

**Elections in Sri Lanka**  
*2024 Parliamentary Elections*  
Frequently Asked Questions

Asia-Pacific

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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## Frequently Asked Questions

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### *Disclosure:*

*These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Sri Lankan elections authorities as of....., to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.*

## Election Snapshot

- Election Day: November 14, 2024
- Registered voters: 17,140,354
- Candidates for parliamentary seats: 8,821
- Polling stations: The Election Commission of Sri Lanka will set up more than 13,000 polling centers across 22 electoral districts.
- Advance voting: 738,002 citizens qualify for advance (postal) voting in Sri Lanka

## When is Election Day?

Sri Lanka will hold parliamentary elections on November 14, 2024. The last parliamentary elections were held in August 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who assumed office on September 23, 2024, dissolved Parliament the following day. Gazette No. 2403/13 declared the date of elections and the period for nominations, and fixed November 21, 2024, as the date for the new Parliament to meet. Article 70(1) of Sri Lanka's Constitution allows the President to dissolve Parliament and call for elections at any time after the Parliament has completed a minimum term of two years and six months.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Section 10 of the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 (as amended) gives the President authority to fix the nomination period and the date of elections.

Dissolving Parliament immediately was one of the commitments that Dissanayake made during his campaign, emphasizing that a new government would be required to reshape the political landscape of Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup>

## Why Are These Elections Important?

The parliamentary elections of 2024 will be a decisive one for Sri Lanka, which elected a new president in September. The new president represents a party that held only three seats in the previous Parliament. This election will see non-traditional alliances fielding candidates across the island. Domestic and international observers have been accredited to carry out long- and short-term observation of the election.

The upcoming parliamentary elections are crucial to establish a mandate for the National People's Power (NPP) alliance, which President Dissanayake represents. Established as an alliance of 21 political parties in 2019, the NPP has served one parliamentary term with only three seats: two directly elected members and one national list member. President Dissanayake campaigned and won the election on an anti-corruption mandate and a promise to install a more transparent and accountable government in Sri Lanka. The election of President Dissanayake is seen as the culmination of protests in 2022 that challenged the status quo of Sri Lanka's politics.<sup>3</sup> Without the support of a parliamentary majority, passing most of the structural and policy changes promised by President Dissanayake and his supporters will become challenging. Dissanayake's immediate

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<sup>1</sup> Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution, Article 70 (A).

<sup>2</sup> ["AKD and NPP announce plans to dissolve Parliament on 22 Sept."](#) Daily FT. September 3, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> United States Institute of Peace. 2024. [Sri Lanka's New President Faces Daunting Challenges and High Hopes](#). October 1, 2024.

call for an election is seen as a strategic move to establish control in Parliament while he enjoys momentum from his electoral victory.<sup>4</sup> A parliamentary majority will also help the president establish a full cabinet.

The upcoming election may see a majority of new faces in Parliament, especially among a number of long-serving government representatives, including former President Ranil Wickremesinghe,<sup>5</sup> having decided not to contest.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Are the Political Parties?**

The upcoming elections will reflect a shift from Sri Lanka's traditional political parties and alliances toward newer ones. The National People's Power (NPP) alliance was established in 2019 with 21 member groups, led by the People's Liberation Front, or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The NPP alliance consists of political parties, youth organizations, women's groups, trade unions, and civil society organizations. The JVP has Marxist-Leninist roots and was a revolutionary movement that led two insurrections in 1971 and from 1987 to 1989. President Dissanayake is a longtime member of the JVP, having joined as a student activist. Another leading alliance is the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), led by former opposition leader and presidential candidate Sajith Premadasa. Some candidates within the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, one of the major Muslim political parties, are joining the SJB.

Separate from the SJB, which is a breakaway faction of the United National Party (UNP), some members of the UNP<sup>7</sup> will contest under the banner of the New Democratic Front alliance, under which former President Wickremesinghe contested the presidential election. Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the party of former presidents Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, will also field candidates, although neither will contest the election. The Tamil National Alliance will contest only in Jaffna district. In total, 8,821 candidates across the country are contesting through dozens of political parties and independent groups for the 2024 parliamentary elections.<sup>8</sup>

### **What Is the Structure of the Government?**

Sri Lanka has three main branches of government: the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. The 1978 Constitution identifies the country as a democratic socialist republic governed by a semi-presidential system in which a popularly elected president holds significant executive powers but is responsible to Parliament in the exercise of his or her duties. Parliament is responsible for the exercise of legislative powers.

The executive branch includes the president, prime minister, Cabinet of Ministers, and Public Service Commission. The president is both the head of state and the head of government. The

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<sup>4</sup> Mallawarachchi, Bharatha. 2024. [Sri Lanka's New President Calls Parliamentary Election to Consolidate His Mandate](#). The Diplomat. September 25, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Economynext. 2024. ["Sri Lanka former president won't contest elections, his party stalwarts say."](#) September 24, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Bandara, Kelum. 2024. ["Dozens of MPs to quit parliamentary politics."](#) Daily Mirror Online. October 7, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Adaderana.lk. 2024. ["Major political parties sign nominations for 2024 General Election."](#) October 9, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> The Election Commission of Sri Lanka published a media release stating that there are 432 political parties and 284 independent groups. However, each party or group is counted separately in each district, so these numbers reflect the total number of parties and groups running in the 22 districts. In Digamadulla district, 21 parties and 43 groups are contesting – the largest number in any one district.

president appoints the prime minister and the Cabinet in consultation with the prime minister, and the prime minister must command the support of the Parliament. The legislature comprises the Parliament, made up of 225 members. The judiciary is a system of courts that interprets and applies the law in Sri Lanka. The president appoints the chief justice, president of the Court of Appeal, and judges of the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal upon the recommendation of the Constitutional Council.

The outcome of the election will determine the division of power within the government. If the National People's Power alliance does not secure a majority, the most likely scenario will be the establishment of a coalition government.

### **What Is the Electoral System for these Elections?**

Of the 225 seats, 196 members of Parliament (MPs) are directly elected from 22 multi-member electoral districts<sup>9</sup> and 29 MPs are indirectly elected through a national list through an open-list proportional system with multi-member districts. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka determines the allocation of seats proportional to the voting population of each electoral district. The largest allocations are in Gampaha and Colombo, with 19 and 18 seats, respectively. Colombo and Vanni districts now have one seat less than the 2020 seat allocation while Gampaha and Kalutara have each gained one seat.<sup>10</sup>

The 196 seats in the 22 multi-member districts are allocated based on the percentage of votes that a political party or independent group received in the district. The winning party in the district is entitled to a "bonus" seat. As outlined in Article 99 of the Constitution, each voter marks an X next to the name of one party or independent group in his or her electoral district. Individual candidates are assigned serial numbers based on the alphabetical order of names (as listed in Sinhala), and voters may select up to three candidates within the political party or independent group by marking an X over their serial numbers on the ballot. A party or group must also obtain more than 5 percent of the vote in the district to gain a seat. If it does not meet the 5 percent threshold, the votes for that party or group count will be eliminated from the count at the district level but will still be counted towards seats at the national level.

The remaining 29 seats, part of one nationwide constituency, are allocated in proportion to the share of national votes received by political parties or independent groups. As per Article 99A of the Constitution, a political party or independent group may determine who is selected for these additional seats from either its national list or any of the candidate lists it uses at the district level, regardless of the number of votes that the candidate receives. However, there have been instances in which persons who were not nominated for the national list at the time of the election were later appointed to Parliament to fill vacancies. Some of those appointments have been

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<sup>9</sup> Sri Lanka has 25 administrative districts. The electoral district of Jaffna includes two administrative districts (Jaffna and Kilinochchim), and the electoral district of Vanni includes three (Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya).

<sup>10</sup> Election Commission of Sri Lanka Media release PE/2024/01. [Placing deposits by Independent Groups under Section 16 of the Parliamentary Elections Act, No. 01 of 1981 and the Number of Candidates to be nominated by Political Parties or Independent Groups for each Electoral District](#). September 25, 2024.

challenged in the Supreme Court, which has not rendered a conclusive decision on the constitutionality of such outside appointments.<sup>11</sup>

### **What Is the Election Management body? What Are Its Powers?**

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) is the independent body that oversees the conduct of presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and local elections, as well as referenda, in the country, ensuring they are free and fair. Its mandate is found in Article 104B of the Constitution. The president appoints the five members of the ECSL, as recommended by the Constitutional Council. The members of the current commission were appointed between July 2023 and January 2024.

The commissioner general of elections is the head of the Elections Secretariat. The commissioner general, along with ECSL staff, is responsible for the administration of elections. The six divisions of the secretariat manage operations throughout the ECSL's 25 district offices. The duties of the secretariat include registering voters, managing electoral rolls, ensuring compliance with election laws, and handling logistics on Election Day. The secretariat operates from ECSL headquarters in Rajagiriya, Colombo.

In addition to its mandate to oversee elections, the ECSL prepares and revises the electoral register, secures the enforcement of electoral laws, regulates the use of state resources during elections, provides guidelines for print and electronic media on election reporting, and regulates campaign expenditures per the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023. The ECSL is answerable to Parliament.

It is the duty of the ECSL to ensure that all citizens exercise their franchise in secret and without intimidation. The ECSL also conducts voter education and creates a level playing field for all candidates.

### **What Is the Process for Nominating Candidates? What Is the Campaign Timeline?**

Candidates may be nominated by political parties or run as part of independent groups that are not registered as political parties. Any recognized political party or independent group must submit one nomination paper for each electoral district in which it is competing, identifying all the candidates contesting in that district for that party or group. Each party may nominate a number of candidates that corresponds to the number of seats for that electoral district plus three. For example, Colombo district has 18 seats, and each party can nominate up to 21 individual candidates.<sup>12</sup>

The nomination period begins 14 days after the publication of the gazette establishing the election date and expires seven days later. Accordingly, the nomination period for the parliamentary election closed on October 11.

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<sup>11</sup> Section 64 (5) of the Parliamentary Elections Act conflicts with Article 99 (A) of the Constitution on this matter, but the Supreme Court can only resolve such a conflict before a law has been passed, not afterward.

<sup>12</sup> Election Commission of Sri Lanka Media release PE/2024/01. [Placing deposits by Independent Groups under Section 16 of the Parliamentary Elections Act, No. 01 of 1981 and the Number of Candidates to be nominated by Political Parties or Independent Groups for each Electoral District](#). September 25, 2024.

## **Are There Any Provisions for Women’s Representation?**

There are no reserved seats or other special provisions for women in Parliament. Key electoral stakeholders, including women’s groups and Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs, have repeatedly advocated for political parties to provide opportunities for women candidates in the elections, but no law mandates this measure. The percentage of women parliamentarians in the eighth (2015–2020) and ninth (2020–2024) parliaments have been among the lowest in the world, with only 5.7 percent and 5.3 percent, respectively – and dropping to just 4.4 percent after the departure of two women in 2024. Furthermore, only one woman served in former President Wickremesinghe’s cabinet of 22 ministers, and no women served as state ministers. The newly appointed interim government of President Dissanayake appointed a woman, the National People’s Power alliance’s national list member Harini Amarasuriya, as prime minister.

## **What Is the Gender Balance Within the Candidate List?**

In the upcoming election, approximately 15 percent of the candidates are reported to be women (this figure is approximate, as final nomination lists had not been published at the time of writing). In the 2020 parliamentary election the proportion of women candidates was approximately 10 percent, or 715 of the 7,452 candidates.<sup>13</sup>

## **What Are the Campaign Expenditure and Donation Limits?**

Before 2023, Sri Lanka had no regulatory framework for political finance or campaign expenditures. The Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023 (REEA) filled this gap and introduced a framework for regulating campaign expenditures during elections. Although the REEA includes several legal ambiguities, it has made a start at limiting corruption vulnerabilities related to elections. After the REEA provisions were applied for the most recent presidential election, three of the 38 candidates failed to submit campaign expense records. Accordingly, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) referred those candidates to the police.<sup>14</sup>

There are no donation limits, but candidates and parties are required to disclose the source of donations. Candidates must also submit declarations of their assets and liabilities at the time of nomination.

The ECSL, adhering to the REEA, consulted with political parties, independent groups, and candidates following the close of nominations to determine the campaign spending limits. As a result of the consultations, the ECSL published campaign finance limits. The maximum amount varies by electoral district. For example, the maximum a candidate can spend in Colombo district is 5.75 million rupees; a political party or independent group can spend close to 80 million rupees in the district.<sup>15</sup> Amounts are determined by multiplying the authorized amount per voter by the total number of voters registered to vote in the upcoming election.

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<sup>13</sup> People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections. 2020. [Parliamentary Election 2020 Final Report](#).

<sup>14</sup> Fernandopulle, Sheain. [“Three presidential candidates in hot water for failing to submit expense reports.”](#) Daily Mirror Online. October 14, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Election Commission of Sri Lanka. Media release PE/2024/27. [‘Parliamentary Elections – 2024 November 14. Provisions in line with the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No 3 of 2023](#) (in Sinhala). October 17, 2024.

## **Who Can Vote in These Elections?**

Eligibility to vote in Sri Lanka is governed by Articles 88 and 89 of the Constitution. Any citizen of Sri Lanka who is 18 years of age or older and correctly registered in the electoral register is eligible to vote. Citizens are disqualified from voting if they have been found to be of “unsound mind” under Sri Lankan law<sup>16</sup> or have been convicted of corruption or illegal practices related to elections.

## **How Many Registered Voters Are There?**

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka maintains a continuous voter list that it updates every four months to add voters who reach 18 years of age. An annual door-to-door manual enumeration updates the voter registry. Online registration has also been made possible.

As of the latest update of the voter list, dated July 8, 2024, 17,140,354 voters are registered in Sri Lanka. The smallest of the 22 electoral districts is Vanni, with 306,081 voters; the largest is Gampaha, with 1,881,129 voters. Colombo district has 1,765,351 voters.

## **Is Out-of-Country Voting Allowed?**

Out-of-country voting does not exist in Sri Lanka. Overseas migrant workers are the group most affected by this. There are approximately 1.6 million adult Sri Lankans working overseas, mainly in the Gulf region. A parliamentary select committee appointed to look into the matter during the ninth Parliament did not produce any concrete results.

## **What Provisions Are in Place that Support the Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities?**

Elections (Special Provisions) Act No. 28 of 2011 introduced provisions to enable voters with disabilities to be accompanied by an assistant to help them vote. Accordingly, voters with disabilities must produce a statement of eligibility in the prescribed format, certified by the village officer and a government medical officer. It is mandatory for the assistant to be qualified as an elector. A person with a disability also has the option to request the support of polling center officials to cast his or her vote. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) will use the specially developed tactile ballot guide for persons with visual disabilities that was introduced country-wide during the 2024 presidential election. In advance of the presidential election, a cadre of ECSL district election officials and senior presiding officers received special training in Sri Lankan and Tamil sign language to communicate with voters who are deaf or hard of hearing. The same officials and workers will be deployed during the parliamentary elections.

## **Are there Special Voting Arrangements for Voters Who Cannot Vote on Election Day?**

Sri Lanka allows some advance voting, referred to as postal voting. The purpose is to enable eligible voters who cannot vote in person on Election Day to cast ballots. For the 2024 parliamentary election, 738,002 citizens qualify for advance voting. According to the

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<sup>16</sup> The Sri Lankan legal framework still uses the term “unsound mind,” which is considered a disqualification to legal citizenship. The concept of unsound mind applies in both criminal and civil procedures in Sri Lanka as an exemption for legal responsibility. Sri Lanka has not updated the relevant legal provisions, although they contravene the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Sri Lanka ratified in 2016.

Parliamentary Elections Act of 1981, voters who believe they are unable to vote in person on Election Day may apply if they:

- Are members of the Sri Lankan armed forces or police force;
- Hold some civil service positions related to transport, prisons, and communications;
- Serve as other officers or public servants or work for the Central Bank or Local Government Service; or
- Are candidates for the election, on the grounds that they are unlikely to be able to vote in person at their assigned polling stations.

The advance voting system involves physically casting a vote, usually at the offices of the head of the police or the administrative secretary. Votes can usually be cast a few weeks before Election Day. Postal voting dates for the parliamentary elections were fixed for October 30 and November 1 and 4 at all district secretariats and election offices, with additional voting on November 7 and 8 for those unable to mark their ballots on the designated days.

Apart from the essential workers listed above, Sri Lankan law makes no provisions for absentee voting. Mobile voting is not available to voters who are in hospitals or institutions or who cannot leave their residences to vote. The electoral legal framework explicitly prohibits proxy voting.

Various parliamentary select committees and a presidential commission of inquiry have recommended liberalizing voting arrangements, among other electoral reforms.

### **Who Can Observe During Election Day?**

Sri Lanka's legal framework does not address election observation. In practice, however, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) has accredited national and international election observers. For the 2024 parliamentary election, international and national groups have received accreditation to observe the election and will deploy both long- and short-term observers. In addition, some observer groups are monitoring social and traditional media for hate speech, disinformation, and abuse of state resources. Domestic observer groups include the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, Campaign for Free and Fair Elections, and others. The Asian Network for Free and Fair Elections will deploy an international observation mission, and reportedly there will be a limited expert mission from the European Union.

### **Who is Managing Security on Election Day?**

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) receives the support of the Sri Lanka Police to manage security on Election Day and for the counting process. The police are required to provide security for campaign events, the printing of ballot papers, and advance (postal) voting. They also handle election complaints. During the election period, police on election duty fall under the command of the ECSL as per Article 104 (C) of the Constitution read with Section 127A of the Parliamentary Elections Act.

The ECSL may request that the president deploy the military to provide security. Security by military personnel is provided only during times of crisis such as civil war, internal conflict, or the

COVID-19 pandemic. The command structure of the military does not change during the election period.

### **Where Are Vote Counting and Tabulation Held?**

For parliamentary elections, vote counting and tabulation will be carried out in approximately 1,400 counting centers across Sri Lanka's 25 administrative districts. Each counting station will count votes from approximately 10 polling stations, and there will be dozens of counting stations in each counting center. Each political party or independent group may appoint two to five counting agents, depending on the capacity of the counting center.<sup>17</sup> Advance (postal) votes are counted separately.

### **How Are Votes Counted and Tabulated?**

Vote counting and tabulation are carried out in three stages at counting centers. In the first stage, the chief counting officer and counting staff appointed by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka count the number of ballot papers in each box. In the second stage, the chief counting officer and counting staff sort and count the ballot papers according to the votes cast in favor of each party or group in the electoral district. In the third stage, candidate preferences are counted to determine the total number of votes that each candidate in the electoral district received. Returning officers, through assistant returning officers, will direct chief counting officers and counting staff to begin counting votes. Historically, vote counting and tabulation were conducted on Election Day after the closing of polls and through the night. However, in 2020, due to COVID precautions, vote counting started the day after the election.

### **When and How Are Final Results Released?**

Upon the approval of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL), results will be announced in two stages: first the vote counts according to contested political parties and then the counts of preferences received by each candidate. Results will be announced first for each polling area and later for the entire electoral district.<sup>18</sup> The ECSL chairman will announce the nationwide results. In the past, results have typically been announced as early as the night of Election Day. In 2020, they were announced around 3 a.m. two days following the election.<sup>19</sup>

### **How Will Election Disputes Be Adjudicated?**

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) is widely seen as the arbiter of all election-related matters during the electoral period. However, its actions, remedies, and sanctions depend to a great extent on the executive and judicial institutions involved in the process. The ECSL has established a temporary National Election Complaints Management Center and election complaints management centers in each district to receive and, where relevant, address election complaints. Any citizen or a group of citizens can file a complaint regarding a violation of the election law. These include offenses under the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of

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<sup>17</sup> Parliamentary Elections Act, Section 51.

<sup>18</sup> The electoral district is the largest geographic unit. Each electoral district contains multiple polling areas, and each polling area contains multiple polling centers.

<sup>19</sup> Election Commission of Sri Lanka. [Parliamentary Election Results](#).

2023 and the Anti-Corruption Act No 9 of 2023 (ACA). The ECSL provides a format for filing complaints.

These include non-criminal complaints related to the illegal display of posters; violations by public officers; intimidation of voters and candidates; media violations; illegal campaigning during the election period; misuse of state resources; breaches of codes of conduct, regulations, or guidelines adopted by the ECSL; and intra-party disputes, among other areas. The election complaints management centers are intended to conduct an alternative dispute resolution process to resolve disputes through mediation and consultation, but they have no adjudicatory function or judicial power.

Filing complaints at election complaints centers does not prevent individuals from filing complaints alleging an election offense or a corrupt or illegal practice directly with the police or the courts as provided in the election laws. The police and judiciary retain authority to investigate and prosecute criminal actions.

Sri Lanka's Constitution gives the Supreme Court the authority to hear specific electoral cases, such as appeals to electoral petitions or cases heard at the lower court level, and cases related to challenges to fundamental rights, as identified in Sri Lanka's Constitution. As part of its responsibility to hear fundamental rights petitions, the Supreme Court retains sole and final jurisdiction over complaints against the ECSL.

Sri Lankan law outlines a number of elections offenses that are punishable by law. These include:

- Forging or destroying nomination or ballot papers;
- Selling or illegally supplying or possessing ballot papers;
- Tampering with ballot boxes, ballots, or other materials;
- Knowingly voting in an election by anyone who is legally disqualified from voting;
- Voting in person or by post as another person;
- Voting more than once in an election or not under a voter's own name;
- Making threats to or unduly influencing voters;
- Using religious assemblies, places, events for political campaigns;
- Committing bribery;
- Making payments or contracting for the illegal transport of voters or using private premises for the distribution election propaganda materials and illegal campaign work; and
- Publishing false reports that are capable of influencing results in newspapers.

Sri Lankan law also prohibits certain activities within 500 meters of a polling station. These include canvassing for votes, soliciting votes, distributing campaign materials, operating any loudspeaker, holding processions (except for religious or social events) or meetings, and related activities. These are classified as elections offenses and punishable by law.

The ECSL's main complaints management hotlines are 011 279 6549, 011 279 6533, and 070 539 6999, and the email address is [pres2024@elections.gov.lk](mailto:pres2024@elections.gov.lk).

## **Resources**

- [Election Commission of Sri Lanka](#)
- [Parliament of Sri Lanka](#)
- [President of Sri Lanka](#)
- [Supreme Court of Sri Lanka](#)
- [Constitution of Sri Lanka](#)
- [Parliamentary Elections Act](#)

## **About IFES in Sri Lanka**

For nearly two decades, IFES has worked with the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) and local civil society partners to promote electoral integrity and democratic rights, and accessible elections. IFES' current programming is carried out with support from the United States Agency for International Development and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. IFES' programming supports the ECSL in responding to emerging electoral threats; safeguarding democratic principles; and building the leadership capacity of women, youth, and people with disabilities and enhancing the inclusion of these historically marginalized groups in the electoral process.

## **Disclosure**

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka as of October 24, 2024, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any International Foundation for Electoral Systems policy or technical recommendations.

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