

Horu versus *Boru*: The Politics of the 2025 Local Government Elections in Sri Lanka

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In the 2025 May local government (LG) election, the National People's Power (NPP) secured a nominal majority in 265 out of 339 LG bodies, electing 3926 members. This would translate into the NPP establishing local bodies under its leadership in more than 150 LGs without having to build coalitions with members from other parties or independent groups. The NPP's 43% vote is an almost 20-point decrease on the percentage vote the party obtained at the November general election (*Ada Derana* 2025a). The main opposition, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) secured 21% of the vote, followed by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) with 9%. In the North and East, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) made a comeback, winning 35 LG bodies while it faced a challenge from the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) which won in three LGs. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) continued their poor performance since the national elections last year, securing six and three LGs respectively. In the up-country, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) was not able to secure outright majorities in any LG bodies, while the rival Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) contested as part of a broader alliance with the SJB.

The May local election in Sri Lanka marks the completion of the process of realigning Sri Lanka's politics on a new axis of polarisation, along the lines of 'thieves versus liars' (*horu* versus *boru*). During the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024, the NPP successfully framed the political 'old guard', as a ring of thieves (*chaura walalla*) corrupt to the core, thereby blurring and making obsolete the ideological differences among these former mainstream parties—the SLPP, SJB, United National Party (UNP), and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This delegitimisation of the old guard included the ITAK, ACTC, SLMC, ACMC, CWC, and TPA among other minority

political parties, who lost ground to the NPP. If the NPP's attack on the establishment parties caught them completely off guard in the 2024 elections, the May LG election campaign saw how these delegitimised parties regrouped and galvanised the other pole of this new axis of polarisation; exploiting the gap between the NPP's tall promises and delivery, to frame the NPP as a movement based on complete lies and fabrications.

The lesser than expected electoral success of the NPP shows how the government is being cut to size. Being a social media-driven popular movement in its rapid rise to power, the NPP's first six months in governance involved responding very quickly to issues that were gaining traction on social media. This news-cycle tendency appears to have been checked by the local elections (*Hattotuwa* 2025). In the post-election rhetoric and in the government's response to mishandling a schoolchild's sexual assault case the same week as the elections, the NPP is trying to shift from being in a permanent campaign mode government to presenting itself as the political establishment. The response of the Minister of Women and Child Affairs on the Kotahena sexual abuse incident was that she did not receive a petition from the parents and that these issues should not be resolved through social media users taking justice into their hands (*Ada Derana* 2025b).

Besides the 'lies and trickery' discourse, a key adjective that is heard among criticisms of the NPP's government and key members is of its *uddachcha* (conceited) nature (*The Morning* 2025a). This characterisation refers to the political persona that the government allegedly presents when it is held accountable or it faces pushback. Having mobilised a politics of being relatable and in sync with grassroots sentiments, that is, a 'people's government', any attempt by the NPP to assume a more distanced, elite persona is not well received by its supporters and critics alike.

The NPP's reduced mandate also indicates the electorate's growing impatience with the time taken to deliver on its campaign promises. The NPP's anti-corruption discourse framed the country's structural political and economic challenges in a manner that implies they are amenable to swift, straightforward solutions, thereby obscuring their underlying complexity. Since coming to power, the NPP has largely continued the previous government's economic programme and met the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) main stipulated targets. While the February budget indicates the government's moves to meet several of its election promises, such as lowered taxes, increased state sector salaries, and higher allocations to health and education (Kadirgamar 2025), these measures were unable to fully meet the high expectations that had been cultivated by the NPP. The slowed down economic growth rate since last year from 5% to 3.5% further constrains the limited room for manoeuvring (World Bank 2025). The gap in expectations is felt all the more keenly due to the lack of key policy measures or 'spectacle' projects that the NPP promised during the national election campaigns, from digital revolution and mineral value-addition projects to an overabundance of diaspora investment and engagement (National People's Power 2024). In the absence of quick miracles to structural issues, the government increasingly embodies the symbolism of the political establishment, while trying to compensate for the loss of narrative lustre.

Shifting axes of political polarisation

During the 2024 elections, the now-opposition parties, who were characterised by the NPP as the corrupt 'old establishment guard', were unable to respond swiftly to the NPP with a strong and unified counter-narrative, hampered by their long-standing internal divisions and considerable disconnect with on-the-ground-sentiment. One reason for this was that anti-corruption had emerged as the main slogan of the 2022 people's protests (the *Aragalaya*), with poor public finance management being identified as a key reason for the 2022 national economic crisis. The NPP adeptly mobilised this slogan in its rapid rise to popularity (Abenante 2022).

By the lead up to the May 2025 LG elections, however, these opposition political camps had a common campaign narrative of calling the NPP government 'liars' and 'tricksters'. This narrative was used to attack the NPP on two fronts.

First, it called out the NPP's portrayal of all other key political parties in Sri Lanka as corrupt and destructive, that the country had been under 'a 74-year curse' as a falsehood. This is a critique that has tangible evidence,

as different political groups pointed to development indicators that showed that past governments in Sri Lanka had some achievements and were not total failures as the NPP framed them to be. Second, the NPP's stance of political purity and ethical high ground is also attacked by pointing out the inconsistencies between the government's rhetoric versus policy. For example, the NPP had promised to present an alternative Debt Sustainability Agreement (DSA) that provided the negotiation baseline for the IMF bailout (Perera 2025). However, no measures have been taken towards this end since the government came to power seven months ago. From a key NPP MP's fabricated educational qualifications to populist promises of swift economic relief through tax cuts, the NPP has faced scrutiny over its claims to ethical integrity (*The Island* 2025a).

Second, the political opposition has seized the NPP's narrative blindspot and attempts to capitalise on it to gain some of the ground it lost to the NPP last year. Just as the NPP made liberal use of the word corrupt, as a catch-all term to mean corruption of all kinds and scale, the lies that the NPP are accused of range from policy reversals to inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies. These catch-all terms indicate the latest poles around which contemporary politics are being contested.

The emergence of this 'liars versus thieves' axis replaces the 'patriots versus traitors' axis of political polarisation which President Mahinda Rajapaksa articulated following the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 (Wickramasinghe 2009). This narrative that favoured the Sinhala-Buddhist claim to nationhood also ushered in an era of power centralisation in the executive branch of government and increased allegations of corruption-nepotism. Electorally, this period was marked by polarising elections along ethnic lines, with the Rajapaksa electoral machine relying on its popularity among the majority of Sinhala voters to secure a winning edge, while the opposition parties depended on their overwhelming popularity among the ethnic minority groups while maintaining a sufficient swing within the Sinhala voters towards them. Electoral maps in 2010, 2015, and 2019 presidential elections manifest this polarisation.

To ally or not to ally?

The May local election result marks a significant turning point for a few reasons. First, due to the inability of the NPP to secure outright majorities in many LG bodies, it is compelled to form alliances with other parties or individuals. In this context, the NPP has attempted to navigate its former stance that it would not ally with major political parties that previously led governments

it deems corrupt and politically expired, by claiming it will only ally with independent groups where needed (*The Morning* 2025b). These developments indicate the limits of the NPP's politics on the axis of corrupt versus non-corrupt. It also reveals the growing traction of the opposition's united 'lies and trickery' narrative against the NPP.

However, this unifying narrative has not translated to the forming of coalitions against the government. A primary reason for this is that Sri Lankan elections have been, for over a decade, driven more by anti-establishment sentiments than by a deep-rooted trust in the incoming government. This explains why governments have been elected by eliminating the prevailing 'governance narrative,' coupled with wanting to experiment with a new narrative. In this sense, the election of the Yahapalanaya government in 2015 was a rejection of strongman, nepotistic rule towards testing a liberal, good governance alternative. The election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019 experimented with the narrative of 'authoritarian technocracy'. The 2024 presidential election eliminated the old guard in its entirety with its narrative of anti-corruption. The slowing momentum for the NPP at the local elections shows the tentative opportunity that the voters have given the NPP to test their narrative. However, the main opposition camps, individually or collectively, have so far not been able to offer the voters an attractive alternative narrative to the incumbent government.

As the largest political party in a highly fragmented opposition landscape, the SJB now faces a dilemma. Despite leading the opposition and being the 'government-in-waiting', its share of the vote is insufficient to form a government on its own in a future national election. In this context, the SJB is likely weighing two strategic options. First, to consolidate its leadership by weakening or sidelining rival opposition groups; or second, to leverage the current position of opposition dominance and build the broadest possible coalition to prevent the government from gaining control of LGs where the opposition holds a majority.

Following the local elections, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa announced that the party was "prepared to take the lead in uniting all Opposition forces" (*The Morning* 2025c). The SJB finds an easy ally in the UNP, and while previous alliance-building talks failed between the two parties, the SJB now finds itself in a stronger position to negotiate with the UNP following the election results. However, from an in-group competition perspective, the UNP emerges as the SJB's closest rival, given their shared political heritage. Several failed attempts at dialogue between the two

parties suggest that the primary differences lie between their leadership. With the UNP securing only around 5% of the local elections vote, it remains significantly weaker than the SJB. As a result, the SJB leadership may not view the UNP as a valuable partner for coalition-building. Instead, it may attempt to weaken or absorb the UNP by drawing its remaining support base into the SJB fold, alienating the party's electorally unpopular leadership.

Meanwhile, the likelihood of coalitions between the SJB and SLPP or Sarvajana Balaya ('All People's Force') seems even more unlikely due to the obvious ideological differences between the SJB and the two nationalist-leaning parties, as well as the dilution of the latter's niche political brands if they join as the smaller members of a larger coalition. In addition, the SLPP's electoral machinery poses a formidable threat to the SJB's main opposition status, especially as the SJB is the only mainstream party which has not formed a government yet. The SJB forming coalitions with the other opposition parties would also dent its credibility and play into the NPP's divisive narrative that portrays all establishment parties as part of a corrupt alliance: 'all the thieves getting together.' The SJB is likely to have observed how the SLPP and UNP suffered significant losses in credibility and identity during their cohabitation during 2022-2024 (Gunasekara 2024).

Return of the Rajapaksas?

The performance of the SLPP in the May local elections, securing close to 10% of the vote, is a significant development. The legitimacy of the Rajapaksa political dynasty, and by extension, the SLPP, was severely undermined during the 2022 economic crisis. The Rajapaksas had positioned their model of authoritarian-nepotistic politics as necessary 'discipline' to ensure governance efficiency and mega-scale infrastructure development. However, by 2022, the country's economic collapse was swiftly attributed to large-scale political corruption and the mismanagement of public finance, which were closely associated with the Rajapaksas' nepotistic style of governance. This loss of legitimacy was reflected in the SLPP securing only 3% of the vote in the 2024 general elections, a dramatic fall from the 59% it achieved in 2019.

The SLPP's comeback in the local elections can be attributed in part to its strong and efficient grassroots mechanism, which enabled it, and its former incarnation as the SLFP, to win the last three iterations of local elections in 2006, 2011, and 2018. The SLPP's ability to win a higher percentage in the 2018 local elections (44.6%) than the NPP in 2025 is attributed to this

grassroots network.¹ The 2018 LG elections victory was highly significant as the SLPP was in the opposition at the time, whereas the NPP is the incumbent with a two-thirds majority and is also reputed to have a strong grassroots political presence through its main political party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Under the leadership of Namal Rajapaksa, the party's national organiser, the SLPP aims to mobilise Rajapaksa loyalists among the conservative Sinhala Buddhist, aspirational middle classes, and rural electorate. During the local election campaigns, the SLPP's main political rhetoric sought to attract voters around alleged threats to national sovereignty and national security. The 2019 SLPP presidential election victory had mobilised similar themes in the immediate aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. In the current context, the threats to national security due to the NPP's 'incompetency' were framed in terms of selling national assets to foreign powers, and the defence agreement that the NPP government entered into with India in April this year, presented as compromising the country's national sovereignty (*News 1st* 2025). The NPP is also blamed for inaction during the sharp rise in gun violence in 2025, with 42 shooting incidents and 29 deaths reported across the country. During the election campaigns in 2024, Major General (Retd.) Aruna Jayasekara, presently the Deputy Minister of Defence, said that an NPP government would need a duration of just two Poya days to eliminate the drug menace, and invited the Rajapaksa loyalists to bring some *banku* (benches) to sit down and take some lessons on how to ensure public safety (*The Leader* 2024). The sharp rise in gun violence since the NPP came to power following such high-handed statements, and the government's inability to deliver on them, has become political fodder for the opposition.²

The SLPP, as the emerging third force, has been silent so far about the possibility of joining forces with other parties to establish LG councils, stating that this is a collective decision it would make (*NewsFirst English* 2025). In this backdrop, it serves the SLPP's interest that it maintains its niche political space without diluting its ideology and politics. Despite the SLPP's comeback being seen as a major future threat to the NPP, the party still faces an uphill task in emerging as a political frontrunner.

1 However, the SLPP did secure majorities in fewer local authorities (231 compared to 236 by the NPP). See: *Ada Derana*. (2018). "Local Authorities Election Results – 2018." (10 February): <https://www.adaderana.lk/local-authorities-election-2018/>.

2 An example of social media discourse or framing of the NPP's handling of rising gun violence: Mature Leadership. (2025). "Sathiye banku banku" [post]. *Facebook* (5 May). Available at <https://www.facebook.com/MatureLeadership/posts/pfbid02q59Lzan8rXRQ2ybfgXfBhvc4dYpNqMbzMzoEQLcX3o5kpV7HtAvN6yem9G8p9v1>.

First, the SLPP and NPP are popularly perceived as 'centre-left' and overlap in ideological stances. Following the 2022 political rupture, much of the SLPP's voter base has already moved towards the NPP and is unlikely to revert their political attitudes and preferences so rapidly. A similar pattern of migration of a core bloc of Sinhala Buddhist voters from the UNP to the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) was evident at the height of the Rajapaksa rule, as seen in the 2010 presidential election result.

Second, the SLPP does not have a new narrative which captures the popular imagination. Its use of hackneyed nationalist and war victory rhetoric does not resonate strongly, despite the SLPP's repeated attempts to frame the NPP as anti-Sinhala Buddhist and pro-secular (as part of its alleged Marxist ideology) over the past year. For example, the SLPP invokes the JVP attack on the Temple of the Tooth Relic in 1989 and alleges that the NPP government did not celebrate the Sinhala New Year (Weerasekera 2025) and is permissive towards the resurgence of Tamil separatism in the North and East. However, this discourse has not taken off, due to the NPP government's symbolic gestures pandering to its Sinhala Buddhist voter base through an exposition of the Lord Buddha's Tooth Relic in the weeks leading up to the LG election (Bandara 2025), and policy choices on post-war accountability, i.e., to not investigate and prosecute former military officials for war crimes or support international investigation of war-time human rights violations. Previous election cycles have shown the power of emotive narratives in bringing parties to power, but the SLPP has yet to find anything new to undermine the NPP.

Fragmenting the national political space

The significance of the NPP's performance at the general elections last year was in appealing successfully across both the Sinhala Buddhist electorate and ethnic minorities. The last electoral map similar to this was the 1994 presidential election won by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge. The NPP's victory stood out even more in comparison as it significantly displaced the Tamil identity-based political parties such as ITAK, to create what could be called a national political space unified under an overarching narrative of a Renaissance (*Punarudaya*). The NPP's campaign narrative replaced the narrative of ethnic division with a populist narrative marked by a class dimension, where the 'haves' and the 'have nots' were framed as the 'politically corrupt' and 'non-corrupt'.

The NPP approached the May local election as if it were the last lap of the political overhaul, of 'system change', that had begun in September last year. The

NPP campaign mobilised key national political figures, even if the setback was later interpreted by key government members as a local election (Ada Derana 2025c). The importance of the local elections for the incumbent government was evident in the president attending major party rallies, including in the North and East, and promising that LG bodies led by the NPP would receive faster approval from the national government than those headed by corrupt opposition parties (Shaheid 2025).

Significantly, in the lead up to the LG elections, the Tamil Guardian reported that the NPP Jaffna MP Karunanathan Ilankumaran, had posted a campaign video whose lyrics invoked LTTE nationalism and drew parallels between communism and Tamil nationalism (*Tamil Guardian* 2025a). While this was subsequently refuted by the NPP General Secretary, as not being part of the party's campaign material, the MP posting such a video indicates the populist politics and amorphous nature of the NPP depending on the electorate's sensibilities. The election result in the North and East shows that the gains that the NPP made in the last elections were lost to the two main Tamil political parties: ITAK and ACTC. The ITAK was the biggest winner with a lead in 35 LGs, claiming to have reversed the 'Anura wave'. It has turned down the possibility of entering any coalition with the NPP in forming the LG councils. The ITAK's triumphant assertion of Tamil nationalism following its wins in the North and East indicates the successful resistance of NPP electoral inroads by the Tamil political parties, and the denting of the NPP's claims to having unified the national electoral space, as was seen in the 2024 parliamentary election (*Tamil Guardian* 2025b). Meanwhile, the clear losers in this equation are the Tamil political parties which previously formed alliances with the 'southern' parties which formed governments, such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

The performance of the two main Muslim political parties, the SLMC and the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), show a growing preference to contest on their own and not as part of a broader alliance, such as with the SJB or UNP. It also reflects the infighting within larger political camps and how minority parties strategise maximising their local capabilities to have more bargaining power. Their electoral outcomes remain modest, and the NPP's success among the Muslim demographic appear to not have faced any major swings. Overall, the battle for the Muslim vote remains three-to-four-cornered, among the SJB, the NPP, and the SLMC and the ACMC. In electorates numerically dominated by Malaiyaha or Hill-Country Tamils, the political space

is similarly fragmented among the NPP, which made considerable inroads since the general elections, the SJB (allied with the Tamil Progressive Alliance/TPA), and other parties, especially independent groups. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) continues to face setbacks since elections last year.

The fragmentation of these electorates, with the exception of the performance of ITAK in the North and East, reveals the limits of the NPP's unifying narrative on the one hand; on the other hand, Tamil political parties of the North and the East have been able to re-assert the strength of their ideological position. The NPP's reading of ITAK's electoral comeback as a return to cheap patronage politics and racism (*Virakesari* 2025) reflects a weak understanding of the unique electoral sensibilities of the voters of these areas.

Ideological catalysts at the margins

The election results of the smaller opposition parties such the UNP, Sarvajana Balaya, and People's Alliance (PA) indicate that they will face a difficult time maintaining their parties intact, as pressure from their grassroots supporters to merge with larger parties of their ideological camps is likely to be growing. In Sri Lanka's electoral landscape, the key issue for smaller parties is maintaining a niche and strong ideological core, which enables them to invigorate the ideological appeal of a much-larger catch-all party, despite their inability to secure larger vote bases running alone.

For the UNP, the main challenge is the lack of strong political personalities that can rally the party's former support base and articulate its ideology of political and economic liberalism. The UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe's political communication is effective in keeping the party relevant but also polarising. His messaging appears to be largely aimed at international audiences including foreign governments. Wickremesinghe's rhetoric ends up dismissing the NPP for not providing a real alternative to the neoliberal policies and reforms that he advocated during the last government, and this prevents him from having a strong ideological critique of the government (*The Sunday Times* 2025).

Meanwhile, the Sarvajana Balaya led by media tycoon Dilith Jayaweera appears to be the only party with a political slogan that could gain mileage in the future (*Ada Derana* 2024). His promise of a '*vyawasayaka rajyaya*' (entrepreneurial state) has not resonated very strongly so far, as he faces strong competition in the opposition space by more entrenched parties such as the SLPP, with which it vies for a 'left nationalist' space (*The*

Island 2025b). Like the SLPP, the Sarvajana Balaya has considerable resources at its disposal, and a potentially strong narrative that may appeal to aspirational voters.

Other parties such as the People's Alliance (PA), led by Anura Priyadarshana Yapa, offer a moderately SLFP-like nationalist agenda after having backed the Wickremesinghe-led National Democratic Front (NDF) in the 2024 general elections (Weerasinghe 2024). The PA and its chair symbol resonated with some voters at the local election but finds it difficult to present a distinct alternative force on its own due to its relatively poor electoral showing. Meanwhile, Patali Champika Ranawaka's United Republican Front (URF) and Wimal Weerawansa's National Freedom Front (NFF) both managed to secure only a few seats at the local elections. However, the potential of these parties to bring ideological colour to broader alliances is not reflected in these results.

Another noteworthy political force in the election is the People's Struggle Alliance (PSA), which includes the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) as its nucleus (*The Island* 2025c). The PSA has been unable to leverage FSP cadre at the grassroots and depends largely on a few high-profile social media activists to maintain its visibility. The socialist agenda of the party has not been able to differentiate sufficiently from the 'left progressive' image that the NPP-JVP has assumed.

Conclusion

The local election result indicates that the momentum of the NPP, which rode to power on a popular wave, is slowing in the face of challenges in meeting the high expectations it cultivated among its supporters. The NPP's re-polarisation of Sri Lankan politics along the axis of '74-year-long corruption', has been completed by the opposition parties who define the other pole of the axis in terms of 'lies and trickery'. Even as both poles varyingly verge on hyperbole, the NPP's effort to brand its opponents as 'thieves' unfit for governance is countered by the opposition's emphasis on the government's limits in delivering on public welfare and anti-corruption as evidence of its incompetence.

The end of the government's 'honeymoon period' following the local elections is signalled by the growing use of the term 'conceited' to critique its political persona, reflecting broader public resistance to the NPP's perceived shift toward an 'elite' status. In the absence of a clear narrative, the government needs to maintain a degree of distance from the polity to operate, and how the NPP navigates this challenge remains to be seen. Against this backdrop, a fragmented opposition

finds little common ground beyond its unified framing of the NPP's 'lies', and individually or in alliance, lacks a cohesive and credible alternative politics of governance, marking a departure from the multi-party bi-polar system that has defined Sri Lankan politics for over seven decades.

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