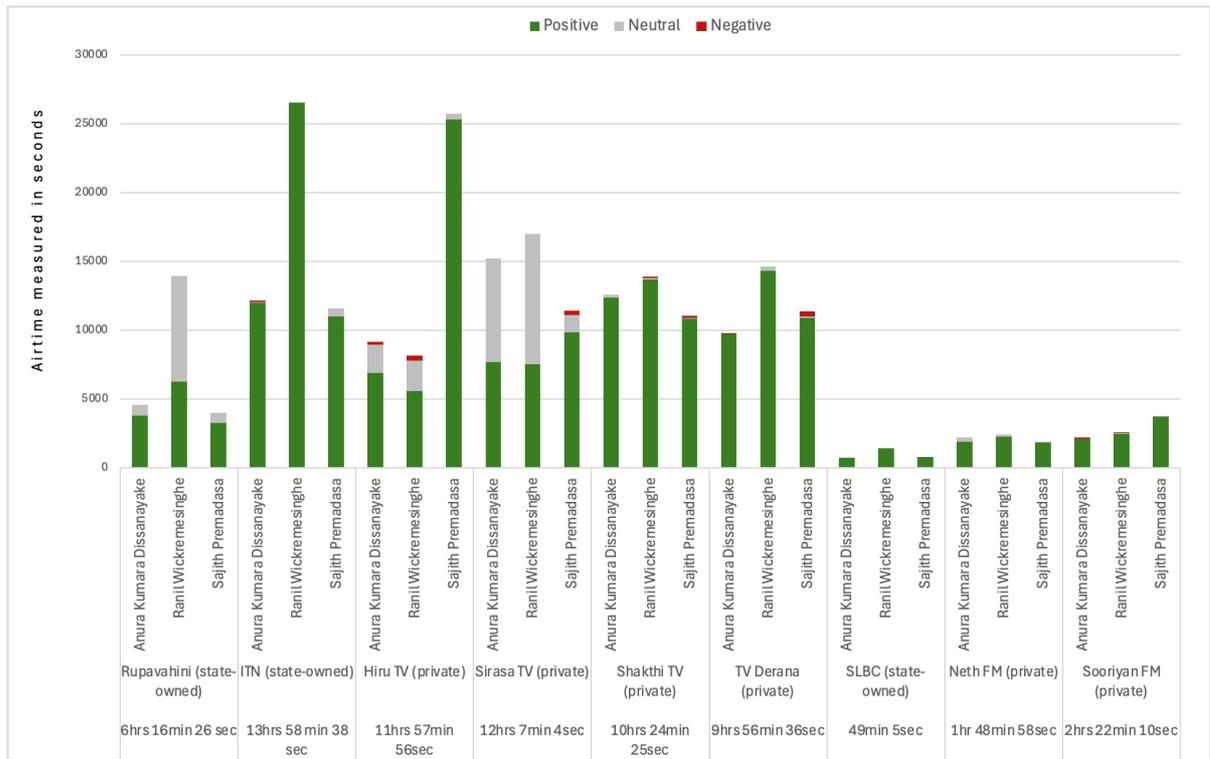


Chart 9 - Tone of the coverage towards the three leading candidates within the prime-time programming, including the news.



G. Print media – Coverage of the candidates

Chart 10

Chart 10 shows the allocation of space to candidates in print media, while Chart 11 depicts the tone the outlets used covering the three leading candidates.

The state-owned Daily News granted most of its coverage to the incumbent, with some 60 per cent of election-related content featuring the President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

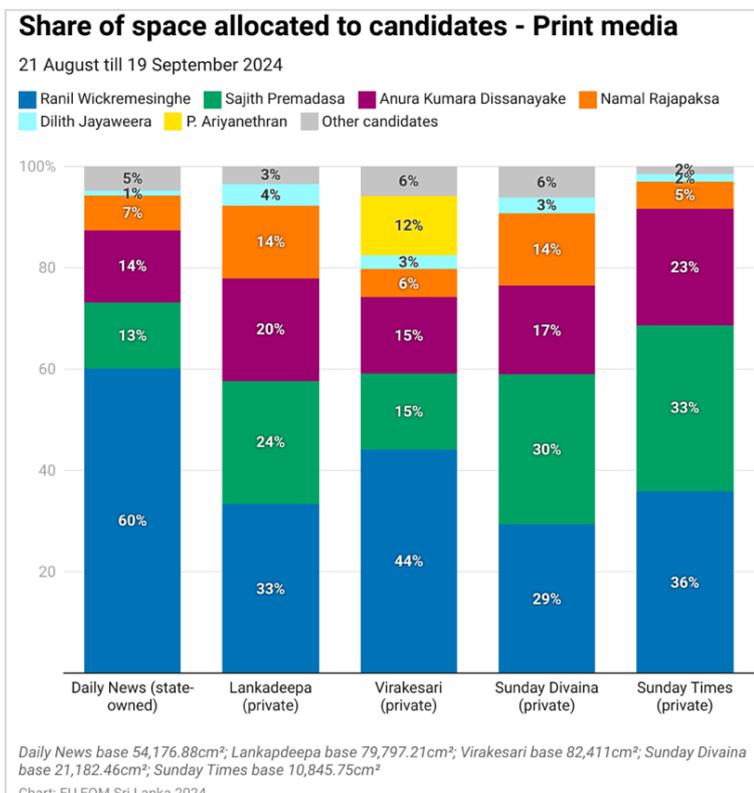
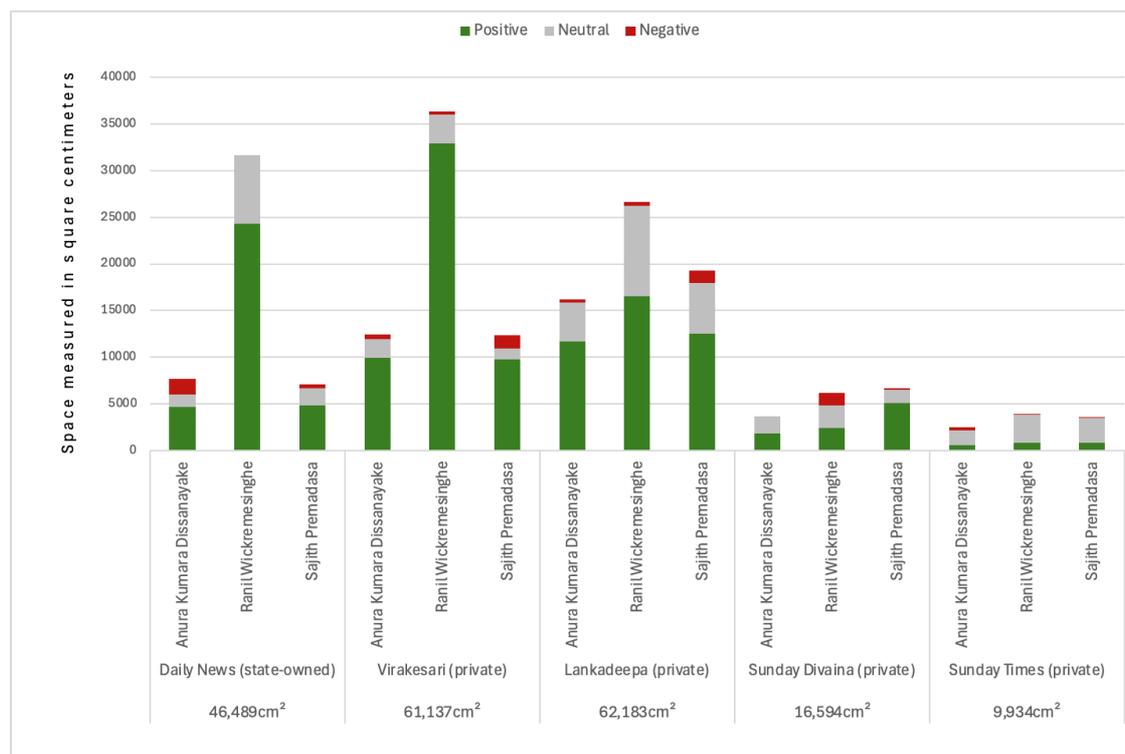


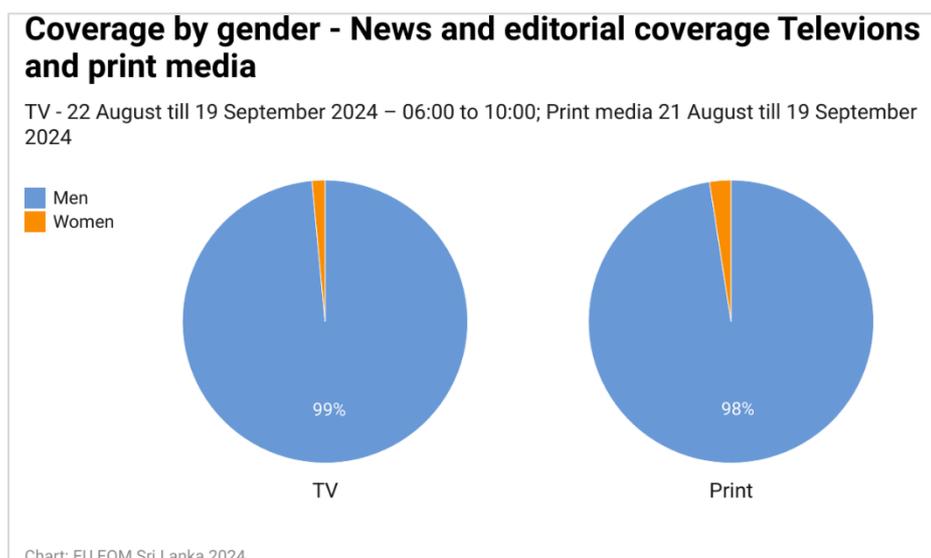
Chart 11 – Tone in print media for the three leading candidates



H. Gender breakdown by media outlet

All presidential candidates were men and there were very few women in leadership positions within the main political parties. Consequently, very little airtime was granted to female politicians, as evidenced by [Chart 12](#). Thalatha Athukorala (a former SJB member of the parliament), Harini Amarasuriya (NPP member of the parliament, appointed as Prime Minister in September 2024), Hirunika Premachandra (SJB member of the parliament), Rohini Kumari Wijeratne (SJB member of the parliament), Geetha Kumarasinghe (SLPP member of the parliament) were the most often featured and quoted in print media and TV.

Chart 12

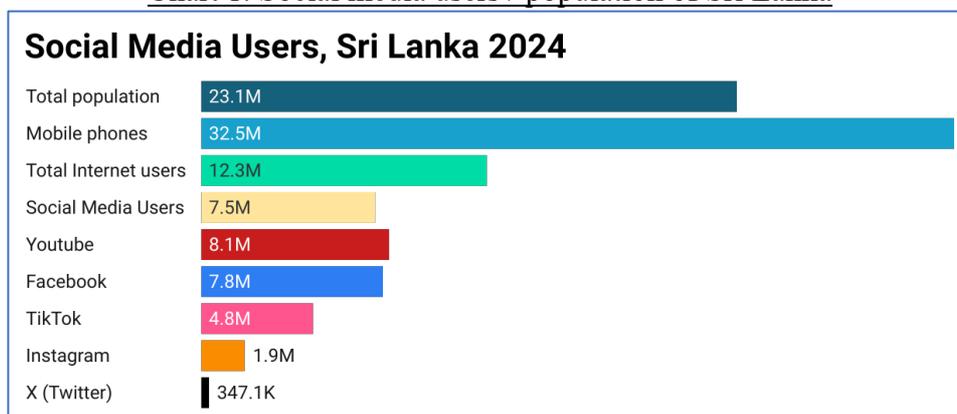


ANNEX 3 – SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING RESULTS

Social media environment

Sri Lanka has a total population of approximately 23.1 million. Some 56.3 per cent of Sri Lankans have access to internet, with some 60 per cent of them having at least one social media account. There are over 32.5 million mobile phones registered in the country. The most popular social media platforms are YouTube (8.1 million users) and Facebook (7.8 million users), followed by TikTok (4.8 million) and Instagram (1.9 million).

Chart 1. Social media users / population of Sri Lanka



EU EOM Sri Lanka 2024 methodology

The EU EOM monitored an indicative set of social media accounts, profiles, groups, and pages, with a nationwide relevance, to capture key campaign trends across various online platforms. The selection of accounts and topics the mission analysed was made after assessing the prospective impact a certain political actor actions might have on political participation. Among the platforms, YouTube and Facebook had the potential to affect the discourse, hence the activity on the latter was in mission’s monitoring focus. Additionally, X and TikTok communications also have been assessed, as the former is popular among political decision makers and news media, and the latter: among first time voters.

The EU EOM social media monitoring unit comprised six locally recruited social media monitors, each of whom was fluent in at least two out of the three dominant languages Sinhala, Tamil and English. The mission used following tools to extract data from social media platforms: SentiOne and Gerulata for extracting data from Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X and TikTok. The data downloaded from social networks cover the entire campaign period, campaign silence, as well as one week following the announcement of results. Data visualizations were made by using [DataWrapper](#) and [SankeyMatic](#).

Table 1. The social media monitoring and data collection/visualization tools used

	
Social Listening tools	SentiOne, Gerulata
Paid Advertising Monitoring	Facebook Ad Library
Content verification tools used by EU EOM	Google Images; TinEye;
Visualisation	DataWrapper; SankeyMatic

Presidential candidates’ online campaign

The EU EOM observed and assessed communication on total of 502 social media accounts, including 60 accounts for candidates, 59 accounts for parties, 231 for influencers, 75 for traditional media, 170 digital media accounts, 11 accounts of state institutions, and 66 of CSO’s.

The sample was selected considering following criterions:

- The reach and impact of the page/group/account on the political agenda (number of followers – min. 1000, interaction rate per post, quotation level in traditional media and sum of shares).
- The content of the page/group/account (are topics covering social, political, and electoral issues, is the content original or is it primarily re-shared, is the content controversial, etc.).
- Political affiliation of the account, page, or group.
- The dominant language used on the page or by the social media influencer was also considered to obtain a balanced sample of digital content in Sinhala, Tamil and English

Chart 2. Monitored social media channels – total.

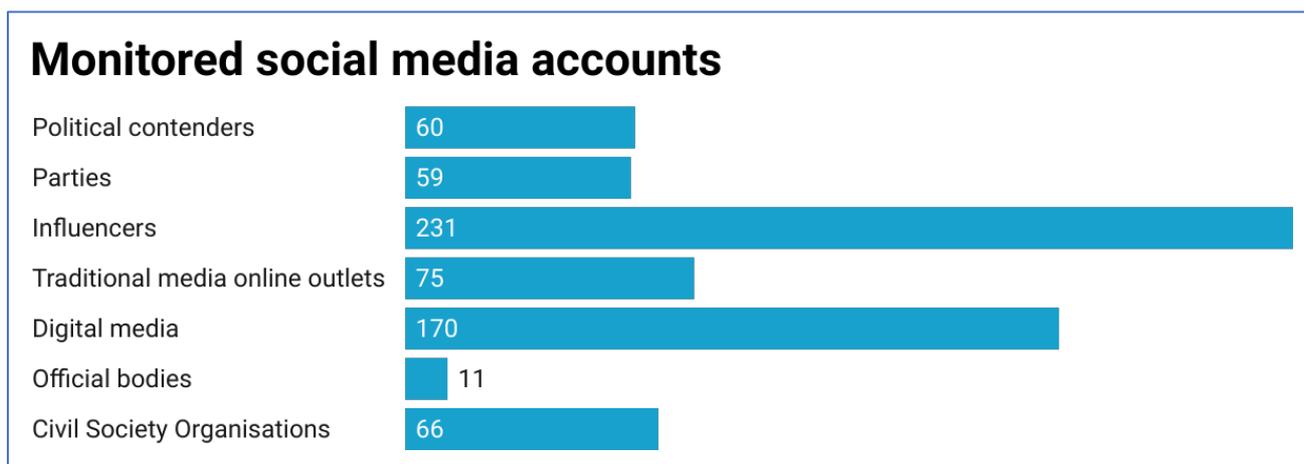
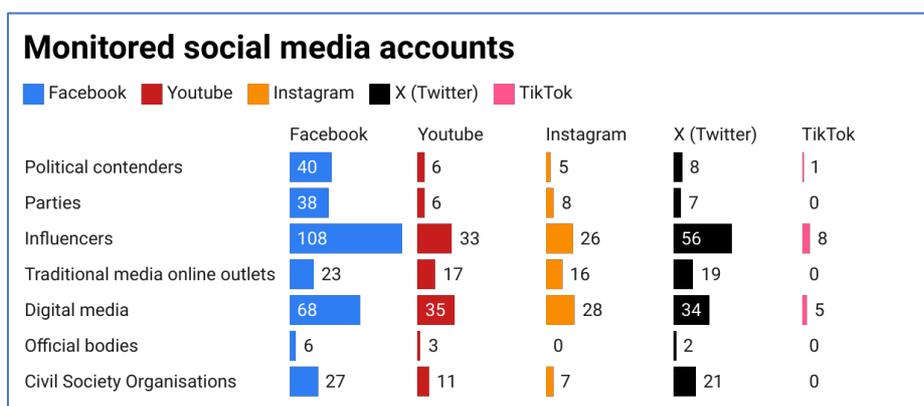


Chart 3. Monitored social media channels – types

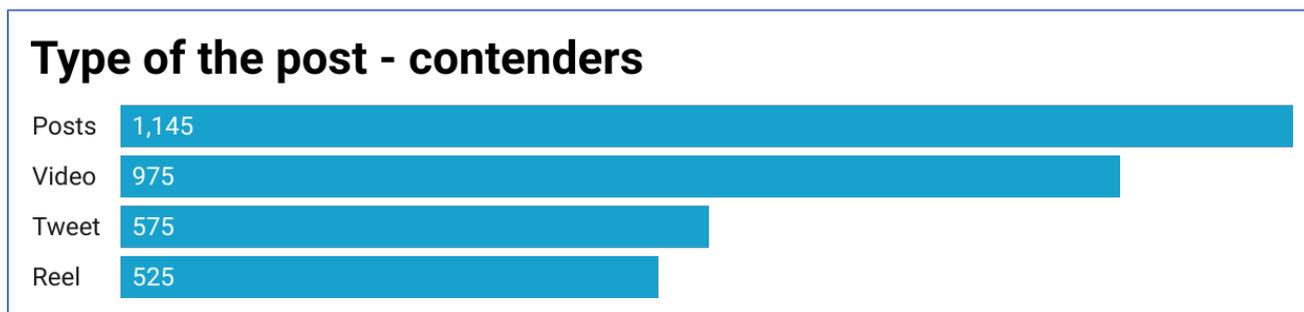
Not every observed actor had every type of account on a particular social network. The statistics in Chart 3 refer to the total number of observed accounts. Facebook accounts accounted for the largest proportion of observed social media accounts, followed by X.



Number of posts by presidential candidates

The Chart 4 illustrates the type of content that was posted by the presidential candidates during the campaign. In total 1,145 are posts⁸⁶ (35.6%), followed by 975 videos (30.3%), 575 tweets (17.9%), and 525 reels (16.3%).

Chart 4. Type of the post – presidential candidates

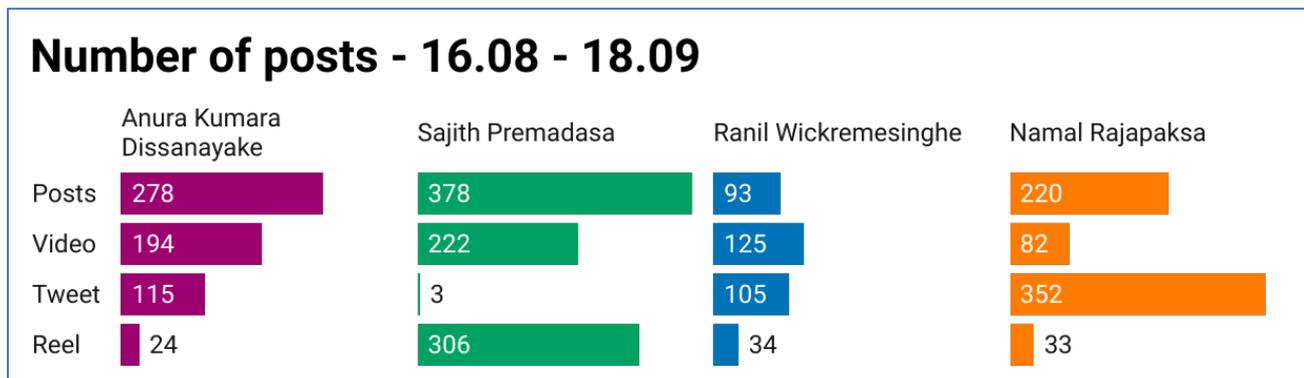


The Chart 5 shows that Sajith Premadasa placed the highest number of posts (378) during the monitoring period, followed by Anura Kumara Disanayake (278), Namal Rajapaksa (220), and Ranil

⁸⁶ Post – text and/or image on Facebook; video – video on all platforms; tweet – X post; reel – a very short video clip.

Wickremesinghe (93). Most videos were placed by Sajith Premadasa (222), followed by Anura Kumara Dissanayake (194). Namal Rajapaksa had the record number of tweets (352), more than all other contenders together. Presidential campaign for Sajith Premadasa used all types of messages (except tweets) and was the only one extensively using Instagram (306).

Chart 5. Number of posts – presidential candidates



Charts 6 and 7 show a level of engagement of social media users with the official accounts of lead presidential candidates. Dissanayake had most interactions (2,822 on average per post) and significantly outpaces others in video interactions (5,653), while receiving fewer comments per post than Wickremesinghe. The engagement ratio for Dissanayake is best shown on average number of shares: with 447 shares for text and 1,227 for videos he outpaced other candidates and his account was the only one showing a steady relative growth of followers. Wickremesinghe had the highest average comments per post (346) and a steady number of interactions for both posts (2,240) and video (3,765).

Chart 6. Average interaction rate per post, monitoring period from 16 August to 18 September

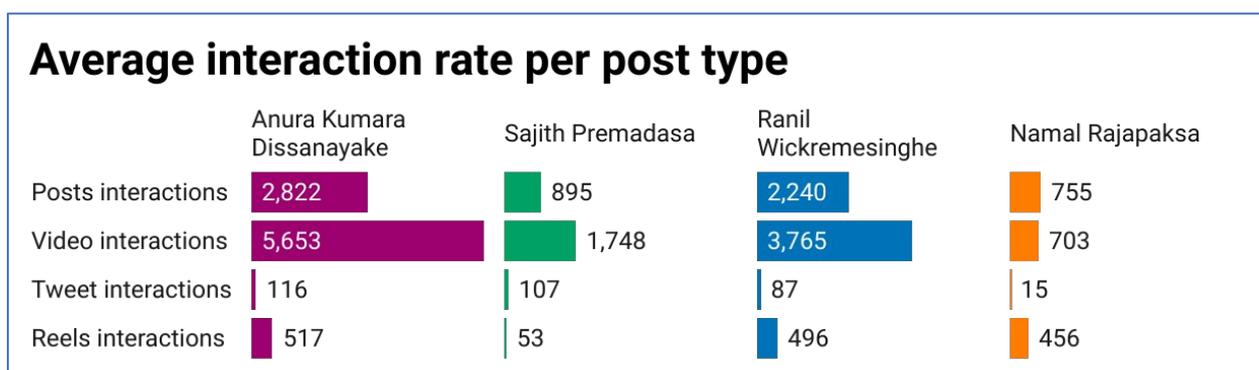


Chart 7a. Average comment count per post type, monitoring period – from 16 August to 18 September

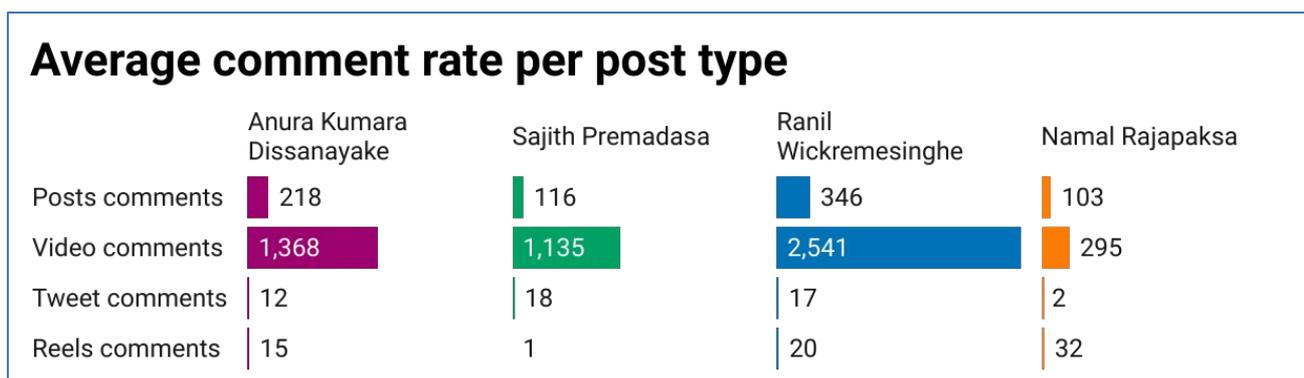


Chart 7b. Average comment count per post type, monitoring period – from 16 August to 18 September

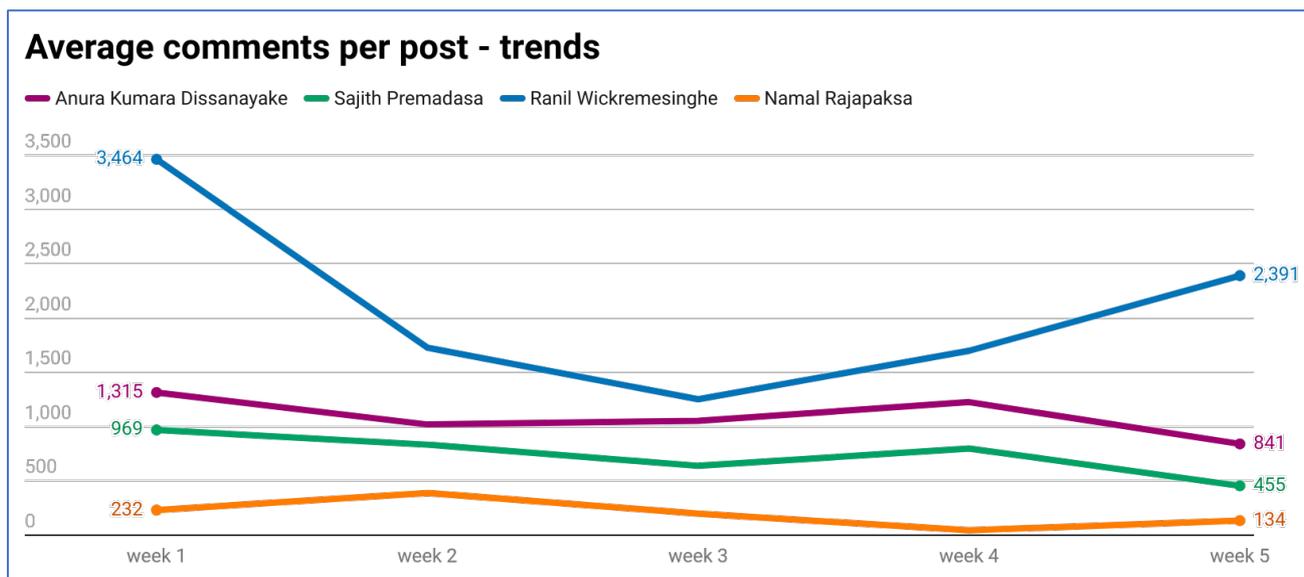


Chart 8a. Average shares per post type, monitoring period – from 16 August to 18 September

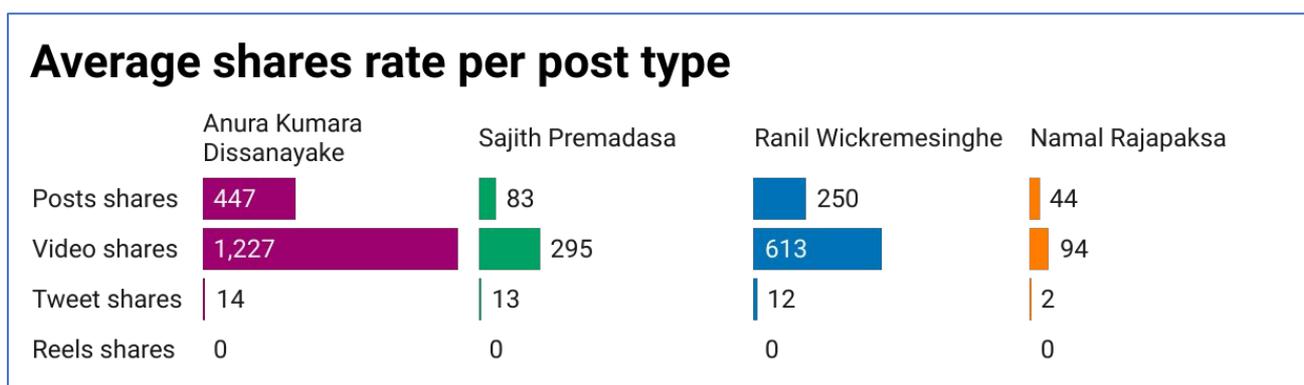


Chart 8b. Average shares per post type, monitoring period – from 16 August to 18 September

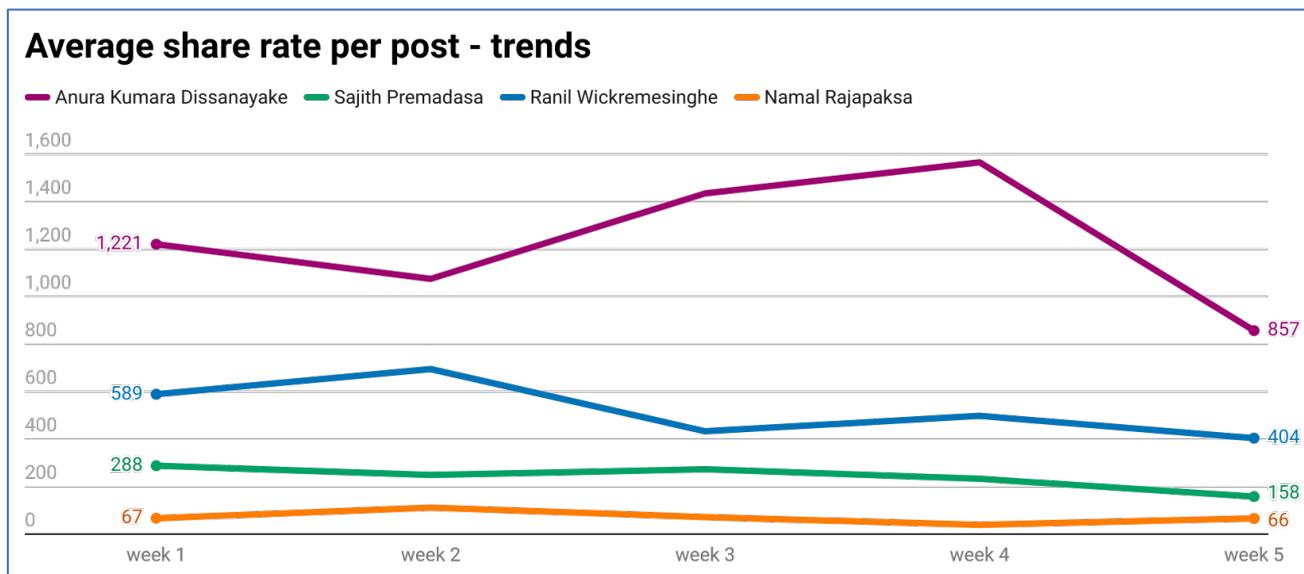


Chart 9. Change in the pool of Facebook followers

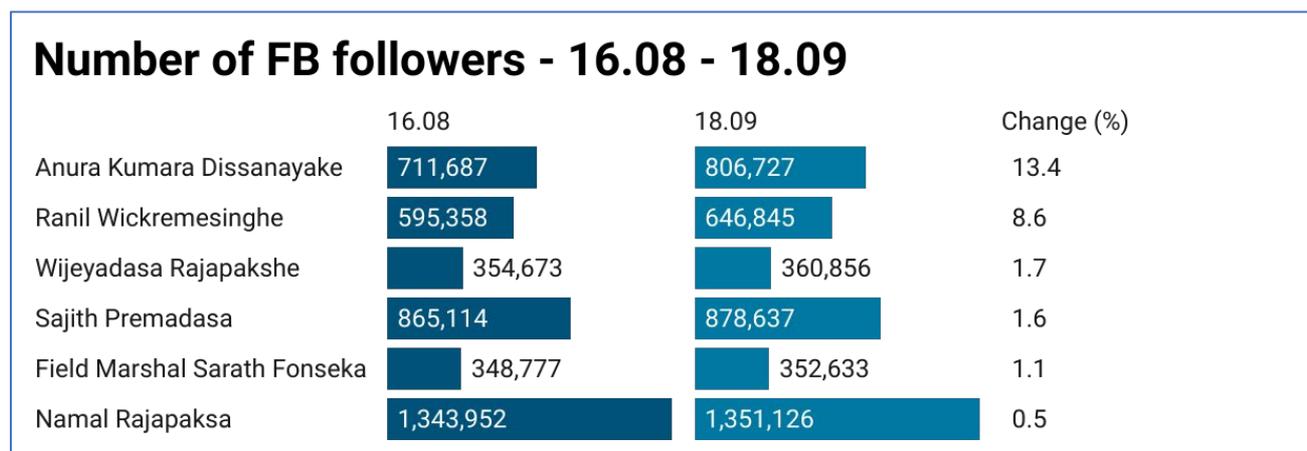


Chart 10 shows that concise messaging was more appealing to social media users, if compared to long posts or videos. For example, Dissanayake had the smallest number of characters per post and got more interactions and shares than any other candidate. Wickremesinghe put exceptionally long description for Instagram and Facebook reels – 525 characters.

Chart 10. Average text length per post type – presidential candidates

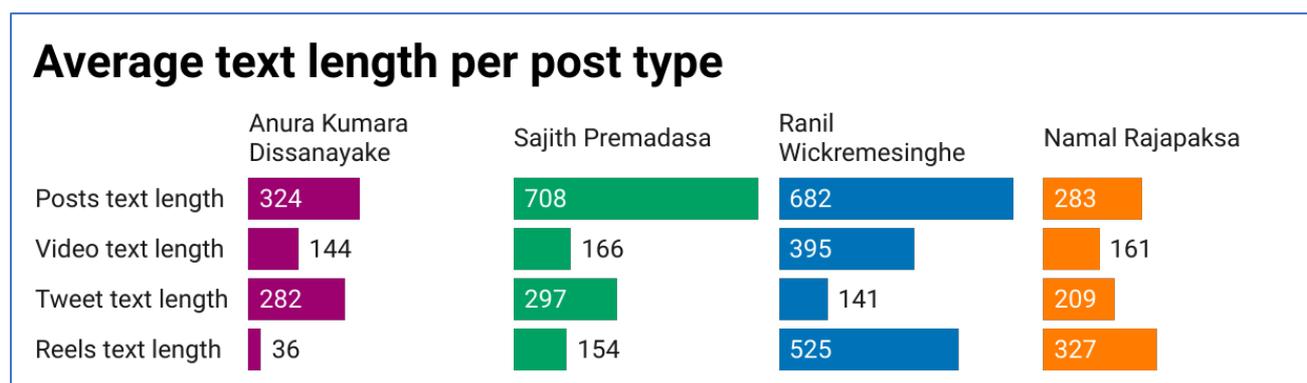
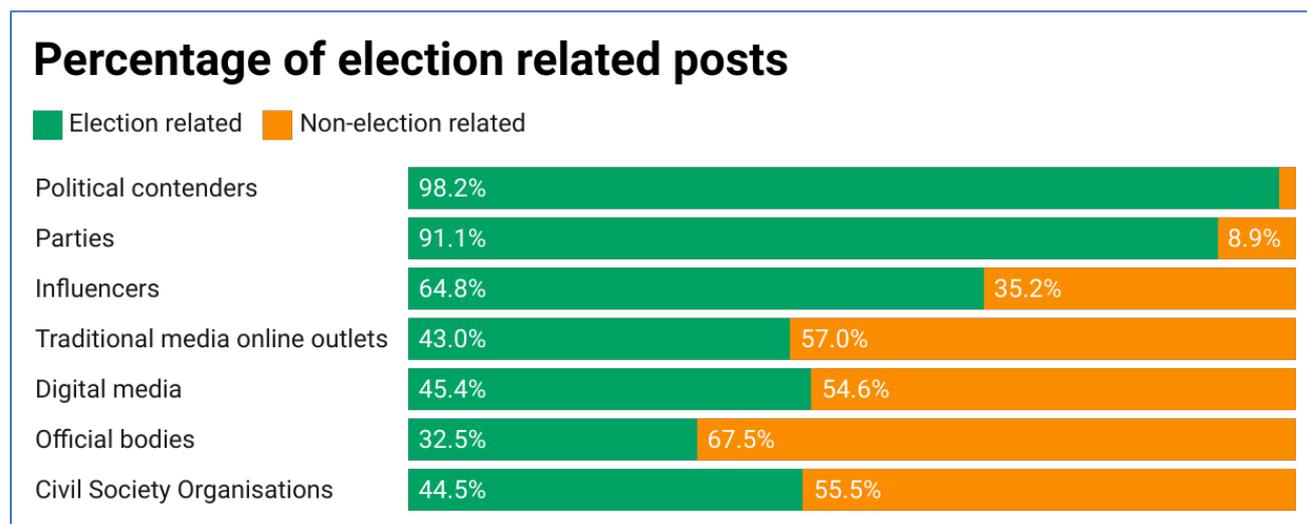


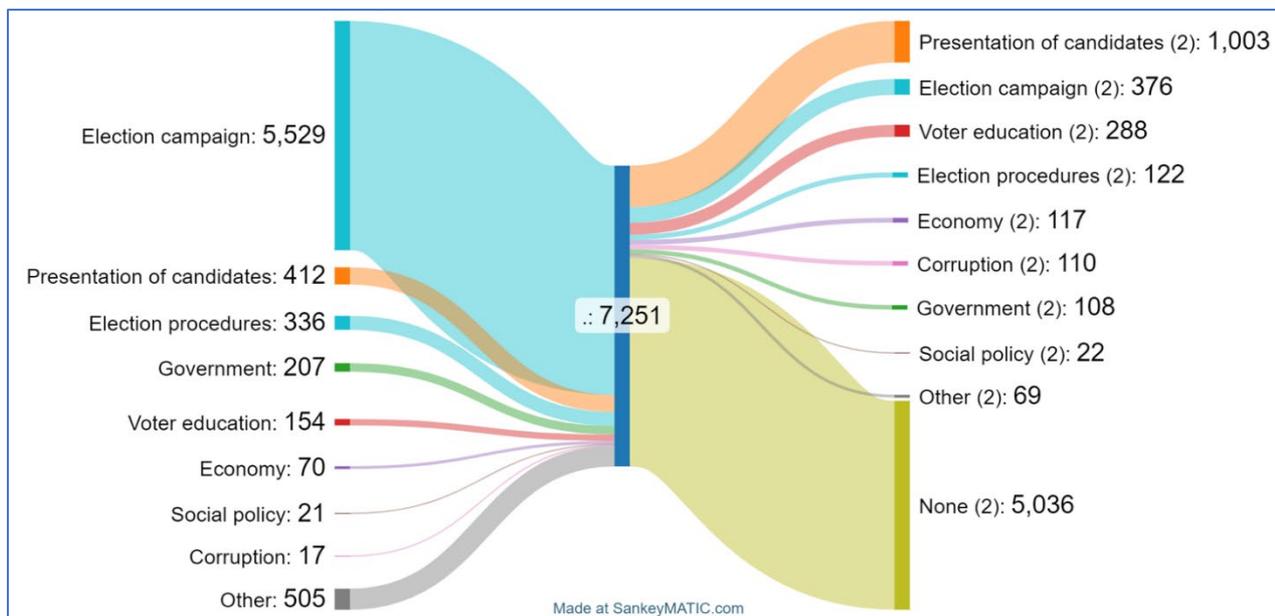
Chart 11. Coded content – percentage of election related posts



Topics and tone of all monitored posts

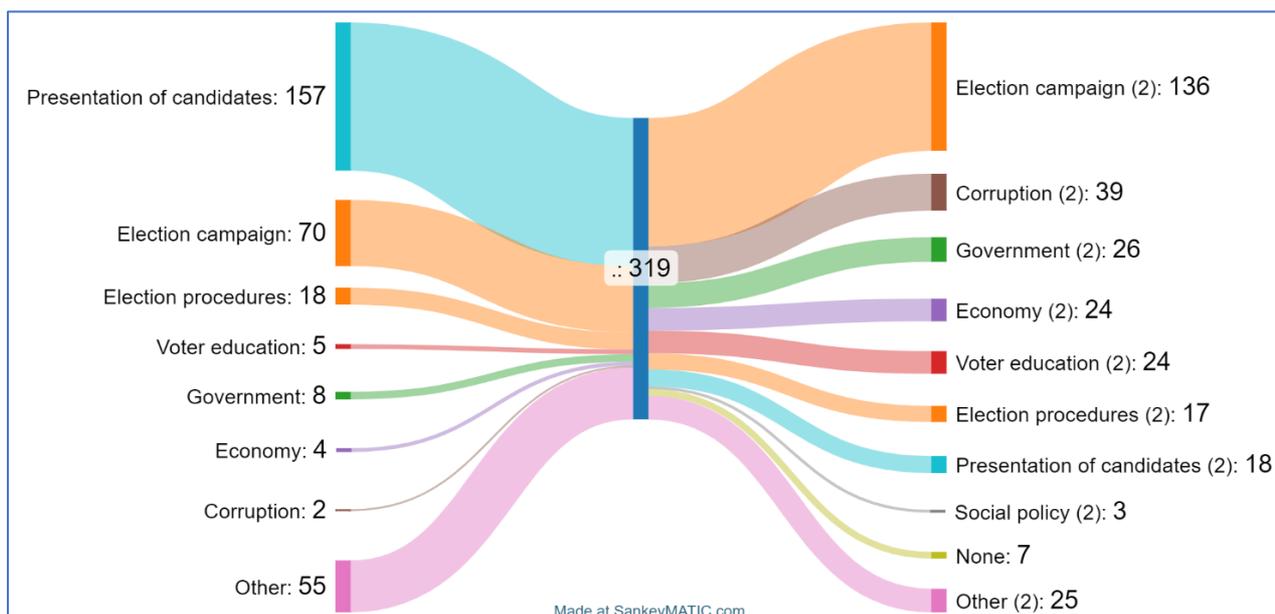
Chart 12 shows that 76 per cent of all coded posts for all actors were featuring campaign events. Candidate presentation and election procedures came next among the topics covered. Topics related to the economy or social issues were marginal. Usually, the posts had one leading topic, as can be seen in the case 69 per cent of all coded posts did not indicate any additional topic.

Chart 12a Primary and secondary topics for all coded posts



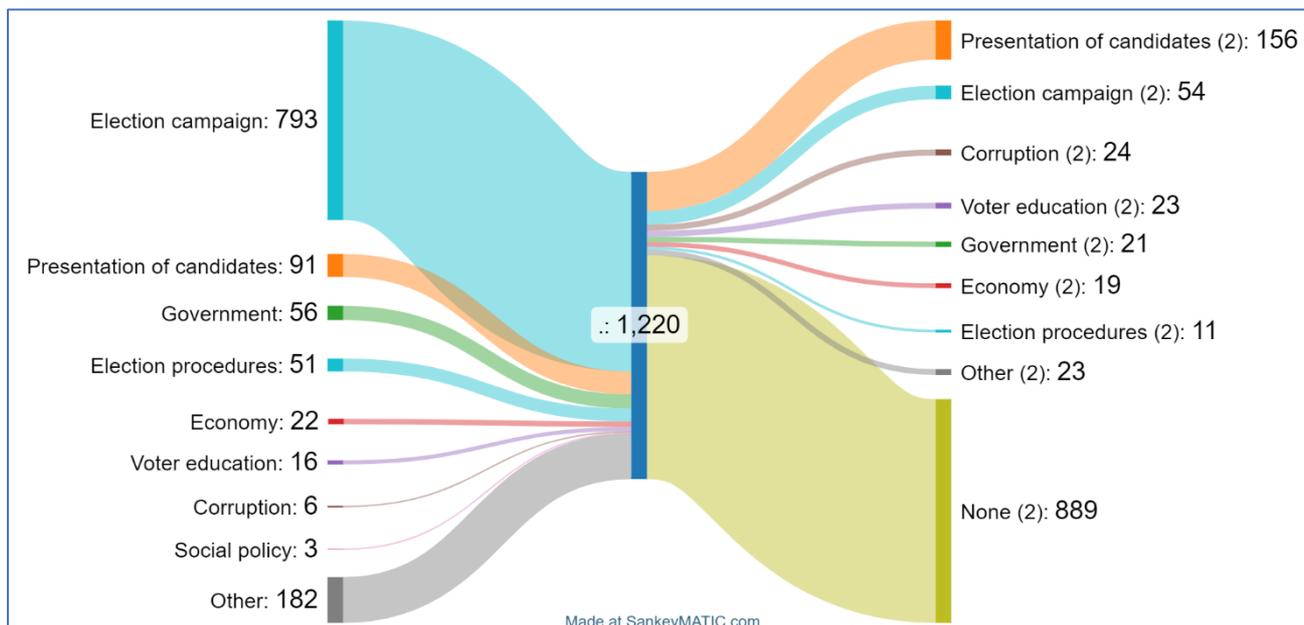
Similarly to candidates and parties, also social media accounts of traditional media primarily focused on election-related topics, with the main topic being the presentation of the candidates (nearly 50 per cent of all coded posts) and election campaign (22 per cent). Among the secondary topics, the latter dominated (43 per cent), alongside with issues related to corruption (12 per cent). Such content indicates of the high level of media politicisation.

Chart 12b Primary and secondary topics for traditional media



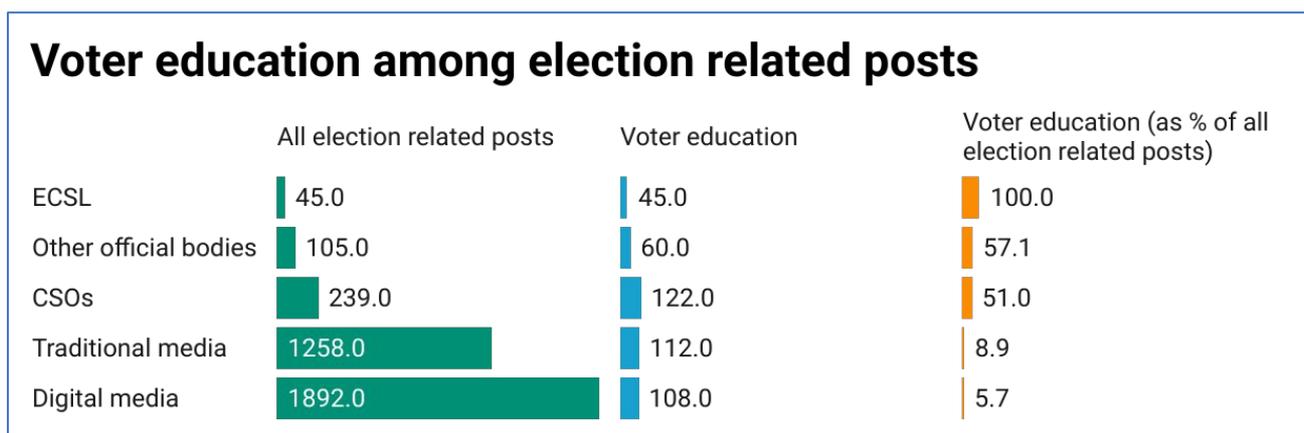
For social media influencers, the main topic was campaign with 65 per cent of all posts primarily covering this topic; 73 per cent of all coded posts for this group had no additional topic.

Chart 12c Primary and secondary topics for social media influencers



During the campaign period ECSL posted 45 election-related posts, focusing on voter education, election procedures and promotion of Commission members appearance in traditional media. Other state institutions made 105 election-related posts, of which 57.1 per cent, were related to voter education. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) posted 239 election-related posts, with half of them including some voter education message. Traditional and digital media paid by far less attention to the voter information with only 8.9 per cent and 5.7 per cent of total election related number of posts, respectively covering this topic.

Chart 13. Voter education posts



The Chart 14 illustrates the tone of the messaging by presidential candidates. The post was rated as negative, if it included a message that sharply criticised opponents, if an unsubstantiated claim targeting opponents were made or if a post contained a fear mongering message. Notably, there were only a few posts, whose tone could have been assessed as entirely positive. While Dissanayake and Rajapaksa maintained about 13 per cent of their statements in a positive tone, the election campaigns of both these candidates were also characterised by the lowest percentages of neutral statements - 37-

39 per cent. As a result, posts containing negative campaigning, for both the new president and Rajapaksa, accounted for almost half of all coded posts.

Chart 14a. Tone of the posts – presidential candidates

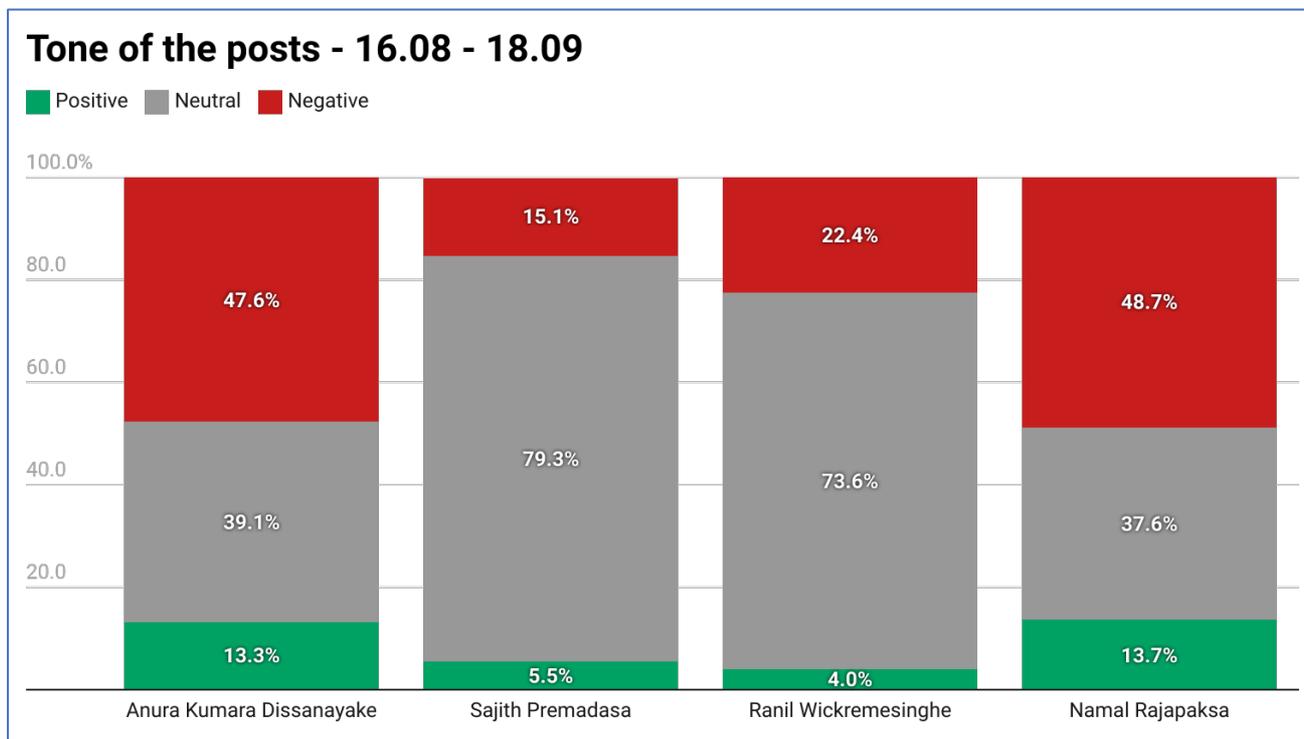
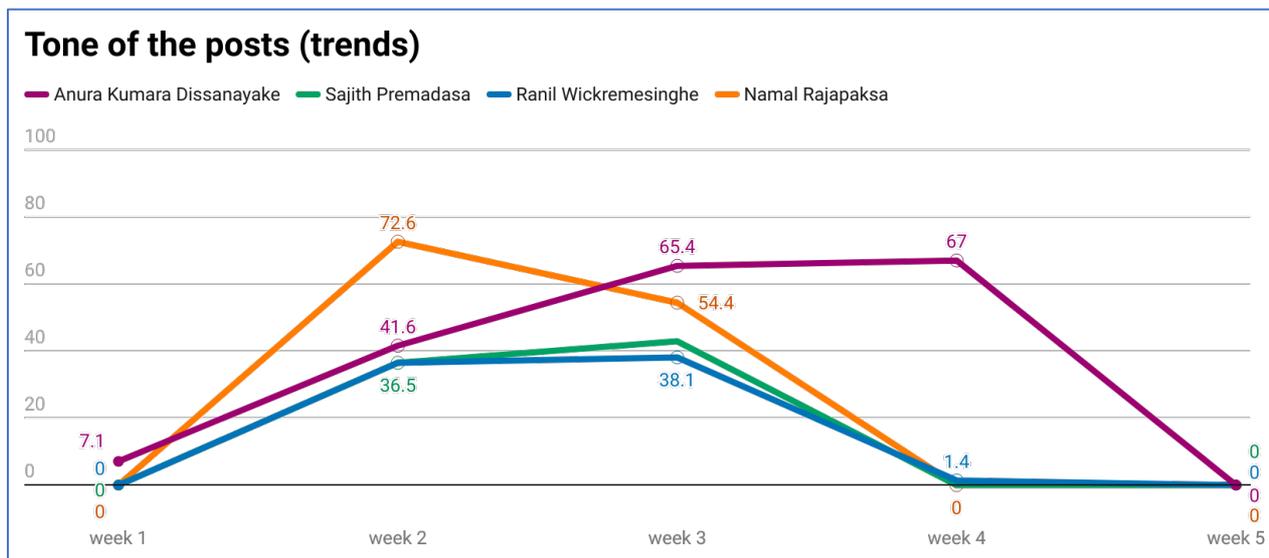


Chart 14b. Tone of the posts – Presidential contenders (trends). The chart below shows the share of posts containing negative message for each week of the campaign.



Paid-for content (advertising)

To assess the levels of paid advertising on Meta, the EU EOM downloaded all available advertising data using Facebook Ad Library Report tool for the period from 16 August to 18 September. The EU EOM selected all accounts that spent above USD 100 on platform and manually identified which

candidate was supported through respective advertising. In total 96 accounts were assessed. Data from manual coding is included in Chart 15 and 16, showing that while Wickremesinghe spent the most on Meta, Dissanayake’s campaign was supported by the highest number of pages and groups, each of whom spent a relatively small amount of money on the platform.

Chart 15. Facebook paid ads spending – lead presidential candidates

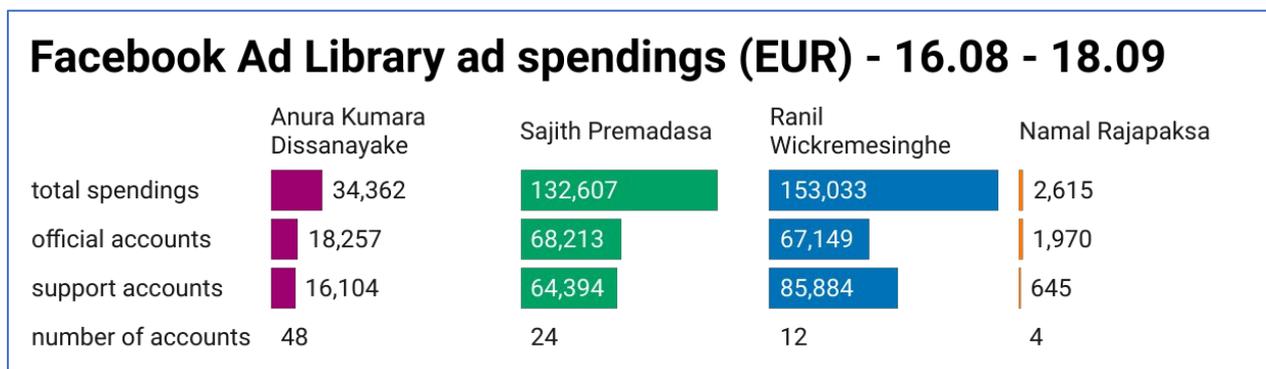
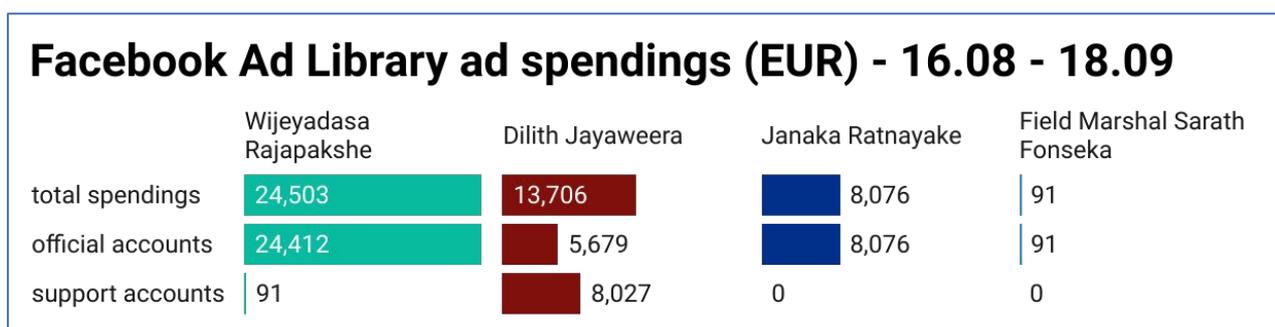


Chart 16. Facebook paid ads spending – other presidential candidates

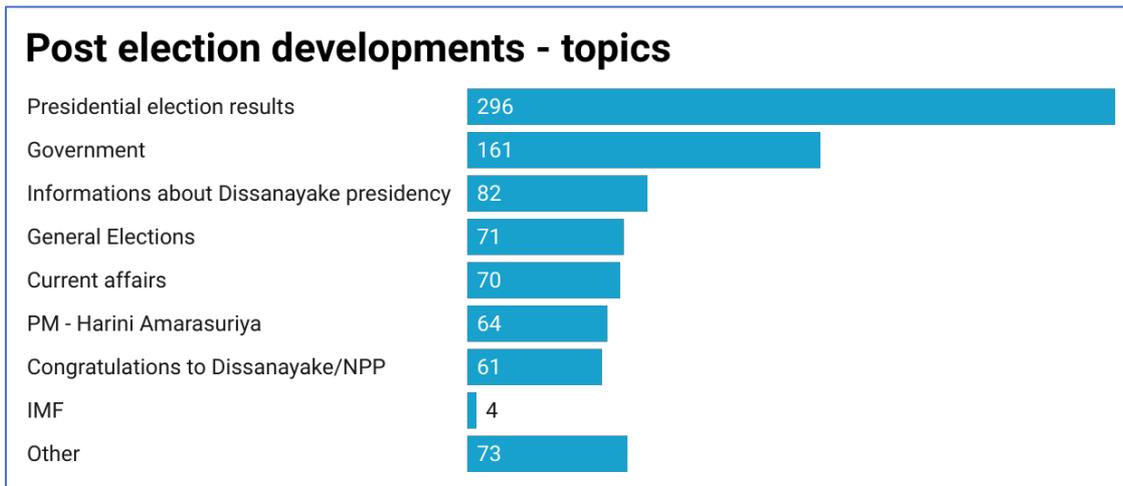


Post-election day developments

All the actors published over 30,000 posts on all monitored social media platforms during the week after the presidential elections, which was twice as many as posts per week during the campaign. The EU EOM coded 1,887, of them 893 were election-related. The highest share of election related posts was placed by state institutions. Lowest share of post-electoral issues were noticed in digital (25 per cent) and traditional media social platforms accounts (21 per cent).

The Chart 18 lists different categories of topics during the post electoral week. Presidential election results were mentioned in 296 posts, making it the most frequently discussed topic. Posts related to the new government numbered 161, while information about Dissanayake appeared in 82 posts. Upcoming general elections were covered in 71 posts. Appointment of The Prime Minister, Harini Amarasuriya, first female Prime Minister in 24 years, was mentioned in 64 posts.

Chart 18. Post electoral developments – topics



The Chart 19 shows that the tone on social media became more positive after the election, with only political parties and digital media making some negative commentary, most often attacking the newly elected president.

Chart 19. Post election developments – tone

