

Sri Lanka General Election 2024: How We See It; What We Want

Collective

In one or two words, describe your reaction to the overall picture from the general election; then go on to explain why.

Harindra: *Saturation.* Sri Lanka's electoral system struggles to produce balanced parliaments, with three of four general elections since 2010 resulting in near- or full-supermajorities (150+ parliamentary seats). Even in the sole exception, following the general election in August 2015, a 'national government' was formed, achieving a quasi-democratic supermajority. These majorities have only dissolved during systemic crises like the 2018 constitutional coup or the 2022 *Aragalaya*, triggering dramatic power shifts. Questions arise about the causes: Is this due to electoral sequencing with parliamentary polls following presidential elections, allowing patronage seeking voters to produce a winner-takes-it-all parliament? Have voters deprioritised bipartisan politics and checks and balances, preferring executive bias in governance? Or are they bypassing a system intended to encourage multi-party representation and limit majoritarian dominance? The present electoral system is saturated and cannot serve to ensure democratic checks and balances.

Rajni: *Tectonic.* The NPP's landslide victory was a major outcome of this election. As significant, was the almost near elimination of the Rajapaksas and the far-right nationalist group represented by Dilith Jayaweera's Sarvajana Balaya. There is a concern that, if this government fails in managing expectations, it will legitimise a far-right political force that will undo the progressive forces the NPP has managed to mobilise. It is important, however, to situate the NPP's victory without reverting to such binaries. The NPP is a political movement that reflects a society that has arrived at a particular moment of Sri Lankan and global history. As much as its actions are restricted by the economic systems and the evolution of ideology at the global and national levels, the forces that gave rise to the NPP's

ascent to power constitute it and shape it, and will have a key role in shaping the 'alternatives' and 'challengers' that emerge with time.

Akhilendra: *Concerned optimism?* If that makes sense. I want this government to do well and succeed in their ambitions. However, I do believe that unchecked power is dangerous. Given this outpouring of support, it is frustrating to hear the party backtrack on promises and carelessly make statements about key concerns like the MMDA. Additionally, it is a very new parliament, with many members serving for the first time, so there's plenty of room for growth. At the same time, there's potential for corruption. What they achieve at the end of their terms will determine much for the future of the country.

Niyanthini: *Dazzling.* Sri Lanka's 2024 general election resulted in a spectacular break from the ruling political formations of the past seventy years. The worst economic crisis to hit the country in this period along with the weakening of ethno-nationalist politics created the conditions for the NPP, a relatively new alliance, to win comfortably. Two-thirds of the tenth parliament is composed of first-time parliamentarians, including the first disabled parliamentarian and first women parliamentarians of Malaiyaha Tamil origin.

Ammaarah: *Cautiously hopeful* is my reaction to the outcome of the general election. In the 54 days between the presidential and general elections, there were many inconsistencies in the NPP's positions on key promises in its manifesto. For example, they changed their stance on renegotiating the IMF loan agreement and repealing the PTA. The former NPP Cabinet spokesperson also said there were no plans to reform the MMDA. If these pressing issues are not addressed properly, it could lead to a strong sense of disappointment amongst their voter base, from which they might struggle to recover. The voters carried a lot of hope. This election represented a last resort for many citizens, especially the youth. This sentiment should not be taken lightly by the current government.

Binu: *Unsurprised.* Former president Ranil Wickremesinghe's elitist ideology, which crushed the people's struggles, led to the landslide election result of the NPP. Wickremesinghe failed to acknowledge the day-to-day issues of the people. With such governance and popular discontent, it was not surprising that people opted for change. However, as a young person, I have many expectations of the party in power. The new government's agenda must appeal to the youth and answer our aspirations. People have been grappling with false manifestations of the political movement for some time. Thus, the promises made by the current government should meet people's needs with fair resolutions.

Ramesh: *Transformation.* The outcome of the general election marked a radical transformation of political power from the elites to the non-elites. The election result revealed a radical shift in Sri Lanka's electoral politics within just six weeks, signalling the cumulative impact of long-standing disillusionment with the traditional ruling class and elite-centric politics, both of which continued to betray the people's mandate and representative democracy for narrow political interests. The people of Sri Lanka have demonstrated their discontent with the establishment through representative democracy and charted a fresh political culture. Sri Lankan citizens have thus demanded a new social contract between the ruled and the rulers with a new set of terms and conditions, including accountable, responsible, and democratic governance, anti-corruption, and checks and balances on governmental power.

Natasha: *Unsurprised.* I wasn't truly surprised by the outcome of this year's election. I believe that it exemplifies the public's interest in changing the general frame of local politics. I am twenty-two years old, and for much of my life I've seen the same people make the same promises. These are promises of prosperity, equality, and improvement and these promises never seem to transcend the status quo and become truth. In the past, the public repeatedly entrusted their vote with people who were responsible for Sri Lanka's economic and social decline. This election proves that people need and want a change.

What was surprising; and what was not, in the results; and why?

Harindra: The defeat of candidates from the SLPP, the SJB, and certain northern political parties, whose electoral legitimacy relied on extensive patronage networks resembling 19th- and early 20th-century electoral machines in North America and Europe, highlighted the fragility of patronage-based politics.

When a patronage leader appears weak and unable to deliver benefits, support from their base quickly erodes. The loss of a regional leader, a minister for nearly three decades (except for four years), who had secured government jobs for thousands in his district, underscores that patronage politics thrives only when benefits are consistently distributed. While this is not surprising, the NPP showed surprising agility during its campaigns to adjust its policy positions to become a big-tent political party, marking a clear departure from the JVP (NPP's core party) that is known for hard stances. The success of the NPP in government would also depend greatly on its ability to maintain this agility.

Rajni: The seats secured by the NPP were more than expected. Even if there was some prior understanding of traditional political parties and the old political guard being delegitimised post-crisis and post-*Aragalaya*, the results showed the *extent* of this delegitimation. The second unexpected element was the NPP's performance in the north and hill-country. Compared to President AKD's electoral map, which showed its main mandate within the Sinhala Buddhist majority areas, the parliamentary elections indicated a more unifying mandate. This appears to be partly the result of minority political actors and parties also being delegitimised, and the NPP's success in convincing the electorate of its 'left progressive statism'. The element of 'surprise' this election brought to the forefront is also a result of the historical, ideological baggage and ambiguity the NPP-JVP brought to the political space, and voter cynicism regarding political movements that repeatedly promised to bring about 'system change'.

Akhilendra: The range of the NPP victory across the electoral map was surprising as there is usually a visible divide in the vote. However, for whatever reason, the overall vote was unified. In that sense we see the east and north go to the NPP. As for the rest of the country, to me it felt like the electoral base from the last election simply shifted to this new one since it was promising change, and they felt betrayed or let down by their own decisions in the previous election. This was unsurprising as in the previous election they voted for the popular in-group and suffered its consequences. Whether the actual tenets the NPP ran on is what appealed to them or if it was simply an aversion to mainstream parties and politicians remains to be seen.

Niyanthini: The results defied expert predictions and scientific polls. The postponed LG elections, which had served as reliable indicators of electoral shifts in the past, added to the element of surprise. The NPP that had begun preparing for the LG election from 2022 had a head start and captured two-thirds of the parliamentary

seats – thought to be unlikely in a proportional representation system. Significant victories among Tamil-speaking constituencies, much to the chagrin of diasporic factions who resourced local campaigns; was perhaps due to the trend of shifting loyalties away from fractured and decaying Tamil nationalist parties, rather than the NPP's merits. Given the severity of the economic crisis, the unravelling of the Sri Lankan polity, which began with the 2022 mass people's movement, should not have come as a surprise.

Ammaarah: The most surprising outcome for many was the NPP receiving a considerable number of votes in the north and east, but this should be taken with a pinch of salt. What is not surprising, yet interesting, is the disaggregation of votes in electoral districts like Vanni, Jaffna, and Batticaloa, which shows a significant scattering of votes across many parties and lists. This possibly reflects the scepticism communities living in these areas still have about the NPP, given its vague positions on their grievances in the past. This scepticism is perhaps also tied to doubts rooted in failed promises by past governments. The good news is that the NPP has now been given the mandate and a chance to reverse this scepticism.

Binu: An NPP win was expected, considering everything that has happened in Sri Lankan politics from the 2022 *Aragalaya* onwards. However, the scale of the NPP's win at the general election and the massive increase in voter bases were rather surprising. The significant accumulation of votes from minority Tamil-speaking communities contradicted the stereotype of the NPP as a party for the Sinhalese. The general election result was an unexpected outcome of the political movement for 'system change' and the NPP has now become the new face of Sri Lanka's political scene. This election will go down in history as one that changed politics in Sri Lanka.

Ramesh: A few things really surprised me in this election. First, I saw an incredible change in the electoral behaviour of Sri Lankans. In the presidential election, AKD was unable to secure a clear majority (42% in the first round) but, six weeks later, the entire political landscape changed in favour of the NPP – a historic victory for a single party and unimaginable under the present system of proportional representation. Second, a vast majority of NPP candidates were unknown, yet people voted for them overwhelmingly, demanding a fundamental change in the existing governance system by defeating popular traditional politicians. Thirdly, there was an astonishing change in electorates dominated by ethnic minorities for decades, with a clear shift in voting patterns among ethnic minorities,

particularly in the Northern Province. I never thought electorates like Vaddukoddai, which have been at the heart of Tamil nationalism, would choose the NPP.

What was not surprising was the rejection of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist parties in the south as well as regional parties in minority regions. After the *Aragalaya*, ethnocentric politics lost its hold in the south. This was reflected in the presidential election campaign and result. Similarly, ethnic minorities' rejection of regional parties became clear after the general election.

Natasha: While I wasn't all too surprised by the election of a new government, I was still surprised to see that a few individuals whom the public did not or would not elect, made it to parliament via the national lists of the most prominent political parties of Sri Lanka, the SLPP and the SJB, to name a couple. It reminded me that any form of change is slow. The candidates' past promises and speeches are still imprinted in the minds of people, despite the periods of economic and social instability.

What are your expectations and priorities for the new parliament?

Harindra: The NPP has the advantage of being a new entrant to handling state power. The NPP government has been brought to power in a context where mass scale alienation of people has taken place, mainly due to the economic downturn and the IMF-led reforms that are undermining the deeply rooted welfare foundations of the state. These include the health, education, and agricultural (land and water) sectors, which have formed the basis of state formation in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The government must prioritise its policies by taking their 'social cost' into account. Moreover, it is important for the new parliament to involve the opposition parties effectively in oversight committees and build a broad civic space for discussing and evaluating policy options.

Rajni: There is still within popular discourse and policy circles hope that windows have opened for overdue, progressive reforms. These include the NPP's mandate of economic justice, a lasting solution to the national question, and a governance system not under capture by a group of elites. The NPP's politics and super-mandate gives rise to the idea that there is now nothing in the way of it honouring its promises. However, the new government will have to deal with some political realities. The NPP's super-majority in parliament doesn't necessarily do away with the highly politically charged nature of the issues in which it has promised transformative change. As a priority, the new government must communicate the politics of its policies, and the limits of its mandate. If the NPP

can continue to convince the citizens of its vision, and its capacity to deliver this vision, it can buy time and legitimacy to implement necessary but politically costly reforms.

Akhilendra: I want to believe that they will move forward with repealing laws like the PTA and reforming the MMDA. Alongside this I hope they strengthen the existing welfare systems that Sri Lanka has in place as opposed to selling it outright. In particular, overhauling the education system is a priority for me and refocusing on what the goals of education are. Education should not simply be a pathway to employment but to further the intellectual capacity of the people participating in it. Our current system prioritises conformity and an unthinking regurgitation of information. Nothing is bad in an absolute sense; however, education should also focus on providing people with the tools to understand the world. I also hope there is attention paid to the maintenance and protection of our environment as Sri Lanka is a hub of unique ecosystems.

Niyanthini: As the dust settles on its dazzling victory, whether the NPP's vision extends beyond merely capturing state power is yet to be seen. Does the NPP have the will to address the obvious political contradiction facing Sri Lanka, beyond its technocratic aura and performative utterances to system change? The impact of the economic crisis continues to rapidly erode Sri Lanka's social development achievements and exacerbate inequalities. There is only a narrow window of time before discontent sets in again.

The government should immediately reverse devastating austerity measures for the worst affected – women, children and working people – by introducing a food distribution system and universal social protection. Expectations of the majority of voters seemed to converge around three demands: reducing the cost of living, increasing spending on public education and public health; and reviving local livelihoods.

Should the government find the courage to loosen the shackles of the IMF on the working people, it is likely to face resistance from powerful external actors, the internal comprador class, and the bureaucracy entrenched in decades of neoliberal reforms. We may well discover again that people's power is necessary for enacting the system change they desire as much as it is needed for the making of democratic governments.

Ammaarah: Firstly, the new government should prioritise addressing issues with certain regressive laws, like the MMDA, the PTA, and the Antiquities Act (used to acquire land as archaeological sites). These laws affect and/or are disproportionately used against

minority communities. I hope the new government responds positively to the long-standing calls of various groups and communities for their repeal or reform.

Secondly, the new government should avoid rushing through amendments to laws, like the previous government attempted with labour law reforms. The proposed amendments lacked transparency and proper consultation with several unions, such as those representing workers in export processing zones and estates. These changes also risk further violating labour rights and compromising the safety and protection of women workers. I hope that any labour law reforms under this government will be carried out in a fair, inclusive, and transparent manner.

Binu: The policies marketed by the NPP appeal to the ongoing struggles of citizens. From a youth point of view, it is encouraging to see the increase in female representation in parliament. Changes of such magnitude may alter entrenched party cultures. I expect to see many positive changes in our education system too. There should be changes in the state curriculum; curbs on privatisation; better resourcing of state universities; and quality education. I would also like to see changes in resourcing and appreciation of the arts and culture, including theatre and cinema; to encourage the young generation to pursue careers in this field. In short, I want the parliament to attend to the needs of the people.

Ramesh: In my view, the NPP government should focus more on strengthening governance structures to carry out their promises to Sri Lankan citizens. Politics and governance are two different things. You could be a good politician, but that does not make you a good ruler. Governance involves making and implementing policies, taking difficult decisions, managing the economy, allocating resources, etc. While the new ministers have suitable expertise, knowledge, and exposure in their portfolios, many lack experience in governance and may have to rely on a corrupt civil service to perform their functions effectively. The extent to which the public service will support the radical changes proposed by the NPP government is unclear at present. We may see conflicts between political and permanent administration, but the high number of postal votes the NPP garnered could be a positive sign of public servants' expectations for reform in the civil service. I hope the new government will reform the civil service, eradicating corruption and malpractice, and ensuring institutional quality and performance based on the principles of fairness, impartiality, rule of law, and good governance. Sri Lankan citizens who made this political change a reality await these reforms eagerly.

Natasha: As a woman, I would like the parliament to address women's healthcare. I would like parliament to prioritise providing healthcare for women and girls in rural areas. I would like them to expand the curriculum to demystify the myths surrounding women's menstruation. This would significantly help to end a long-standing culture that leaves young girls ignorant and ashamed of their bodies, which inevitably affects their wellbeing.

Furthermore, I would like the new parliament to look into abolishing existing animal welfare laws. Under existing laws, individuals are able to kill wild elephants to harvest their tusks, and domestic dogs to avoid inconvenience. I would like for the parliament to look into the crisis facing wildlife. Sri Lanka is undergoing fast paced development, and it negatively affects the forests and wildlife. Development needs to find a balance between the natural world and the man-made one. I hope that the parliament is able to recognise this and work towards a better future.

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Natasha Ranawake is a 22-year-old student who hopes for a positive change in Sri Lanka.

List of abbreviations

AKD – Anura Kumara Disanayake

IMF – International Monetary Fund

JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

LG – local government

MMDA – Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act

NPP – National People's Power

PTA – Prevention of Terrorism Act

SJB – Samagi Jana Balawegaya

SLPP – Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna