

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	630
Land:	Sri Lanka
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Sri Lanka: Political situation, including political parties and alliances (2017 - August 2020)
Udgivet:	18. august 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. oktober 2020

Document #2037123

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Sri Lanka: Political situation, including political parties and alliances (2017-August 2020) [LKA200300.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to the 2012 census [the most recent national census (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 2.7)], Sinhalese account for 74.9 percent of the population and mainly practice Buddhism, while Tamils represent 15.3% of the population and are mainly Hindus (UN 26 Aug. 2019; MRG Mar. 2018; Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 2.7).

Sources report that during the 2015 presidential election, opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena defeated the incumbent president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had been in power since 2005 (MRG Mar. 2018; Reuters 8 Jan. 2015). According to sources, Sirisena won the 2015 election with the support of a part of his own party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018) and of Ranil Wickremesinghe's party, the United National Party (UNP) (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018; AP 26 Oct. 2018). Verité Research, a Colombo-based think tank providing strategic analysis for Asia (Verité Research n.d.), explains that following the election, some SLFP members followed the new president into the governing coalition he formed with the UNP and other allied parties, while others gave their support to former president Rajapaksa and formed an "informal faction known as the Joint Opposition (JO)" with other allied smaller parties (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 14). The same source adds that the JO members "formally remain a part of the SLFP" (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 14).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that this political change "brought new hopes and aspirations for [Sri Lanka's] Tamils," after years of continued rights abuses and militarization (MRG Mar. 2018). In his preliminary findings following his visit to Sri Lanka in August 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief writes that the Sirisena government was committed "to strengthen[ing] fundamental freedoms and the rule of the law that comprises of inclusiveness, justice and respect for human rights to all of the people of Sri Lanka," leading to the adoption of the Human Rights Council resolution 30/1, co-sponsored by Sri Lanka, on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka (UN 26 Aug. 2019). For information on the treatment of Tamil citizens, see Response to Information Request LKA200298 of August 2020.

2. 2018 Constitutional Crisis

Sources explain that on 26 October 2018, President Maithripala Sirisena [of the SLFP (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018)] dismissed Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe [of the UNP (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018)] and appointed in his place the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, whom he had defeated in the 2015 presidential election (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018; Asia Society 4 Dec. 2018; AP 26 Oct. 2018). The Diplomat, a current-affairs magazine dedicated to the Asia-Pacific region (The Diplomat n.d.), indicates that this decision followed the SLFP departure from the national coalition it had formed with the UNP (The Diplomat 7 Jan. 2019).

Wickremesinghe subsequently argued that he still had the support of Parliament (The Diplomat 7 Jan. 2019; AP 26 Oct. 2018; International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018) and refused to leave office (Asia Society 4 Dec. 2018; AP 26 Oct. 2018). Sources report that President Sirisena then suspended Parliament to give Rajapaksa time to secure political support (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018; *Time* 29 Oct. 2018; Asia Society 4 Dec. 2018). Sources report instances of bribery to convince MPs belonging to the opposition to join the new Prime Minister's party (Al Jazeera 2 Nov. 2018; *Daily Mirror* 3 Nov. 2018). However, sources report that Rajapaksa failed to secure a majority in the Parliament (The Diplomat 7 Jan. 2019; Freedom House 15 Nov. 2018; Asia Society 4 Dec. 2018). On 9 November 2018, Sirisena dissolved Parliament two years before the scheduled end of the legislature (Al Jazeera 13 Dec. 2018; VOA 13 Dec. 2018), but on 13 December 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the dissolution by Sirisena was against the Sri Lankan constitution (Al Jazeera 13 Dec. 2018; VOA

13 Dec. 2018; *The Indian Express* 13 Dec. 2018). Sources report that on 15 December, Rajapaksa resigned and on 16 December 2018, Wickremesinghe was reinstated as prime minister (Al Jazeera 16 Dec. 2018; NPR 17 Dec. 2018).

3. 2019 Presidential Election

According to sources, 35 candidates ran for president (Asian Tribune 18 Nov. 2019; BBC 17 Nov. 2019). Sources report that the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) candidate, Gotabaya [Gotabhaya] Rajapaksa, won the November 2019 presidential election with 52.2 percent of the vote while the UNP candidate, Sajith Premadasa, got 42 percent of the votes (*The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019; EIAS 28 Nov. 2019). Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, whom he served as his defence secretary, and sources report that he is credited with ending the civil war with Tamil separatists (BBC 17 Nov. 2019; *The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019). According to sources, Gotabaya Rajapaksa garnered the votes of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, while his opponent Sajith Premadasa won the vote of Tamil [who are mostly Hindus or Christians (US 25 June 2020, 1)] and Muslim minorities (US 25 June 2020, 1; *The Diplomat* 13 Dec. 2019; *The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019). According to *The Diplomat*, Sri Lankans belonging to Christian communities "mostly" voted for Rajapaksa (*The Diplomat* 13 Dec. 2019). Sources indicate that, following the 2019 Easter bomb attacks, Rajapaksa ran his campaign with a security-oriented agenda (*The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019; Reuters 16 Nov. 2019; EIAS 28 Nov. 2019). Press Trust of India (PTI), an Indian news agency, reports that more than 40 parties backed Gotabaya Rajapaksa during the election, including the following 15:

Akhila Ilangei Dravida Mahasabha, Sri Lanka Telo Party, Sri Lanka People's National Party, Janatha Sevaka Pakshaya, Eksath Janatha Jathika Pakshaya, New Democratic People's Front, Deshapremi Eksath Jathika Pakshaya, Pragathisheeli Janatha Sevaka Pakshaya, National Front, United Democratic People's Party, United Lanka People's Party, Patriotic Progressive People's Front, Democratic People's Congress, Islam Socialist Front and People's Party of Indian Origin. (PTI 5 Nov. 2019)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, the elections were generally peaceful (EIAS 28 Nov. 2019; *The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019). However, sources report that there were incidents of violence on election day, such as an attack on buses transporting Muslims voters (DW 17 Nov. 2019; *The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019; EIAS 28 Nov. 2019), which were stopped at a roadblock (*The Guardian* 17 Nov. 2019; EIAS 28 Nov. 2019). According to the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS), in the north of the country, there is a "heavy military presence and unauthorised roadblocks" intended to discourage Tamil voters (EIAS 28 Nov. 2019). The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) reports that 94 "major incidents" took place on election day, including 69 cases of intimidation, 5 cases of assaults and 3 cases of threat" (CMEV 2020, 48).

Sources report that the newly-elected president Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister (AFP 22 Nov. 2019; PTI 22 Nov. 2019). The *Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka* indicates that the President appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as Minister of Finance, Economy and Policy Development, as well as Minister of Buddhasasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs, and Minister of Urban Development, Water Supply and Housing Facilities, while Chamal Rajapaksa [also a brother of the president (AFP 22 Nov. 2019; PTI 22 Nov. 2019)] was appointed as Minister of Mahaweli, Agriculture, Irrigation and Rural Development, as well as Minister of Internal Trade, Food Security and Consumer Welfare (Sri Lanka 27 Nov. 2019). Sources state that Gotabaya Rajapaksa also announced his intention to call a general election at the earliest possibility (AFP 22 Nov. 2019; SATP 2020; PTI 22 Nov. 2019). PTI explains that "Sri Lanka's existing parliamentary term ends next August [2020], and the Constitution allows the president to dissolve the legislature in March [2020] and go for an election" (PTI 22 Nov. 2019).

4. Post-Election Political Situation

Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicates that Sri Lankan security authorities have been "stepping up surveillance, harassment, and threats against human rights activists and journalists" since the November 2019 elections (HRW 3 Mar. 2020). Similarly, the New Humanitarian, an independent non-profit news organization specialised in humanitarian crises (The New Humanitarian n.d.), reports that rights groups have experienced "a rise in surveillance by state security forces, threats, and other measures more common during the country's ... civil war" (The New Humanitarian 10 June 2020). For instance, according to the same source, families of disappeared people in the northern districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya, who have been organizing a continuous sit-in protest, are reporting being "increasingly monitored and threatened by security personnel," while being pressured into agreeing to compensation for the loss of their family member, instead of obtaining a complete investigation (The New Humanitarian 10 June 2020). Amnesty International also indicates that officials from the Sri Lankan Police, including the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), State Intelligence, and the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID), also known as the Counter-Terrorism and Terrorism Investigation Division (CTID), have been visiting or summoning human rights activists in order to ask about "project activities, donors and funding information, registration and details of

staff members" (Amnesty International 16 Jan. 2020). In addition, police also searched the office of a media organization, Newshub.lk, looking for [defamatory (Newshub.lk 27 Nov. 2019)] content related to the new president (EconomyNext 26 Nov. 2019; Newshub.lk 27 Nov. 2019). HRW notes that police and intelligence officers are "instill[ing] fear in rights groups" through visits to their offices during which they asked for "staff lists, home addresses, and other personal details" (HRW 3 Mar. 2020). The same source reports statements by human rights activists claiming to have experienced higher monitoring by intelligence and military officers, with one activist's organization ceasing their activities as a result (HRW 3 Mar. 2020).

According to the Colombo Telegraph, a public interest website on Sri Lankan current affairs run by exiled journalists (Colombo Telegraph n.d.), as cited by HRW, police officers investigating abuses from the Rajapaksa era have been transferred or have seen their security clearance withdrawn after the presidential elections (HRW 14 Jan. 2020). Similarly, in its report for 2019, Freedom House reports that the week after the election, "leading personnel in the Criminal Investigation Department responsible for cases against the Rajapaksa family were demoted, transferred, and banned from traveling abroad" (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020).

According to the government's gazette, the president established a "Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country and a Disciplined, Virtuous and Lawful Society," that is composed of military and police officials (Sri Lanka 2 June 2020). The Defence Secretary, Retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne heads the taskforce to curb "illegal activities of social groups which are violating the law" and to fight drug trafficking (Sri Lanka 2 June 2020). According to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), citing its Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, this is "another act of over-reach by a government seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further expand its powers" (ICJ 5 June 2020). The same source notes that the "task force's military and police membership follows a pattern of recent military appointments to civil administrative positions" by President Rajapaksa and that the "[v]ague and overbroad language" used to define its scope and powers "could effectively criminalize expression protected under international law" (ICJ 5 June 2020). Similarly, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), an independent and non-partisan organization that focuses primarily on issues of governance, argues that certain phrases in the description of the Task Force's mandate use a "vague language" that is "open to abuse" (CPA June 2020).

5. 2020 Legislative Elections

5.1 Electoral Campaign and Elections Delayed

On 2 March 2020, President Rajapaksa dissolved the Sri Lankan Parliament and called for legislative elections to be held on 25 April 2020 (Sri Lanka 2 Mar. 2020). The Associated Press (AP) reports that a 2015 change to the Constitution has decreased presidential power and that the president wished to amend the Constitution to strengthen his office, needing a majority of two-thirds of the Parliament seats (AP 20 Apr. 2020). The same source explains that before the Parliament dissolution, the opposition held a majority in the Parliament (AP 2 Mar. 2020). The Wire, an independent, non-for-profit media organization (The Wire n.d.), reports that during the electoral campaign, the president's party, the SLPP, argued that "their platform of a 'strong government' will not be compatible with the provisions of the 19th amendment, which put major restrictions on presidential powers and expanded the role of prime minister" and that they would change the constitution with a two-thirds majority (The Wire 5 Aug. 2020).

Sources report that on 19 March 2020, the election commission head announced that the elections would not take place on the scheduled date because of the COVID-19 pandemic (*The Hindu* 19 Mar. 2020; *Daily News* 20 Mar. 2020; *Daily FT* 20 Mar. 2020). According to sources, the National Election Commission used the provisions under the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 (*Daily News* 20 Mar. 2020; *Daily FT* 20 Mar. 2020). *Daily Financial Times (Daily FT)*, a daily English-language newspaper in Colombo, explains that the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 "provides for the postponement of an election, where, 'due to any emergency or unforeseen circumstances' the poll for the election in any electoral district cannot be taken on the specified date" (*Daily FT* 20 Mar. 2020).

On 20 April 2020, AP indicated that the election commission set 20 June 2020 as the new date for the legislative elections after the president rejected the commission's suggestion to ask the Supreme Court for help in order to find a solution to a possible constitutional crisis, as the Sri Lankan Constitution requires that a dissolved Parliament must be replaced within three months (AP 20 Apr. 2020). Similarly, the *Hindu*, an Indian newspaper, explains that the Election Commission set 20 June 2020 as the election date after the Prime Minister and President Rajapaksa's secretary made a statement regarding the Election Commission's responsibility to choose an election date (*The Hindu* 21 Apr. 2020). Sources report that President Rajapaksa refused to reconvene Parliament after opposition parties [including the UNP, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) (*Daily FT* 1 May 2020)] asked him to do so (*Daily FT* 1 May 2020; *The Hindu* 1 May 2020) in order to avoid a constitutional crisis because of the absence of an in-session Parliament more than three months after its dissolution (*The Hindu* 1 May 2020).

Sources report that opposition parties [the Samagi Jana Balawegaya [Balawegaya] (SJB) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (EconomyNext 11 May 2020)] and civil society representatives filed several petitions at the Supreme Court seeking annulment of the Parliament dissolution and contesting the election date fixed by the Election Commission (AP 2 June 2020; *The Hindu* 2 June 2020). The Supreme Court rejected these petitions without providing reasons (AP 2 June 2020; *The Hindu* 2 June 2020). On 10 June 2020, the election commission announced that the elections would be delayed a second time and set them to take place on 5 August 2020 (Reuters 10 June 2020; AFP 10 June 2020).

According to sources, postponing the elections meant that the president governed the country without the legislative institution to check the executive's power (DW 29 May 2020; Nikkei Asian Review 30 Apr. 2020). Deutsche Welle (DW) adds that the president "has strengthened his grip on government offices by appointing former military officials to a number of key positions in ministries" (DW 29 May 2020). Similarly, International Crisis Group notes that, since President Rajapaksa's election, retired and active military officials have an "unprecedented role in governance," some of whom "are credibly alleged to have overseen serious human rights violations" toward the end of the country's civil war (International Crisis Group 29 May 2020). Sources report that the government response to COVID-19 includes military officials in different roles (International Crisis Group 29 May 2020; Nikkei Asian Review 30 Apr. 2020), such as Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, who was appointed to run the National Operation Center on Coronavirus (Nikkei Asian Review 30 Apr. 2020). International Crisis Group further adds that there were "serious legal anomalies" in the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including curfews instituted to enforce social distancing as a measure of "questionable legal validity without parliamentary approval" (International Crisis Group 29 May 2020).

5.2 Campaign and Election Day

On 27 July 2020, the CMEV published a report on "hate speech and divisive language" during the electoral campaign for the legislative elections of 2020, indicating that, because of the absence of debates on significant ethnic issues, hate speech incidence was lower at the start of the campaign, in comparison to previous elections (CMEV 27 July 2020, 2). However, the same source notes an increase of hate speech and divisive language as the race was tightening (CMEV 27 July 2020, 2). According to the report, hate speech and divisive language were more prevalent at the ground level, such as in door-to-door canvassing by opposition and larger rallies (CMEV 27 July 2020, 2). Candidates such as those from Ape Jana Bala Pakshaya (OPPP) or from the SLPP party have been campaigning on ideas that "the Sinhalese people are threatened by rising numbers of Muslims; that they need to be 'controlled'; and that Tamils are attempting to divide the country" (CMEV 27 July 2020, 3). Candidates from Akhila Ilankai Tamil Mahasabha (AITM) and Tamil Makkal Viduthai Pulikal (TMVP) had an anti-Muslim discourse, saying that Muslim voters have "'stolen' Tamil land to win votes from Tamil voters" (CMEV 27 July 2020, 3).

On the election day, 5 August 2020, the CMEV indicates having documented 301 incidents of electoral violations, including 151 incidents of illegal campaigning, 57 incidents of intimidation/influencing and 21 incidents of illegal posters or cut-out (CMEV 5 Aug. 2020, 1). According to the CMEV national coordinator, Manjula Gajanayaka, as cited by the *New York Times*, the election was peaceful with "fewer violations of election law than in past votes" (*The New York Times* 7 Aug. 2020). The *New York Times* reports that 71 percent of eligible voters participated in the elections (*The New York Times* 7 Aug. 2020).

5.3 Election Results and Cabinet Appointments

Sources report that the SLPP won 145 [of the 225 seats] in the Sri Lankan parliament and counts on the support of allies in order to reach the two-thirds majority of 150 seats needed to change the constitution (AFP 7 Aug. 2020; *The New York Times* 7 Aug. 2020; PTI 7 Aug. 2020). PTI indicates that in the South, with a Sinhalese majority, the party's victory margins "were [in most areas] in the high 60 per cent" (PTI 7 Aug. 2020). According to sources, Ranil Wickremesinghe's party, [the UNP], won only one seat (AFP 7 Aug. 2020; PTI 7 Aug. 2020); it had 106 seats in the previous parliament (AFP 7 Aug. 2020). The SJB party, a breakaway party from the [UNP], led by Sajith Premadasa, secured 54 seats (AFP 7 Aug. 2020; PTI 7 Aug. 2020). The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) obtained 10 seats, down from 16 seats in the previous parliament (AFP 7 Aug. 2020; PTI 7 Aug. 2020).

Sources report that on 12 August 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa swore into office a new Cabinet that includes two of his brothers and one nephew (AP 12 Aug. 2020; PTI 12 Aug. 2020). Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa was assigned the Finance, Urban Development and Buddhist affairs ministries, while the president's eldest brother, Chamal Rajapaksa became the minister of Irrigation (PTI 12 Aug. 2020; AP 12 Aug. 2020). [Mahinda Rajapaksa's son (PTI 12 Aug. 2020)] Namal Rajapaksa was appointed as youth and sports minister (PTI 12 Aug. 2020; AP 12 Aug. 2020). Gotabaya Rajapaksa also appointed his lawyer, Ali Sabry, as justice minister (AP 12 Aug. 2020).

6. Main Political Parties During the 2020 Legislative Elections

6.1 United National Party (UNP)

The UNP was founded in 1946 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 16; Verité Research Nov. 2017, 3). The *Political Handbook of the World 2018-2019* describes the party as democratic-socialist that "advocates a moderate line and the avoidance of a narrowly 'communal' posture" (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 16). In a report on Sri Lankan political parties published in 2017, Verité Research indicates that the party was founded on a "non-communal" basis, with a "pro-western anti-communist ideology" (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 3). The same source indicates that the UNP has a market-oriented ideology, but that it has "several key welfare initiatives" to its credit (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 4).

Sources report that the UNP was part of the National Democratic Front (NDF) coalition that presented Maithripala Sirisena as a candidate for the 2015 presidential election (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 16; Verité Research Nov. 2017, 16). According to sources, during the 2015 legislative elections, the UNP was part of an informal coalition, the United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) that won 106 seats (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 16; Verité Research Nov. 2017, 7). The UNP then formed a coalition government with a part of the SLFP (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 16; Verité Research Nov. 2017, 7).

The CPA indicates that since the 2019 presidential election, the UNP has faced internal divisions, such as "choosing the Opposition Leader and Party Leader, plans for contesting the Parliamentary Election, the alliance and symbol" (CPA Mar. 2020, 5). The same source further adds that a policy shift, distancing the party from its traditional electoral base, appeared during the 2019 elections where the party candidate, Sajith Premadasa, was "more aligned with aspects of Sinhala nationalist ideology and increased social welfare" (CPA Mar. 2020, 5). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6.1.1 UNP Split and a New Alliance: Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)

PTI reported on 2 March 2020, that, in anticipation of election call, a UNP faction led by Sajith Premadasa formed a new alliance, [SJB (United People's Force)], with smaller Muslim and Tamil parties traditionally allied with the UNP (PTI 2 Mar. 2020). EconomyNext, an economic, financial and political news service focusing on Sri Lanka and based in Colombo (EconomyNext n.d.), indicates that 12 parties joined the alliance on 2 March 2020 which includes "the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Tamil Progressive Alliance, Rishad Bathiudeen's group and two break-away parties from the [SLFP] as well as the United Left Front," among others (EconomyNext 2 Mar. 2020). Other sources specify that the new alliance was a renamed reconstitution of the Ape Jathika Peramuna party (Newstube.lk 10 Feb. 2020; *Daily Mirror* 12 Feb. 2020). PTI indicates that the new alliance was born out of the impossibility to "iron out internal differences" within the UNP and that the UNP leader and former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was not present at the new alliance's launching event (PTI 2 Mar. 2020). Similarly, EconomyNext notes the absence of Wickremesinghe at the event (EconomyNext 2 Mar. 2020).

According to PTI, the main faction of the UNP is also officially contesting the legislative election led by former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, in a contrary move to the UNP working committee's approval of the coalition formed under Premadasa's leadership (PTI 2 Mar. 2020). Similarly, News First, a news website in English, Sinhala and Tamil, indicates that, as two separate entities, the SJB and the UNP were to run in the 2020 general elections (News First 10 June 2020).

6.2 Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (People's Party) (SLPP)

Sources indicate that the SLPP was formed in 2016 (*The Hindu* 10 Oct. 2019; *FP* 11 Aug. 2020). The *Daily Mirror*, a Sri Lankan newspaper, specifies that SLPP is the new name of the political party registered under Our Sri Lanka Freedom Front (Ape Sri Lanka Nidahas Peramuna) and that Professor G.L. Peiris was named as the new chairman (*Daily Mirror* 2 Nov. 2016).

According to sources, the party was created by Mahinda Rajapaksa's supporters (*FP* 11 Aug. 2020; PTI 11 Nov. 2018) as a "platform for his re-entry into politics" (PTI 11 Nov. 2018). Sources report that Mahinda Rajapaksa joined the SLPP on 11 November 2018, during the constitutional crisis, after President Sirisena dissolved the Parliament on (Reuters 11 Nov. 2018; PTI 11 Nov. 2018).

The *Economist* notes that the party puts forward "a hardline approach, favouring Sinhalese nationalism" (*The Economist* 23 July 2020). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In the February 2018 local elections, the SLPP won 40 percent of the votes, leaving the UNP in second place and the SLFP in third (*The Hindu* 10 Oct. 2019). According to the *Daily News*, an English-language newspaper in Sri Lanka, the SLPP won the elections in 231 of the 340 local councils, while the UNP won in 34 councils, and 9 councils were won by the SLFP (*Daily News* 18 June 2020).

6.2.1 Sri Lanka Nidahas Podujana Alliance/Sri Lanka Nidahas Podujana Sandanaya (SLNPA/SLNPS)

Sources report that on 17 February 2020, the SLPP, the SLFP, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, the Sri Lankan Communist Party, the Sama Samaja [Samasamaja] Party, the Democratic Leftist Front, the National Freedom Front, the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party, the Desha Vimukthi Janatha Party and the Pivithuru Hela Urumaya formally formed the SLNPA/SLNPS (News First 17 Feb. 2020; *Europa* n.d.).

6.3 Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)

Sources report that the SLFP was founded in 1951 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019; Verité Research Nov. 2017, 11). Verité Research indicates that the party had a Sinhala nationalist and socialist platform during the 1956 elections (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 11), while *Political Handbook of the World* notes that initially, the party advocated "a neutralist foreign policy and the progressive nationalization of industry" (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 20).

Daily News explains that, after the 2015 elections, the party was divided in two factions: one that participated in the government [until Mr. Sirisena decided to pull the SLFP out of it in October 2018] and another, led by Mahinda Rajapaksa, that remained in the opposition (*Daily News* 18 June 2020). Verité indicated, in 2017, that, as a president, Sirisena had "often criticised the UNP-led privatisation of state-owned enterprises" (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 13). Similarly, the International Crisis Group indicates that during the UNP-SLFP coalition government, headed jointly by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, they had "regularly and publicly reversed each other's policies – notably on the economy and ethnic reconciliation" (International Crisis Group 31 Oct. 2018).

During the 2019 presidential election, the SLFP did not run a candidate, but instead backed Gotabaya Rajapaksa of the SLPP (*The Hindu* 10 Oct. 2019; *Frontline* 8 Nov. 2019), for the first time in its history (*The Hindu* 10 Oct. 2019). The *Daily News* indicates that, in the 2020 legislative elections, the SLFP is part of a coalition led by the SLPP, instead of "being the main party leading the coalition" (*Daily News* 18 June 2020). Other sources similarly report that on 17 February 2020, the SLFP formed an alliance with the SLPP in anticipation of the legislative election (*The Hindu* 18 Feb. 2020; *The Morning* 17 Feb. 2020), registering the coalition as the Sri Lanka Freedom People's Alliance (SLNPS) (*The Morning* 17 Feb. 2020).

6.4 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

Founded in 1964, the JVP is a Marxist-Leninist party with a "strong commitment to the welfare state" against "capitalist ideals and neoliberal economic policies" (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 22). Verité Research indicates that between 1994 and 2008, under the leadership of Somawansa Amarasinghe, the party "assumed an increasingly Sinhala nationalist position" (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 22), while in the post-war period, it has supported the establishment of a truth and reconciliation committee (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 22). However, *the Economist* reports that the party is against "any form of political devolution for the Tamils" (*The Economist* 23 July 2020). According to the party's website, the political bureau includes Anura Dissanayake (party leader), Tilvin Silva (General Secretary), Vijitha Herath (Information Secretary), K.D. Lalkantha (Administrative Secretary), Bimal Ratnayaka (National Organizer) and Sunil Handunneththi (Financial Secretary) (JVP n.d.). According to News First, a faction of JVP members were contesting the election on the Frontline Socialist Party list (News First 10 June 2020).

6.5 Tamil National Alliance (TNA)

The TNA is an alliance between the Sri Lanka Tamil Government Party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, ITAK), the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Ealam (PLOTE) party, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Organization (EPRLF) (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 18). According to the *Economist*, between 2015 and 2019, under the UNP-SLFP government, the TNA was the largest opposition alliance, but "it rarely opposed the government and, on many occasions, supported its policy initiatives" (*The Economist* 23 July 2020). The coalition secured 16 seats in the 2015 election and was recognized as the official chief opposition when the SLFP-UNP coalition government was formed (Verité Research Nov. 2017, 18-19).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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ecoi.net summary:

Query response on Sri Lanka: Political situation (2017 - August 2020)



Country:

Sri Lanka

Source:

[IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#)

Original link:

<https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=458150&p1s=1>

Document type:

Response

Language:

English

Published:

18 August 2020

Document ID:

2037123

Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583 F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

