

Sri Lanka's Watershed Election

October 2, 2024

Anura Kumara Disسانayake, popularly known as “AKD,” was sworn in as [Sri Lanka's ninth executive president](#) on September 23. He is Sri Lanka's first president not associated with one of the country's two dominant parties or their offshoots. The election was conducted peacefully, and an international election monitoring group called the polls “[credible and transparent](#).” Dissayanake's victory has been interpreted by many as a [rejection](#) of the corrupt, elite-dominated political status quo and the national leaders associated with Sri Lanka's social and economic problems. If realized, his [vision for Sri Lanka](#) could mark a dramatic change of direction for the country on a range of issues of substantial interest to the international community and the U.S. Congress, including democracy, human rights, and economic recovery.

Dissanayake campaigned on anti-corruption, clean government, and relief for ordinary Sri Lankans who have borne the brunt of the country's economic woes. In his [remarks](#) following his swearing in, Dissayanake pledged to “cultivate a more ethical and transparent political culture.” Dissayanake immediately [dissolved](#) the country's parliament, called new elections for November 14, 2024, and appointed Dr. [Harini Amarasuriya](#) as prime minister. An academic and activist, Amarasuriya is a first-time parliamentarian and the country's third woman prime minister—the first without family ties to politics. The prime minister [serves](#) as the president's deputy and shares some executive duties.

During the campaign, Dissanayake also emphasized his support for addressing the country's human rights and social justice issues and promoting national unity. Addressing human rights concerns has been a priority for the United States and Congress over the past 15 years. Concerns include the militarization of the country, the lack of accountability for abuses committed during the government's 26-year civil war against the ethnic Tamil militant separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), restrictions on media and civil society, and repression of activists, journalists, and others.

Insurgent to President

Dissanayake leads the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front), founded in 1965 as a [Marxist party](#) for workers, farmers, and students. The JVP took up arms against what it called “the unlawful, unjust repression of the government” in 1971 and 1987-1990; those insurrections resulted in over 1,000 and as many as 60,000 deaths, respectively. Under Dissanayake the JVP [evolved](#) into a more moderate, mainstream party, but never garnered significant national support.

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Dissanayake also leads the National People's Power alliance, a coalition of socialist parties that includes the JVP (NPP/JVP) and that rose to prominence during the “[Aragalaya](#)” anti-government uprising during Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis. After those protests forced the resignation of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's successor government successfully negotiated an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout, restructured its debt with external creditors, and won [praise](#) for its reforms and nascent economic recovery. The new government also maintained and deepened many of its predecessor's anti-democratic policies and “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,” according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

A Mandate for Change?

While Dissanayake won the [presidential election](#) decisively with 42% of the vote (the runner up received 33%, and Dissanayake broke 55% when voters' second- and third-ranked choices were counted), he will need his coalition to perform well in the November legislative elections in order to pass promised reforms. The NPP/JVP held 3 of 225 seats in parliament prior to the body's dissolution. An [August 2024 poll](#) showed the NPP/JVP statistically tied with the Samagi Jandissanayakea Balawegaya (SJB) party at 29% and 28% of voter support, respectively. The Rajapaksa family's Sri Lanka Podujana Permana (SLPP) party garnered “substantially more support” (19%) than its presidential candidate (2.5%), suggesting the former ruling party remains a political force.

Democracy, Human Rights, and Accountability

In a post on X after his victory, [Dissanayake wrote](#), “This victory belongs to all of us.... [T]he unity of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and all Sri Lankans is the bedrock of this new beginning.” His [election platform](#) promised investigations into political killings and disappearances, a functioning Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Commission Against Discrimination, but Dissanayake reportedly [suggested](#) his government will not seek to punish perpetrators of past war crimes. The JVP historically has been associated with Sinhalese nationalism, and Dissanayake [fared poorly](#) in Tamil areas of northern Sri Lanka, where he made only one campaign appearance.

The IMF and the Economy

Dissanayake made renegotiating the terms of the country's \$3 billion IMF program central to his campaign, and he [met with IMF officials](#) on October 3 and 4 to discuss ways to alleviate burdens on citizens. IMF approval of Sri Lanka's performance under the program is necessary for the government to receive the fourth program disbursement—about \$337 million—and underpins Sri Lanka's debt restructuring with external creditors. The [IMF program](#) emphasizes the need to reform social programs to protect the poor, but also requires improved revenue collection and disciplined spending in order to make the government's debt sustainable. Dissanayake [has said](#) that higher taxes and spending cuts primarily impacted the working class, and has argued for changes to the program to reduce that burden. It remains to be seen whether his government will win the domestic support—and latitude from the international community—to make such changes, and whether he will embrace the reforms needed to support Sri Lanka's economic recovery.

International Relations

Dissanayake's election is not expected to bring major changes to the country's foreign relations. Although the JVP historically has had warm ties to China and a contentious relationship with India—which helped put down the party's armed insurrections—Dissanayake has [emphasized](#) his intention to pursue cordial

relations with all nations. He visited [India](#), [China](#), and the United States earlier this year in an effort to shore up ties and meet Sri Lankans overseas, and has interacted with representatives from dozens of countries since his election. To maintain Sri Lanka's economic recovery, Dissanayake will need strong relations with creditor organizations and nations—including India, China, and the United States.

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