

Sri Lanka: Campaign expenditure ceiling: Small players can't spend even the bare minimum

Tuesday 29 October 2024, by [CHAMARA Sumudu](#), [KULARATHNA Sithara](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2024).

Jana Aragala Sandhanaya's election candidate Sithara Kularathna explains the travails of having shallow pockets in the context of electoral politics and conducting a campaign under such restrained circumstances

Sri Lanka is in need of economic and social transformation, and new public representatives with novel ideas and skills are necessary to achieve it.

According to the Jana Aragala Sandhanaya's (JAS) General/Parliamentary Election candidate Sithara Kularathna however, entering and thriving in Sri Lanka's politics dominated by wealthy and influential political parties remains a massive challenge to newer candidates.

Therefore, they are more in need of the people's support now more than before. She made these remarks during an interview with *The Daily Morning*, where she explained challenges faced by and the priorities of relatively newer political movements contesting the upcoming General Election.

Following are excerpts from the interview:

What is it like to contest in the General Election as a woman through a relatively newer coalition? How challenging is it?

Generally, when a woman tries to enter politics, she has to face issues that they face in the general society. These issues include our society not yet being adequately open-minded to accept women who are engaged in politics or social work outside their traditional household duties. When it comes to politics, I'm not talking only about election related politics. I refer to the act of taking a stance when we or others around us are facing issues, and also when it comes to the country's common issues. In all these circumstances, women have to face challenges posed by the general society.

Political campaigns are a staple in any election. How has being a member of a newer political movement impacted the need and ability to launch campaigns?

When it comes to election-related politics, the JAS is a new coalition formed targeting the election. We don't have monetary resources to freely spend on the Election. We don't have money to launch massive campaigns. Our politics depend on the people's support and contributions. Many political campaigns in Sri Lanka's political arena have massive budgets. During the Presidential Election, the Election Commission (EC) had imposed a limitation on the amount of money that can be spent for election campaigns. We however don't have funds to spend at least such a minimum amount. We observe that in Sri Lanka's politics, political movements, and political parties that can spend a lot, including on television advertisements and social media campaigns, are the ones who attract the most attention and stand out. Being a small party, this situation is a challenge to us.

How do you overcome those challenges?

In the said context, we rely mostly on canvassing. We visit houses, and talk to the people about our politics. We conduct small-scale meetings in various areas, and rallies at the District level. In addition, we try to connect with the people through social media in order to inform them of our politics. We constantly have to fight with large-scale political movements and political parties that are in a position to spend a lot on their campaigns. Even when it comes to freely accessible platforms such as social media, it is difficult to stand out without spending money to promote social media content. Even the expense-related limitations set by the EC are a challenge to small parties like ours.

Sri Lanka's political system is already dominated by several influential and established parties. What do you think about entering such an environment through a relatively newer political movement?

We are a coalition of three left-wing political parties that have been in politics for a long time. In addition, this coalition includes social activists, trade union leaders, and media personnel who played an active role during the 'aragalaya' movement as well as various other activists who have been engaged in politics with various groups and as individuals. We have been facing these challenges for some time, because we engaged in politics with the people including through participating in and giving leadership to the people's struggles. We have accepted that challenge because we believe in politics centred around the people. Take Sri Lanka's agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The stance on the IMF agreement is extremely crucial at this point as the country's economy, including solutions to the debt burden and the economic crisis, depend largely on the IMF agreement. We are the only political group saying that we should withdraw from the IMF agreement and that moving forward with the IMF will not provide solutions to the people's issues. We think that regardless of how challenging it is, we must base our politics on the people and take it to the people.

How do you decide on priorities, and what is the decision-making process that you are involved in, like?

We have a national executive board, which includes representatives from all member parties of the coalition as well as other individual activists. It is that board that decides what we prioritise in our coalition's politics. Among the priority areas that we have identified at present are our stance on Sri Lanka's agreement with the IMF, and resolving the debt crisis regarding which we have presented solutions in our manifesto. Our solutions focus on how to deal with these challenges without placing the burden on the people, because at present, the burden of the economic crisis has been placed on the people who are not responsible for the crisis. When we look at the conditions stipulated in the IMF agreement, we are of the opinion that there are other parties that are trying to take advantage of this situation. This includes large-scale companies and the wealthy based in India who, for example, are waiting to buy our land. India's economic influence on Sri Lanka is another matter that has received great attention from our end.

In that process, what is the state of women's representation?

There are women in the said board, which is the primary body that takes decisions. When we look at women members of the board, we have not been given that position merely for being women. When we include women in the decision-making process, we take into account whether they have been active in politics, even if their activism was not related to elections, and the extent to which they have worked alongside the people and in the people's struggles. Their qualifications are not limited to being women. We however believe that both men and women should receive equal opportunities.

Sithara Kularathna

Sumudu Chamara

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

The Morning

https://www.themorning.lk/articles/hYQX9Vp3IyeNtJnRJ5rA?fbclid=IwY2xjawGITrIleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHZN4gSbWXcv45wyqZcjRRnUIkO7bnQcHOXJVxnn-D1zpL_DBCAhhLGBwIQ_aem_drfI3E6YsUwXFo8SYeMxsw&sfnsn=mo