

Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential elections

SUMMARY

With a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population of 22 million, Sri Lanka is a country strategically located in South Asia at the crossroads of major shipping routes in the Indo-Pacific region. This lower middle-income country has undergone a severe economic crisis, whose consequences have been exacerbated by its economic and monetary policies, not to mention the 2019 terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted, and widespread popular protests prompted the resignation of the prime minister followed by the president, posts held by the Rajapaksa brothers. Ranil Wickremesinghe took over as president. The country has received assistance from the International Monetary Fund and negotiated a key debt restructuring deal in June 2024.

India and China are competing to expand their influence in the country because of its geo-strategic location in the Indo-Pacific. The 99-year lease of Hambantota port to China in 2017, feeding the debt-trap narrative, has increased Indian and United States (US) concerns. Colombo boasts a nonaligned foreign policy, and has remained neutral on the war in Ukraine.

European Union–Sri Lanka relations are based on a comprehensive cooperation agreement on partnership and development, which entered into force in 1995. Sri Lanka benefits from enhanced access to the European Union (EU) market under the generalised system of preferences plus, of which it is the third-largest beneficiary. The European Parliament – like other international stakeholders – has underlined the importance of a national reconciliation process given the unaddressed legacy of the 1983–2009 civil war against the Tamil insurgency. Parliament has also expressed concern over Sri Lanka's continuous application of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, systematically used for arbitrary arrests.

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's presidential elections will take place on 21 September 2024. The EU has deployed an election observation mission, with MEP Nacho Sánchez Amor (S&D, Spain) as Chief Observer.



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Introduction

Strategically located at the crossroads of major shipping routes in the [Indo-Pacific](#) region, Sri Lanka is an insular country lying a few dozen kilometres east of the southern tip of India. It was granted dominion status within the British Commonwealth in 1948 as [Ceylon](#), a name dropped in 1972 when it became the Republic of Sri Lanka. It is densely inhabited: its multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, estimated at 22 million (more than Romania), live on 65 610 km² (similar to Lithuania). Ethnicities and religions often overlap. The main ethnic groups are Sinhalese (75 %, mostly Buddhist), Tamil (11.2 %, mostly Hindu) and Moors (9.3 %, mostly Muslim). Article 9 of the 1978 [constitution](#) gives Buddhism (professed by 70 % of the population) the 'foremost place' among the country's [religious faiths](#); it commits the state to protect it while assuring the rights of religious minorities (including a 7 % share of Christians). According to the amended Article 18 of the constitution, Sri Lanka's [official languages](#) are Sinhala and Tamil, with English the 'link language'. Colombo, the country's main city and largest port, is the executive and judicial capital. Its suburb Sri Jayawardhapura Kotte (also known as Kotte) is the legislative capital.

Figure 1 – Map of Sri Lanka



Source: EPRS, 2024.

Institutions and parties

The [president](#) is the head of state, elected by the citizens for a 5-year term, renewable once. Sri Lanka has a presidential system: the president heads the government, can appoint and dismiss the prime minister and the other ministers. The president can submit to a national referendum any bill or matter of national importance rejected by the parliament. From 1994 to 2005, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (commonly referred to by her initials CBK) was Sri Lanka's first and only female president; she was also the country's second female prime minister. [Ranil Wickremesinghe](#) has been the president since July 2022. The constitution provides for an independent judiciary. The supreme court is the highest appellate court and the final arbiter in constitutional disputes.

Main political parties

Sri Lanka has a unicameral parliamentary system (the senate was abolished in 1971). The national [parliament](#) consists of 225 members, elected by proportional representation, for a 5-year term. The current speaker is [Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana](#). The current parliament (see Figure 2), elected in 2020, comprises 11 [women](#), or almost 5 % of the members (less than in previous terms).

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). With 145 seats, the Sri Lanka People's Front is the country's ruling party. The Rajapaksa brothers (see section on 'Recent history' below) founded it in 2016 as a split from the centre-left Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLPP gives [priority](#) to a people-centric economy (self-sufficient economy), focusing on local production and aimed at creating a technology-based society. The party is opposed to federalism.

Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). With 54 seats, the United People's Power is the largest opposition force in the parliament. This heterogeneous alliance [promotes](#), among other things, housing, social development and the protection of the rights of religions other than Buddhism. Its leader

Sajith Premadasa (former ally of President Wickremesinghe: the SJB is a splinter group from the UNP – see below) is the son of Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was the country's president from 1989 until his assassination in 1993. In the last presidential elections held in 2019, Premadasa was the main contender to winner [Gotabaya Rajapaksa](#), obtaining 42 % of the votes.

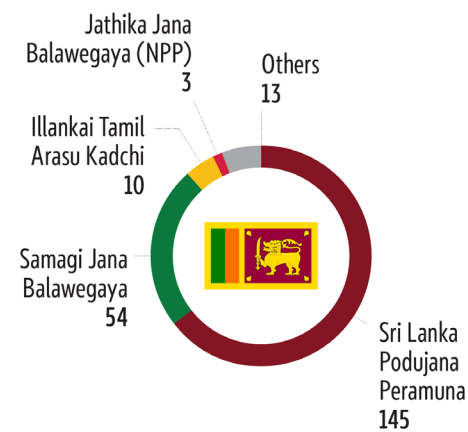
Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK). Founded in 1949, the Sri Lanka Tamil State Party is the main political force representing the Tamil minority (see text box in the section 'The European Parliament and Sri Lanka' below) in the parliament (10 seats). Sivagnanam Sritharan is the party's leader. As other Tamil parties, ITAK supports federalism.

Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB) / National People's Power (NPP). Established in 2019, the

[JJB/NPP](#) is a movement formed by 21 groups, holding three seats in the parliament. It aims at a more progressive Sri Lanka; its core objectives encompass transparency and accountability in politics, fight against corruption, economic democracy, social protection and inclusiveness. Its leader Anura Kumara Disanayake is a main candidate for the 2024 presidential elections.

United National Party (UNP). Founded in 1946, this centre-right party is the country's oldest. Previously the ruling party, it suffered a significant electoral defeat – following a split by SJB – in 2020, which saw its parliamentary representation reduced to one seat, held by its leader, President Wickremesinghe.

Figure 2 – Parliament's composition



Source: [Parliament of Sri Lanka](#), 2020.

Economy

The World Bank classifies Sri Lanka as [lower middle-income](#) country – it upgraded to upper middle-income only in the year 2020. According to [Europa World](#), Sri Lanka, whose perpetual deficit economy has slowed down in recent years, has the potential to restore high growth rates, considering its strategic location on the main trade routes between the Gulf and Asia and its proximity to India. Sri Lanka is heavily [dependent on export](#) items, in particular textiles and garments, [tea \(fourth largest producer\)](#), rubber and coconut, foreign direct investment (FDI), the tourism industry, and remittances from foreign workers, especially from Gulf countries. Its dependence on tourism and workers' remittances, in particular, make the country vulnerable. Sri Lanka's high dependence on imports, such as fuel, machinery and intermediate products, lies behind its chronic trade deficit, also because the country has not exploited its [offshore natural gas](#). FDI has been discouraged by the country's economic crisis and the government's default, which has prompted [debt restructuring efforts](#) (see 'Recent history' below). Agriculture – making up 7 % of GDP and employing [26.5 %](#) of the population – is vulnerable to [climate disasters](#). A third of arable land is dedicated to rice production.

Foreign relations

Sri Lanka's [geo-strategic location](#) in the middle of the Indo-Pacific region is close to key international trade routes: trade coming from the Suez Canal or through the Strait of Hormuz must pass near Sri Lanka when moving on to the Malacca Strait, and vice versa. This has given rise to a rivalry between India and China on establishing their influence in the country. The issue is of particular sensitivity for India, as Sri Lanka's proximity¹ is critical to Indian security. Furthermore, New Delhi is wary of Beijing's growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean (and so is Washington, whose Department of Defence coined the '[String of Pearls](#)' concept in 2004), which India has traditionally considered its own sphere of influence. Media reports on Chinese plans to obtain a 99-year lease

with a view to setting up a [radar base](#) in southeast Sri Lanka, potentially monitoring the Indian navy and military and strategic assets in the region, as well as United Kingdom (UK)–US installations on Diego Garcia, have raised further concerns. The exploitation of Sri Lankan ports is also a major issue. India showed uneasiness towards the repeated docking of [Chinese scientific research vessels](#) (suspected of gathering critical data for conduct of military operations) in the region, including in Sri Lanka. The 99-year lease of Hambantota² port to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017, feeding the [debt-trap narrative](#), has increased Indian (and western) concerns. [India](#) (namely Adani group, the largest Indian conglomerate) and the [US](#) have stepped up their investments in Sri Lanka to counteract Chinese investment. [India](#) and the [US](#) have also strengthened their defence cooperation with Sri Lanka. Beijing on its side has tried to counter the surge of an anti-China sentiment, making efforts to [improve its image](#) in the country, for instance by increasing food donations.

Colombo claims a nonaligned foreign policy, although analysts [argue](#) this approach assumes [different shades](#) depending on the country's presidency. For instance, in September 2023, President Wickremesinghe labelled the [AUKUS](#) trilateral partnership between Australia, the US and the UK as a 'strategic misstep', a 'mistake' and a 'military alliance moved against ... China'. On the same [occasion](#), he defined the 'Indo-Pacific' an 'artificial framework' (despite this, Sri Lanka participated at the [3rd EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum](#) held in Brussels in February 2024). He also denied the Indian allegations of the presence of [spy ships](#) in the island's ports. Meanwhile in January 2024, Sri Lanka announced its participation in the US-led [naval mission in the Red Sea](#), also [joined by the EU](#), to protect freedom of navigation from Houthi militant attacks. Sri Lanka has kept neutral on the Ukraine war (with some of its citizens reportedly [duped](#) and enlisted on both fighting sides), and maintains political [dialogue with Russia](#). On the [war in Gaza](#) (which to many Sri Lankans [echoes the civil war](#)'s last phase, see text box below), in June 2024, Wickremesinghe called for a two-state solution in 5 years, and the government set up a Gaza Children's Fund. Sri Lanka has long-lasting [bilateral relations with Israel](#), which provided Colombo's government with arm sales during the civil war. In November 2023, Sri Lanka agreed to send 10 000 farm workers (and [construction workers](#)) to Israel, to fill positions vacated by Palestinian Arabs following the 7 October events.

Relations with the EU

[EU-Sri Lanka relations](#) date back to 1962. The European Commission opened a Delegation in Colombo – also accredited to the Maldives – In 1995, when the comprehensive [cooperation agreement](#) on partnership and development, still the base of bilateral relations, came into force. Cooperation is based on respect for democratic principles and human rights, and is implemented through dialogue and partnership. The agreement set up a [Joint Commission](#), whose 26th meeting took place in February 2024 in Brussels. The EU–Sri Lanka [Working Group](#) on good governance, rule of law and human rights held its 6th meeting in November 2022 in Brussels. An EU–Sri Lanka [Re-admission Agreement](#) addressing illegal immigration has been in force since May 2005. A bilateral horizontal [agreement on air services](#) entered into force in July 2013.

Since May 2017, Sri Lanka has benefited from enhanced access to the EU market under the generalised system of preferences plus ([GSP+](#)), of which it is the [third-largest beneficiary](#). In the past 10 years, [bilateral trade](#) has been oscillating: peaking at €4.2 billion in 2022, it amounted to €3.7 billion in 2023. In that year, the EU was Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner (12.4 % of total trade), after India (16.3 %) and before China (11.9 %). However, the US was the top destination for Sri Lanka's exports – mostly textiles and clothing. The EU (7.4 %) has largely been overtaken by India (25.6 %) and China (20.4 %) as the origin of Sri Lanka imports. EU FDI to Sri Lanka in 2022 amounted to €1 billion. The EU has provided around €1 billion in assistance so far through various programmes. The [multi-annual indicative programme 2021–2027](#) focuses on supporting a green economic recovery and assisting local efforts towards a peaceful and inclusive society.

The European Parliament and Sri Lanka

The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the countries of South Asia ([DSAS](#)) covers inter-parliamentary relations with Sri Lanka. The [11th inter-parliamentary meeting](#) between the European Parliament and the Parliament of Sri Lanka took place in October 2023 in Colombo. On the occasion of the 3rd EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum on February 2024, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Ali Sabry paid a [visit to Parliament](#) in Brussels and met a delegation of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

In June 2021, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on Sri Lanka, focusing on the arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA, see text box below). MEPs expressed deep concern over the recurrence of human rights violations in the country, and reiterated their strong opposition to the PTA's continuous application. Parliament regretted the discrimination against and violence towards religious and ethnic minorities, including through counter-terrorism. MEPs called on the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to use the GSP+ as a leverage to push for advancement on Sri Lanka's human rights obligations and demand the repeal or replacement of the PTA.

Unaddressed legacy of the 1983–2009 civil war against the Tamil insurgency

From 1983 onwards, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and other Tamil separatist groups conducted a [civil war](#) aiming to establish a Tamil state in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces. The conflict ended in May 2009, when the government killed the LTTE leader and achieved victory over the Tamil insurgents. Both sides allegedly committed [war crimes](#) in the conflict's final phase, which resulted in over 100 000 people dead, many of them civilians. In 2014, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) asked the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to [investigate](#) the human rights violations and crimes committed during the war, which resulted in a [report](#). [Human Rights Watch](#) argues that at least 10 commissions have been established to address the civil war (and the 1988–1990 insurrection Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – [JVP](#) – in southern Sri Lanka); however, successive governments have failed to act on their recommendations, and many families of disappeared have remained frustrated with the lack of progress in investigating cases. A September 2023 OHCHR [report](#) criticised the government's reconciliation plans. In December 2023, the government set up a [Commission for truth, unity and reconciliation](#).

Human rights in Sri Lanka

According to [reports](#), government agents commit arbitrary and extrajudicial killings, and multiple deaths in police custody occur. In the northern and eastern provinces, [state-supported land appropriation](#) is a reason for concern over its impact on demographics and on the freedom of belief of non-Buddhist denominations. Security forces disrupt Tamil commemorative events for victims of Sri Lanka's armed conflict. Implementation of the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act ([PTA](#)) legislation is highly controversial. As the Parliament's June 2021 resolution underlined, PTA grants wide-ranging powers to the police in order to search, arrest and detain civilian suspects, and has led to consistent allegations of torture and sexual abuse, forced confessions and systematic denials of due process. PTA has been systematically used for arbitrary arrests and the detention of Muslims and minority groups in the country. OHCHR reiterated the calls for a moratorium on the use of PTA, and for replacing it by legislation adhering to international best practice. A further issue of concern is the [Online Safety Act](#) adopted in February 2024, which according to many [stakeholders](#), including the [Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka](#) and the [UN HRC](#), would give authorities a range of discretionary powers potentially criminalising many forms of legitimate expression.

Recent history

Since its independence and until 2019, Sri Lanka was ruled alternately by the UNP and the SLFP, now both decimated. In particular since 2005, however, the Rajapaksa family has dominated the country's politics. Mahinda Rajapaksa was president of Sri Lanka for two mandates, from 2005 to 2015. He brought the civil war against Tamil to an end. He was defeated in the 2015 presidential election by Maithripala Sirisena, a former member of his cabinet, who ran the country in the years 2015 to 2019. In 2019, Sri Lanka was shaken by the [Easter bombings](#) – coordinated attacks against churches and international hotels that killed 269 people. Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Mahinda's younger brother and

secretary to the Ministry of Defence held by his older brother when president from 2005 to 2015) won the November 2019 presidential elections. His brother Mahinda became prime minister.

The economic and monetary policies pursued since 2019, the terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic (causing a drop in tourism revenue) led to an unsustainable debt level, a situation aggravated by a balance-of-payment crisis. Blackouts and shortages of food (aggravated by the rise in food prices caused by the war in Ukraine), fuel and pharmaceuticals triggered widespread protests demanding the government's resignation. In April 2022, Sri Lanka [defaulted on its debt](#) and asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance. The protests forced both prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (in May) and his brother president Gotabaya Rajapaksa (in July) to resign and flee. Ranil Wickremesinghe, former minister during the Sirisena presidency, became first prime minister, and in July took the presidency through a parliamentary vote. Sri Lanka has adopted severe [austerity measures](#) with [IMF](#) support. In June 2024, Sri Lanka reached a [debt restructuring deal](#) with bilateral creditors. According to the World Bank, [poverty](#) is estimated to remain above 22 % until 2026.

2024 presidential elections

Sri Lanka's [presidential elections](#) will take place on 21 September 2024. A record 39 candidates (including [Mahinda Rajapaksa's son](#) Namal) are running. [Postal voting](#) is allowed. Surveys place either [Anura Kumara Dissanayake](#) or [Sajith Premadasa](#) as the frontrunner. Parliamentary elections will take place in [2025](#) (the local council elections scheduled for March 2023 were [cancelled](#)).

The Presidential Act No 15 of 1981 set up [limited ranked voting](#) system for the election of the president. Voters can express up to three preferences. If no candidate receives over 50% of valid votes on the first count, all candidates except for the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes are eliminated. The second and third preferences of the eliminated candidates are distributed until one of the remaining two candidates obtains the majority. This system has seen little use in practice: each presidential election going back to the first in 1981 has resulted in a candidate from one of the two major parties or alliances winning in the first count.

The EU has deployed a [mission](#) to Sri Lanka, to observe the presidential elections. MEP Nacho Sánchez Amor (S&D, Spain) has been appointed Chief Observer.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ India and Sri Lanka, together with other five countries, were both co-founders of [SAARC](#), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation set up in 1985.
- ² Hambantota, home region of the Rajapaksa family, was at the same time the location for the construction of the second country's [international airport](#) (after Colombo), almost unused, and of an [international cricket stadium](#). These 'white elephant' infrastructures (including the port) financed by China were named after the Rajapaksa family. According to the [New York Times](#), China founded Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidential electoral campaign in 2015, an allegation he [denied](#).

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