

# Sri Lanka's 2024 Presidential Election

August 30, 2024

The South Asian island state of Sri Lanka is scheduled to hold a presidential election on September 21, 2024, its first since protests fueled by a severe economic crisis forced former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign and flee the country in July 2022. Some observers say this crisis has sparked [widespread disillusionment](#) with Sri Lanka's political establishment and the economic reforms the government undertook to address it, which have increased taxes and the cost of living. Thirty-nine candidates registered to run for president, and [polling](#) suggests candidates from outside the country's two dominant political parties are more competitive than they have been in the last two decades.

The [Biden Administration](#) “aims to support Sri Lanka’s democratic institutions, encourage its economic development, counter terrorism,” and work with the government to “promote a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.” Congress has shaped U.S. policy toward Sri Lanka and has focused on promoting accountability following the end of the country’s civil war in 2009, protecting human rights, strengthening democracy, and responding to the strategic implications of Sri Lanka’s growing relationship with China. Congress may consider whether the election is conducted in a safe, transparent, and inclusive manner, and whether a new and potentially more democratic government offers opportunities to expand U.S.-Sri Lanka cooperation.

## Background

[Sri Lanka](#) is a mixed-parliamentary system with a unicameral legislature, which Freedom House rated as “[partly free](#)” in 2023. The president is elected to a five-year term and is the head of state, commander in chief of the armed forces, and the head of government. The prime minister is appointed by the president and customarily is the leader of the ruling party in Parliament, and shares some executive responsibilities.

From 1983 to 2009 the government fought a 26-year civil war against the Tamil militant separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who fought to establish a separate state in Sri Lanka in light of official discrimination against ethnic Tamils by the majority Sinhalese. After the war ended in 2009, President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) kept many [repressive](#) emergency and anti-terrorism laws in place, repressed the media and political opponents, manipulated elections, and silenced civil society. He also [expanded](#) funding for the military and put [family](#) members in positions of control over major sectors of the economy. In Sri Lanka’s last presidential election, Mahinda’s brother—and defense minister—Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected on a security-focused platform. The Rajapaksas’ Sri Lanka Podujana

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Peramuna (SLPP) party solidified its dominance in the [2020 parliamentary elections](#) and subsequently amended the constitution to [expand](#) the president's power—allowing the president to hold other ministerial positions, appoint and dismiss ministers, dissolve parliament more frequently, and appoint members of the elections, public service, police, human rights, and corruption investigation commissions.

In 2022, Sri Lanka experienced its [worst economic crisis since independence](#): inflation reached 60%, the currency depreciated by over 80% against the U.S. dollar, and the government defaulted on its debt. Sri Lanka's gross domestic product contracted by an estimated 7.9% in 2022, poverty rates doubled to 25% of the total population, and half a million workers lost their jobs. Thousands of Sri Lankans protested the government's handling of the situation, ultimately overrunning the president's and prime minister's residences and forcing them to resign and leave the country.

## Presidential Candidates

Sri Lanka's economic upheaval and the public's reaction have disrupted the political status quo, and Sri Lanka's ranked choice voting—which counts voters' second and third preferences if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote—raises the probability of an unexpected result. Multiple candidates with strong public and/or organizational support are offering different visions for Sri Lanka's future, as well as different approaches to issues of interest to Congress, including democracy, human rights, and Sri Lanka's role in the region.

Current President **Ranil Wickremesinghe**, who was selected by Parliament in the midst of the 2022 crisis, is running on his success in addressing food, fuel and other shortages, and in negotiating a \$3 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Wickremesinghe has maintained and deepened some of his predecessors' anti-democratic policies, specifically the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act to repress protests. An [August 2024 report](#) from the U.N. Human Rights Council notes his government has “introduced an array of new or proposed laws which give broad powers to the security forces and significantly expand pre-existing restrictions on freedom of expression and opinion and association.” Wickremesinghe has been described as “[pro-western](#),” but calls himself “[Pro-Sri Lanka](#)” and willing to work with any partner. Wickremesinghe has lost two previous bids for the presidency.

**Sajith Premadasa** leads the Samagi Jana Party, the main opposition party that broke away from Wickremesinghe's United National Party in 2020 but espouses similar policies. Premadasa has promised to [renegotiate](#) Sri Lanka's IMF deal, to increase [support](#) to poor Sri Lankans, and to [address the concerns](#) of ethnic and religious minorities. Premadasa promises a “[multi-aligned](#)” foreign policy.

**A. K. Dissanayake**'s National People's Party is a left-wing party derived from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) movement, a Marxist organization involved in armed uprisings against the government of Sri Lanka in 1971 and 1987-1989. A vocal campaigner against corruption, Dissanayake's [popularity](#) surged in the wake of the 2022 crisis. He has [promised](#) to negotiate changes to the IMF program, cut taxes, investigate human rights abuses, and return to parliamentary democracy. Dissanayake espouses a [non-aligned foreign policy](#).

**Namal Rajapaksa**, son of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, won the SLPP's [presidential nomination](#). The SLPP and the Rajapaksa family have borne the brunt of public anger over the country's economic crisis, but the SLPP remains the ruling party until parliamentary elections expected in August 2025. Previous Rajapaksa governments were notable for pursuing ethnically divisive policies, [militarizing](#) the country, [criticizing](#) the U.S. and European governments—especially for “bullying” on human rights—and courting closer ties to China.

A [July 2024 poll](#) has Premadasa and Dissanayake essentially tied in the lead, with President Wickremesinghe in third.

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