

Sri Lanka's 2024 Election Revolution: NPP Victory Ends Era of Patronage Politics

"Voters demand economic justice and systemic reform, but can the new left government deliver

Friday 6 December 2024, by [JOHNSON Mark](#), [PolityLK](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2024).

Sri Lanka's shock election results, which saw the left-wing National People's Power secure a stunning two-thirds majority, reflect deep-seated frustrations with a political establishment that failed to prevent economic collapse. While voters across ethnic and regional divides united behind the NPP's promise of systemic change, concerns linger about whether the new government can deliver. Academics, students and researchers interviewed by PolityLK expressed cautious optimism tempered by worries about the NPP's apparent backtracking on key manifesto promises like IMF loan renegotiation and reform of controversial laws. Many see this as a pivotal moment - perhaps the last chance to address Sri Lanka's structural problems before disillusionment sets in. The unprecedented mandate brings both opportunity and risk.

The End of Patronage Politics

The election marked a decisive rejection of the patronage-based politics that has dominated Sri Lanka for decades. As Harindra notes, even powerful regional leaders who had secured thousands of government jobs for supporters saw their support collapse, demonstrating the fragility of transactional politics when patrons can no longer deliver benefits. The results showed voters prioritising systemic change over traditional patron-client relationships.

A Unified Mandate Across Ethnic Lines

Perhaps most striking was the NPP's ability to win support across Sri Lanka's ethnic divides. The party secured unprecedented victories in Tamil-majority areas in the North and East, though as Ammaarah cautions, vote fragmentation suggests lingering scepticism. This represents what Rajni calls a "more unifying mandate" compared to the presidential election, potentially creating space for addressing long-standing ethnic grievances.

Economic Justice vs IMF Austerity

A core tension emerges between voters' demands for economic relief and the constraints of Sri Lanka's IMF programme. Niyanthini argues there is only a "narrow window of time before discontent sets in again" and calls for immediate reversal of austerity measures affecting women, children and workers. However, the NPP faces what Rajni calls "political realities" in delivering on its economic promises while managing international obligations.

Reform Expectations and Governance Challenges

Interviewees highlighted several urgent priorities:

- Reform of controversial laws like the PTA and MMDA that disproportionately affect minorities
- Protecting and strengthening welfare systems, particularly education and healthcare
- Environmental protection and sustainable development
- Civil service reform to tackle corruption

However, Ramesh notes that good politics doesn't automatically translate to good governance, warning of potential conflicts between the NPP's reform agenda and an entrenched bureaucracy.

Conclusion: A Critical Window for Change

The NPP's historic victory opens a rare window for progressive reform in Sri Lanka. However, the government must carefully balance high public expectations against institutional constraints and resistance from vested interests. Its success or failure could determine whether this represents a genuine turning point or another false dawn for Sri Lankan democracy. Managing this tension while maintaining public trust through clear communication about both possibilities and limitations will be crucial.

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