

# 2024 Presidential Election: Two-Cornered, Three-Way Fight

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After weeks of hullabaloo, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) has nominated Namal Rajapaksa as their candidate for the upcoming presidential election. Since 2005, the Rajapaksas have contested all four presidential elections and won three times. Thirty-seven-year-old Namal Rajapaksa, the eldest son of Mahinda Rajapaksa will be the third Rajapaksa family member in a row to contest the presidential election. He is the national organiser of the SLPP, formed by the Rajapaksas in 2017 out of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). There is no illusion of his likelihood to win this time around, and Namal is contesting to lose. Before the election was announced, not many thought the SLPP would nominate a candidate, let alone nominate Namal Rajapaksa; to contest primarily against Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has led the government with their support since July 2022.

It is only because of President Wickremesinghe, that the Rajapaksas and the senior leaders of the SLPP have been able to politically survive after the unprecedented economic crisis and popular uprising in 2022. As anticipated, many senior SLPP stalwarts started campaigning for Ranil Wickremesinghe way before the election was announced. Therefore, the nomination of Namal Rajapaksa certainly signals a complicated and highly intense presidential election to come. This will be an election where candidates will have to compete till the end of polling, perhaps even after polling day. Three candidates are contesting to win while many more have entered the race only to lose. However, these losses will determine who will win this year's election. Among them, Namal Rajapaksa's role will be more salient than others.

## Two-cornered three-way

This year's presidential election will be a 'two-cornered three-way' competition. It is three-way as there are only three main contenders – Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa, and Anura Kumara Disanayake. Although three main contenders are in the race, only two broad

political projects are represented. Ranil Wickremesinghe and Sajith Premadasa represent the political culture against which people protested during 2022, while Anura Kumara Disanayake and the National People's Power (NPP) represent the dissenters. Since Ranil Wickremesinghe's government crushed the popular struggle (*Aragalaya/Parattam*), many who associated with the ideas and aspirations of the protestors started to gravitate towards the NPP. Having been a party with abysmal parliamentary representation, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led NPP has since emerged as a formidable national-level political force and a political movement for various progressive groups to come together to challenge the country's corrupt political culture.

Ever since representative democratic rule was introduced into Sri Lanka, corruption has been a feature of our democracy maintained through a patron-client relationship with citizens; where politicians distribute various perks and particularised advantages to voters in return for their votes. Therefore, since independence, the Sri Lankan state nurtured a democratic political culture where old feudal-style relationships between ruler and ruled continued even without feudalism. In such a political system, most of the political parties and their politicians focus on distribution of patronage goods (subsidies, jobs, promotions, deeds for houses and lands, etc.) rather than delivering policies and programmes that are beneficial for the country. Under this system, those politicians who have built an extensive patronage network in their districts enjoy the highest probability of getting elected to the legislature irrespective of how effective they are as policymakers or how well-lived as democratic leaders.

In this political culture, Sri Lankan democracy functions as an elitist democracy where ruling elites allow no space for citizens to be involved in rule. Instead, they maintain various patronage programmes to make the majority of citizens feel that they are safe in the hands of the current ruling classes. In addition

to the distribution of patronage, the elites sustain their hegemony over the masses by deploying other strategies from time to time – arousing racism, various phobias, and anti-imperialist emotions. Irrespective of the ethnicity, geography, or colour of their parties, the majority of politicians, especially those aligned with the two leading rival coalitions (centred around the United National Party (UNP) and the SLFP between 1956 and 2014), function within this political system in which democracy is rule by and for the political elites. The politicians who rally their support around Wickremesinghe and Premadasa want to preserve this system while promising to rectify past mistakes to perform well in the future.

### Political culture and election engineering

One must remember, Sri Lanka's patronage democracy has survived for 75 years despite two southern insurgencies and 26 years of bloody war. In Western liberal democracies, political parties are expected to espouse policies and appear for particular ideas to attract communities and individuals with specific interests. In such a party-voter nexus, it is believed that individual voters assess the available options as autonomous beings and choose the best option to realise his or her interests.

Yet, this assumption is far from reality, especially in postcolonial societies such as Sri Lanka. In postcolonial Sri Lanka, citizens belong to multiple economic, social, and cultural groups organised as networks of individuals. In these complex networks, individuals hold different levels of power; they can influence those who hold less power while getting influenced by those with more power. In patronage democracies, national-level politicians maintain their voter bases by having control over these networks. To control those networks, national-level politicians distribute various patronage programmes through these networks. The patronage goods are designed to reach the individual voter through local political actors who play an influential role in social networks in the constituency supporting the politicians to amass votes. For example, in the village, the chief priest in the temple, an educated respected individual, a rich businessman, a social worker, or sometimes even a drug dealer or mafia boss, could facilitate this patron-client relationship between the national-level politicians and the individual voter.

Therefore, the electoral success of national-level politicians depends on the effectiveness of their network of local political actors who mediate between the voter and the politician. Former presidents Ranasinghe Premadasa and Mahinda Rajapaksa are good examples of politicians who exhibited the effective management

of such patronage networks. Therefore, parties and their leaders mobilise these local political actors in patronage networks instead of mobilising voters to win elections. Because of this patronage-network-mediated election engineering, the national politicians can cross over to a rival political camp and still retain a significant portion of their voter base.

### Push and pull factors

Local political actors who control the local networks within a constituency push the electorate towards the candidate they support. The push they exert depends on how powerful their patronage networks are. Therefore, Wickremesinghe and Premadasa are vying to show that they enjoy the support of most of the parliamentarians, to indicate that they have the lion's share of the total voter base. Individual politicians too individually and collectively have begun to show their allegiance to either independent candidate Wickremesinghe or leader of the Samagi Jana Sandanaya (United People's Alliance), Premadasa. All these theatrics are expected to boost public confidence in one candidate's victory over the other. The underlying assumption here is that parliamentarians command the support of a stable voter base that can be used to barter with the national leader for some benefits – often a huge sum of money – in return. This calculation stems from conventional wisdom under the current political culture. Both Wickremesinghe and Premadasa seem to have entered the presidential election race by accepting the rules of the game in Sri Lanka's patronage politics.

In contrast, Anura Kumara Disanayaka has entered the fight from the opposite corner to the other two candidates and contests on very different terms. His mobilising strategy is akin to what one may find in classical political party literature: setting up village-level party branches; addressing numerous local pocket meetings; conducting rallies to garner public support; and canvassing from house-to-house to educate the electorate.

Parties and national-level leaders can also mobilise voters independently of local political networks by using various communication tools available to them. The charismatic personality of the national politician, their oratorical skill, and the ability to create mega gimmicks that inspire the voter or instil fear (about other ethnic or religious groups) in the mind of the voter, could grab the attention and support of the voters directly. Media organisations, university lecturers, prominent religious preachers, and various professional bodies at the disposal of the candidate can be used to garner the electoral support of voters across the country.

During the 2019 presidential election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa mobilised voters by using multiple communication tools. The story of *Manirakkitha Nagaya* of Kelaniya temple and the Easter Sunday bombings were exceptionally successful. Around the time of the 2019 presidential election, the chief incumbent of the Kelaniya temple claimed that the temple had received relics of the Buddha that were hitherto hosted in the *naga* world, a parallel realm of existence in Buddhist cosmology. At the point of this transfer, it was claimed, the *magas* had also predicted good times ahead for Sri Lanka under a good leadership, thereby mobilising public emotion in support of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the candidate who was widely perceived to be the next 'guardian' of Buddhism. Similarly, following the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019, the Rajapaksas deftly capitalised on the anxieties of Sinhalese and Tamil communities over the threat of Muslim extremism.

### Electing the winner or defeating the loser

In a presidential election, voters either elect the winner or defeat the loser. For example, in the 2010 election, voters chose Mahinda Rajapaksa for his role in ending the almost three-decade long war, hence Sarath Fonseka lost. On the contrary, Maithripala Sirisena won the election in 2015 as voters decided to defeat Mahinda Rajapaksa's bid for a third term and express their anger towards excessive corruption and family rule. Therefore, despite having a strong parliamentary team with powerful voter bases, the presidential candidate could lose if they fail to mobilise the electorate from the centre. Ranil Wickremesinghe is using his media team to create an impression that he rescued the country from the economic crisis and that only he can lead the country to prosperity. So far, the message of Sajith Premadasa sounds very weak as he merely promises a government free of corruption. Among the three candidates, Anura Kumara Disanayake is making an impressive national-level campaign for change. His media and outreach strategy are exceptionally good.

When looking at political developments so far, Sri Lanka seems to be heading for a very close race, the likes of which we may not have seen in the past forty years. There is a great chance that Sri Lankan voters would decide to defeat the losers, to elect the winner, on 21 September. Therefore, how well candidates manage to instil fear and arouse anger toward their rivals will determine the success of their campaign. All three candidates are equally vulnerable to such negative campaigns and, given the intensity of the fight, they would resort to such negative campaigns soon. Ranil

Wickremesinghe is accused of protecting the corrupt Rajapaksa family and SLPP members; in addition to the tainted legacy of his involvement in the infamous bond scam during the *Yahapalana* regime, and the Batalanda torture camp at the height of the JVP's second insurrection during the late 1980s. His allegiance to the West and neoliberalist economic policies makes him look like an agent of neo-imperialism. On the other hand, Sajith Premadasa is not a tested leader; except for his father's patronage credentials, he does not have much to offer. Looking at the credentials of the team who support his candidacy, it is difficult to convince people that he stands for corruption-free politics. Despite all the hype about the NPP, it is not a political force that Sri Lankans have ever tested in terms of their capacity to govern. Especially since most of their leaders are not from the traditional political elite, the NPP's capacity to rule the country, and its ability to resolve the current economic crisis are commonly questioned by the supporters of mainstream parties. The NPP still struggles to reach out to conservative voter bases due to its role in two violent southern insurrections.

### Contesting to lose

Except for the three main candidates, all other candidates are contesting the election to lose. There are reasons for such candidates to contest despite knowing they stand no chance of winning the election. At the first presidential election held in 1982, there were four minor candidates – Rohana Wijeweera, Kumar Ponnambalam, Colvin R. De Silva, and Vasudeva Nanayakkara – in addition to J. R. Jayewardene (UNP) and Hector Kobbekaduwa (SLFP). These minor candidates contested the presidential election to stand for their ideological and policy positions and provide Sri Lankan voters an opportunity to take a policy position. Since then, there have always been a few minor candidates at every election; and at least one or two of them contested for the sake of their policy position.

However, lately, many minor candidates have been fielded to support the main contenders. Some minor candidates are fielded to confuse the voters, while others are using media coverage that they get as presidential candidates to promote one of the main candidates. Some minor candidates have stepped down from the race at the last-minute, endorsing one of the main candidates. Therefore, the purpose of the minor candidate is either to support a main candidate or obstruct the victory of another. Sarath Fonseka has announced his intention to contest as an independent candidate in the upcoming presidential election. As a candidate who does not stand a chance of winning the presidency, Fonseka is likely

trying to prevent some votes for Sajith Premadasa, in support of Ranil Wickremesinghe. His negative campaign against Premadasa may help Wickremesinghe's presidential bid at this year's election. Therefore, this year's unusually high number of minor candidates, if they do not drop out before the election, would hurt the vote share of the main candidates, especially the vote share of Wickremesinghe and Premadasa. Among these minor candidates, there are a few 'political heavyweights' in the contest. However, their effect on the outcome of the election has been dwarfed by Namal Rajapaksa.

### **Losers also can be winners**

The fielding of Namal Rajapaksa by the SLPP is not a simple move and needs the serious attention of political analysts. He is not merely a candidate seeking to lose the election, but a candidate who is seeking to lose, to win the next election. For the average political mind, it appears quite the wise move on the part of the Rajapaksa family, who want Namal Rajapaksa to succeed his father. Therefore, contesting and losing the 2024 presidential election elevates him to 'presidential material' that would come in handy at the next presidential election in 2029. Thereby, he would be able to secure the party leadership of the SLPP, as well as the position of the most suitable candidate for the presidency.

Although the above analysis has merit, I believe the Rajapaksas want to assert through this move that they are the most influential family in Sri Lankan politics. Ranil Wickremesinghe would not have agreed to contest if not for the support of the SLPP. After exhausting all options available to postpone the election, he grudgingly agreed to the presidential election. Although people no longer stand in long queues to buy fuel, cooking gas, and other essential items, he knows that household economies are severely affected due to the high cost of living, limited income opportunities, and heavy taxes that

affect people's economies in multiple ways. Therefore, this is not the time for an uncharismatic politician like Ranil Wickremesinghe, backed only by an electorally decimated UNP, to contest a presidential election. With the green light of the Rajapaksas, a majority of the SLPP parliamentarians rallied around Wickremesinghe in July 2022 and made him a formidable candidate in 2024. This has further strengthened his position to bargain with other politicians and smaller parties to form a grand alliance. Wickremesinghe is known for breaking up parties by stirring internal conflicts. Therefore, Wickremesinghe's success on his own terms using the support bases of the SLPP would not only end Namal Rajapaksa's dream of becoming the next ruler of the country, but also end the politics of the Rajapaksa family once and for all.

Namal Rajapaksa contesting as the candidate of the SLPP and the Rajapaksa family would certainly undermine Wickremesinghe's presidential campaign. Since 2022, following the economic crisis and the unprecedented popular uprising, SLPP members of parliament (MPs) lost the electoral popularity they enjoyed at the 2020 general election. The current voter base of these SLPP MPs is comprised of people who benefited from the patronage programmes of the respective MP; as well as who can be called staunch loyalists of the Rajapaksas. Therefore, fielding Namal Rajapaksa as the candidate of the SLPP would weaken the current electoral strength of Wickremesinghe. This would certainly force Wickremesinghe to negotiate with the Rajapaksas and chart a path to victory that could be a victory for the Rajapaksas too.

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