

The cost of politics in **Sri Lanka**

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Introduction

The relationship between money and politics has remained a persistent concern for advocates and activists of free and fair elections in Sri Lanka. Across urban and rural political landscapes, and throughout the various stages of electoral politics, money has become a common feature with individual contestants from all political parties required to make a hefty financial outlay to etch their name and number into the minds of voters. Although electoral success cannot be bought with money alone, history attests to the rarity of candidates achieving it without significant spending, the financial backing of other interested individuals, organisations, or groups, or a family history in politics.

The prominence of money, aligned with an election culture in Sri Lanka which promotes personalities above comprehensive discussions on policy, diminishes the focus on accountability and transparency, not just during campaigns but also in the decisions taken by those elected to public office. This report aims to support an improved understanding of the underlying drivers, and types, of expenses associated with parliamentary politics in Sri Lanka, encompassing not only the election campaign period but also the periods preceding and following the vote. In doing so it seeks to assess the impact of these political costs on Sri Lankan democracy and considers practical solutions that can be introduced to limit the importance of money in politics.

Methodology

In accordance with Westminster Foundation for Democracy's "cost of politics approach", comprehensive information on the various costs associated with parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka was gathered. This starts with the moment an individual decides to enter parliamentary politics and extends to when they run for candidacy; when campaigning for votes; and the costs that follow being elected or selected through the national list². The study seeks to understand the drivers of these costs and to think through the impact that they are having on electoral democracy.

Information was obtained through two main approaches. Firstly, desk research was conducted using freely available secondary sources such as scientific articles, opinion pieces and electoral observation and evaluation reports from national and international organisations. Secondly, to gain a well-rounded understanding of the subject, four focus group discussions (FGDs) and 24 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in Colombo. Interviews and FGDs were held with political aspirants, members of parliament (MPs), former MPs, former unsuccessful candidates with campaign experiences, senior political party officials, community leaders, academics, civil society representatives, trade union activists, media personnel, former election administrators and ordinary voters. These interactions took place both in person and virtually, utilising a set of structured questions to guide the conversation. The engagements captured the perspectives of representatives from different political parties as well as those from youth and women demographics.

Historical Context

Sri Lanka holds the distinction of being Asia's oldest democracy, having embraced universal adult suffrage in 1931. It is a parliamentary democracy, with the legislature bearing the exclusive constitutional responsibility for creating and amending laws. The current electoral system was formalised under the 1978 Constitution which framed a significant change to the electoral system following a constitutional amendment in 1988.

Up to that point, constituencies featured individual candidates nominated by recognised political parties or independents, with the candidate securing the highest votes declared elected - a system known as first-past-the-post. The 1988 amendment saw this change to a proportional representation (PR) system. It also increased the number of MPs to 225³, making provision for 29 of those to be elected from a national list based on the total number of votes polled by each party and independent groups at a general election⁴, and implemented a preferential voting system⁵ where voters express their candidate preferences from a party or group's list. Under the PR system each voter can indicate up to three preferences⁶ based on the candidate's assigned number after their nomination paper is accepted by the Returning Officer who is appointed by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL).

Within this system Sri Lanka has seen the emergence of dominant political parties who have significant influence on the electoral landscape⁷. These parties often form coalitions with smaller parties or independent candidates to strengthen their electoral prospects. These coalitions which are often unofficial and based on opaque agreements, in turn, influence the overall dynamics of elections and governance. These groupings have been a factor in periodic changes in government that have taken place in Sri Lanka⁸. Understanding the frequency and the way power changes hands provides valuable insights into the stability and adaptability of the country's political system, and is an important factor to be considered in understanding the

costs of parliamentary politics.

However, whilst regular political transitions may be used as evidence to suggest that Sri Lankan democracy is working, the question of who it is working for remains. Although numerically dominant, youth and women bore the brunt of thirty-year civil conflict, and continue to face serious impediments to gaining adequate and effective representation in various decision-making bodies. As a consequence, critical issues for these marginalised groups are rarely top of the agenda. Even when there have been more progressive commitments made, these have not gone far enough. In 2018, a mandatory quota for women was introduced in local government elections, but it inexplicably replaced the existing youth quota, rather than operating alongside it⁹.

The influence of money on politics is another area of concern. The PR system created larger electoral districts which meant higher costs involved inter-alia in travelling from one end of the electoral district to the other. At the same time large electoral districts also means that the elected representative is less accessible and less accountable to his or her constituents which can result in regional issues not being adequately represented or raised in the parliament¹⁰. Rather it is financial backers of successful election campaigns that can get their concerns raised and addressed as they seek a return on their political investment. As a result, Sri Lankan democracy has become increasingly transactional, with votes being most likely auctioned to the highest bidder and representatives failing to effectively fulfil their

primary legislative functions. A result of a lack of understanding of how to develop laws and policies to sustainably foster the country's economic, social, and political growth, and the fact that they are instead continuously contemplating their re-election strategies. This limited accountability

can partially explain the country's poor ranking in Transparency International's 2022 Corruptions Perceptions Index¹¹ and the lack of trust in parliamentarians as captured in the 2020 Global Corruption Barometer¹².

Drivers of the cost of parliamentary politics

i. Getting your name on the ballot paper¹³

Getting one's name on the ballot paper is a significant financial burden. An aspiring politician must prove their value to the political party from which they seek nominations for the election. These expenses are substantially higher than the official, and nominal, fees and deposits payable to the ECSL¹⁴.

This effort involves arranging party rallies, meetings, health camps, providing disaster relief to communities and hosting other events such as funerals, weddings, and big girl parties¹⁵ within their electoral constituencies. Their goal in doing so is to persuade and mobilise party supporters and voters, encouraging them to align with the ongoing political agenda of the party. Financial costs are also pronounced for those seeking a position on a party's national list, the proposed names for which are submitted at the same time as those who are nominated to contest the election on the party's ticket. In the Sri Lankan political arena, it is common for individuals to secure a national list seat by financially supporting the party's pre-election-related activities, even if they are not actively involved in them.

One female aspirant who contested for a national list position explained how "we are called the parachuters¹⁶, although we are professionals who contributed to the party our own personal savings with a clear-cut intention of developing a better future for the country"¹⁷.

Yet, securing a place on the ballot paper solely through loyalty points earned by advancing the party's agenda does not guarantee success. The nomination process is highly secretive and confined to a select few powerful figures within a party's hierarchy. Therefore, aspirants also offer favours to senior party politicians responsible for issuance of the ticket to contest for an upcoming election. As one informant noted, "political parties also tend to be very hush-hush during the period of handing over the nominations or the ticket to run. Thus, we do not know how and based on what people are chosen by each party. Not knowing why, we were not chosen also hinders our ability to enhance our chances in future election cycles"¹⁸. These political party operatives may even use their positions of power to engage in various forms of sexual misconduct, a widespread challenge faced by female candidates. This is particularly the case for those who seek recognition under the mandatory legislative quota for local council elections, as their fate largely rests in the hands of electoral organisers responsible for filling these quotas in their respective constituencies.

But within these contests for party recognition there are interesting and important variations. The cost of securing a position on the ballot paper in Sri Lanka is considered lower when the candidate's likelihood of winning the seat is high owing to their popularity. This popularity could be attributed to factors like inherited privileges¹⁹, seniority, or admiration among the citizens or

voters. As one political aspirant asserted during a KII, “young people either from tragedy politics [the succession of a deceased family member] or genetic politics can go a long way in the political ladder fast, as opposed to the ones with no political background. Name is a license in Sri Lanka to enter and sustain in politics”²⁰. A view that was shared by a political activist who emphasised how “in Sri Lanka, name recognition and family ties become crucial factors for victory, and that is the truth” and argued that “in our political landscape, one’s name acts as a ticket to secure a place on the ballot sheet and in parliament. It’s a system dominated by father-to-son successions, uncles passing the torch to nephews, and even the transfer of power from late husbands to wives.”²¹

Given the wider importance of name recognition among the electorate many political aspirants have now also resolved to garner social media popularity by attracting likes, comments, shares, followers, in order to build a strong testament to their virtual popularity, in addition to their financial muscle, and their chance of winning the party’s backing.

ii. Election campaigns

A candidate who secures a place on the ballot paper, is faced with significant financial expectations during their election campaign. Advertising and paying supporters and services were the two most important areas to direct funds towards according to informants and discussants, with substantial resources required for both.

(a) Advertising

Most of the respondents highlighted the considerable expense associated with paid advertisements on mainstream media, and increasingly social media platforms, as one of the highest costs incurred during the election campaign. In response to the high cost involved in deploying the media for campaigns, and

Even though the extent to which that translates to support in offline electoral politics remains unproven.



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Political Activist

noticeable price variations offered by each outlet to publish election advertisements²², many affluent politicians in the country have diversified their investments, acquiring, or aligning themselves with media outlets to reap these benefits without incurring direct costs. This ensures free access and control over media not just during an election campaign period, but at any juncture. As one senior media figure explained, “some politicians extend political favours to media moguls, hoping to secure discounted rates in return”²³

Incumbent candidates of the ruling party are more able to leverage their power and influence to gain these privileges without payment, even exerting control over publicly controlled media. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that a person’s ability to spend on their media campaign will be

solely determined by the depth of their pockets as opposed to their sex, age, religion, or caste. This is true despite ECSL publishing specific media guidelines in 2019²⁴, urging agencies to maintain neutrality and impartiality in their reporting, publishing, telecasting, or broadcasting of information related to political matters. Such measures are regularly ignored owing to the lack of legal sanction when guidelines are violated and an ineffective monitoring system.

For the most part, campaign advertising expenditure is still predominantly focused on traditional methods like billboards, cut-outs, pamphlets, flyers, pocket calendars, posters, and wall-clocks, rather than more costly broadcast advertising although this is dependent on the demographic composition of an electoral district. Major media hubs are concentrated in central Colombo and prime-time news is mainly aired in Sinhala; this language inequality means that candidates in the North Eastern province might choose to avoid these time slots to connect when

seeking to connect with their predominantly Tamil-speaking demographic. This challenge also persists due to the unequal technological progress across Sri Lanka's regions, resulting in areas with limited signal coverage.

Despite this, social media is becoming a more frequently deployed tool in election campaigns and therefore an expense. Political aspirants employ social media bots to magnify disinformation and manipulate public perceptions on trending issues. Facebook's Ad Library report, recorded expenditure of USD \$478,545 on 26,710 advertisements²⁵ during the 2020 general elections in Sri Lanka. A recently drafted Online Safety Bill 2023²⁶ includes measures to detect, prevent and safeguard against the misuses of online accounts and bots to commit offences. Yet concerns that the bill would also be used to limit freedom of expression in the country has seen 45²⁷ fundamental rights petitions submitted to the Supreme Court.

(b) Supporters and support services

Aspirants rely on individuals or community level leaders to organise and execute their election campaigns or meetings, often compensating them with cash or non-monetary favours for doing so. Furthermore in Sri Lanka, where face-to-face interactions and rallies are pivotal, participants are typically paid in cash for their attendance. Across the nation it is common for candidates to offer payments, whether in cash or goods, to voters in exchange for their support even if these payments are rarely documented or monitored.

Explaining popular support for this transactional arrangement one voter explained that "voters do not trust politicians because they always kick the ladder after they are voted in. Given that the politicians are very wealthy thanks to the voters' money, I do not think there is any wrong in accepting the candidate's payment offers to secure

votes. It's a good way to recover the money they have stolen from us."²⁸ Additionally, candidates or even the political party they represent, may also make payments to religious places of worship²⁹ or other respected local leaders in the hope of securing their backing, and as a result their communities or congregations' electoral support.

Further, given the PR system in place and its enlarged multimember districts, candidates face substantial expenses when traveling to gain voter support, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Besides transportation costs, candidates may also need to invest in security due to the prevalence of violence during election campaigns. A common perception in the country stands that a candidate accompanied by a security detail or squad demonstrates power, authority, and influence, which may help them garner more votes.

iii. Costs when elected

The financial burden bestowed on a contestant does not end if he or she secures their parliamentary seat. There is an ongoing financial strain for all MPs. As one national list parliamentarian attested "I am not going to contest and come to politics [again], it is too expensive and is very difficult to keep up with the expenses. My biggest cost is letting go of my highly financially rewarding profession. Before all of this, I had a Benz, a Range Rover and BMW. Now I only have a Toyota-Roomy³⁰."

MPs receive an official salary and allowances for parliamentary and constituency offices, staff, and travel as outlined in Table 1 below that can amount to 200,000-400,000 LKR (USD 600-1200) per month. They are also entitled to a pension after serving just one term, a source of particular frustration for one citizen engaged during this research who bemoaned "the never-ending financial burden of MPs on the public."³¹ Even still, these resources often fall short of the ongoing demands placed on MPs, given the expectations that they will personally address constituents' issues and finance various community activities due to their prominent societal roles.




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National list Parliamentarian

Table 1: MP salaries and allowances³²

Allowances	All the Ministers, Dy. Ministers, State Ministers and Hon. Members of Parliament
Sitting Allowance	Rs. 2,500/= for attending each parliamentary meeting.
Committee Allowance	Rs. 2,500/= for attending each committee meeting when the committee is held on non-sitting days. (No allowance is paid for attending committee meetings which are held on sitting days).
Office Allowance	Rs. 100,000/= per month to maintain an office.

Allowances	Hon. Ministers, Dy. Ministers and State Ministers	Hon. Members
Member Allowance (Salary)	 Not Paid by the Government	Rs. 54,285.00
Entertainment Allowance		Rs. 1,000/=
Drivers Allowance		Rs. 3,500/= (Drivers allowance is paid to the Hon. MP only if he isn't provided a driver from the government)
Fuel Allowance	Fuel allowances are paid based on the distance from Parliament to the electoral district which each MP was elected and the approved market price of one litre of diesel on the first day of every month. (e.g.: Colombo 283.94 ltrs. Gampaha & Kaluthara 355.58 ltrs.)	
Telephone Allowance	Rs. 50,000/= is paid monthly for land line and mobile. (No payment or reimbursement for telephone bills)	
Transport Allowance for personal staff	Rs. 10,000/= is paid per month to meet traveling expenses for 4 personal staff to office. (Rs. 2,500/= each)	
Free Postage Facilities	Stamps amounting to Rs. 350,000/= are issued to each MP annually. (Rs. 87,500/= quarterly)	

Given the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka, in-office spending can entail ensuring modest necessities of people such as buying textbooks, bags, or shoes for the new school term, or even helping them to pay off their electricity bills³³. A newly elected female parliamentarian expressed that “when I visit my constituency, I spend approximately LKR 2-3 lakhs per month³⁴ to address the needs and requests of my constituents. My salary as a parliamentarian is insufficient to cover these expenses. But fortunately for me, unlike most of the other female parliamentarians, my husband is alive and is earning enough to cover our household expenditure³⁵. In addition, MPs are expected to fund party rallies, meetings, health camps, and other events such as funerals, weddings, and big girl parties. They are also expected to donate a lump sum of money during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year Festivities and

sport festivals associated with it. The MP is usually the guest of honour at these events. These obligations are undertaken by MPs in both ruling and opposition parties in their respective electorates. However, voters tend to expect less from the opposition MPs as opposed to the ruling party MPs. It is widely accepted that by doing so they enhance their chances of re-election in the future.

Another way to enhance future electoral bids is to repay supporters who aided successful election campaigns. This can take both monetary and non-monetary forms. More wealthy sponsors and lenders often seek repayment through receiving state contracts, tenders or even tax concessions, which contribute to entrenching corruption³⁶. To get around this, one MP shared how they have “a policy of not accepting funds from external

sources to avoid being indebted throughout my career. Instead, I sell my own assets like land or vehicles, or occasionally take bank loans that I repay in instalments. However, my children are concerned because they don't want me to keep selling our family inheritance, which they expect to inherit someday. They prefer that I discontinue my political career"³⁷. Candidates often use their personal funds, wealth, or assets before seeking support from private sponsors. But with the escalating costs of election campaigns, candidates increasingly find themselves relying on private sponsors who initially contribute as a gesture of goodwill or through donations to maintain public favour. However, these 'donations' come with an expectation of repayment, particularly if the candidate succeeds in securing the required votes for victory.

At the same time as meeting the ongoing demands placed on them when in office, elected MPs immediately begin the quest to raise the funds for a re-election bid begin as soon as the previous cycle ends. Particularly those within the government or who are members of the ruling party, may be inclined to exploit state resources to boost their chances of re-election. Control of the media narrative can be important in this regard. An experienced media personality voiced concern about the politicisation of the media in Sri Lanka, "media outlets openly advocate for specific candidates daily, not just during elections. This continuous promotion, known as 'voice-cut politics,' involves media personnel gathering around MPs, seeking their opinions on everyday issues. Sri Lankan news is all about politicians and who-said-what, but nothing on politics or policies"³⁸.

These expectations, pressures, attacks, and scrutiny can also have hidden costs for individuals mental health. The price they pay for public service includes enduring incessant harassment, media trolling, and public shaming as they navigate the complex landscape of politics. One female MP revealed how her entire family suffered when she

was wrongly accused of adultery, "you may even be a MP or even a cabinet minister, yet you will be humiliated and harassed by your own colleagues during parliamentary sessions"³⁹. Additionally, respondents highlighted the cost to youth who chose to get involved in politics at a young age. One remarked on how "we live under constant surveillance, every move scrutinised. We are politically tainted, and it haunts every aspect of our existence [now and in the future]"⁴⁰.

These challenges underscore the complex nature of the landscape MPs navigate once elected, one that can often have high personal costs and one where official income often fall short of the diverse and constant demands they encounter daily from constituents.



"you may even be a MP or even a cabinet minister, yet you will be humiliated and harassed by your own colleagues during parliamentary sessions"

Sri Lankan female Parliamentarian

iv. Financing the costs

Candidates often tap into personal resources, setting aside a substantial portion of their earnings, selling assets, and borrowing from banks. Donations or loans from family and friends, particularly those in the diaspora also contribute significantly to campaign funds. Using personal funds to finance political campaigns is seen to carry comparatively less corruption risks. Many politicians attested to the sale of a private assets, such as a plot of land or vehicle, to fund their own political campaign as opposed to accepting external favours which always come with a 'bill of infinite demands.' But many candidates, by choice or necessity, move beyond personal circles and approach big businesses and oligarchs for donations. This source of financing is more available to those in power, which further weakens opposition parties and their candidate's ability to challenge on an equal financial footing.

Having the resources and networks to raise the funds required to run for offices means that MPs primarily come from wealthier segments of society to the exclusion of those who are more representative of the average Sri Lankan. These affluent individuals – which can include women and youth - view the expenditure outlaid to win a parliamentary seat as a highly valuable investment, given the benefits and influences that come with the position. This fuels public frustration that MPs, whose income aligns with that of a modest public servant, are able to afford opulent luxuries whilst also recovering campaign expenses, or the loss incurred by selling personal assets. And raises questions about how this is both possible and legal.

The misappropriation of public funds to support political bids is a grey area but there is wide acceptance that those who are able to get away with doing it, continue to do so. As one trade union activist pointed out "some politicians may not look rich, but their families, and friends are filthy rich soon after they assume political office. That is

what needs to be investigated"⁴¹. This patronage extends to party leaders' families, giving rise to issues related to nepotism. One academic highlighted that "in the recent general election, there were glaring disparities where relatives of the ruling party were provided with vehicles fuelled limitlessly, securing not only voter support but also an unfair advantage over newcomers lacking such political backing. They were able to win the elections effortlessly, as everything was done for them."⁴²

Political parties, especially those in power, frequently extend support to candidates, often in the form of "in kind" assistance, such as through personnel and logistical help. But overall political parties typically offer minimal financial support to candidates. As aspirants are often selected based on their financial capacity to advance the party's agenda, such extra financial aid is deemed unnecessary. However, the National People's Power (NPP) party stands out by providing financial backing to each contestant through a consolidated political fund. This unique initiative aims to not only ease the financial burden on candidates but also shield them from potential involvement in corrupt practices, ensuring a more transparent and accountable electoral process. Nevertheless, details about the financial donors to the NPP and its fund remain ambiguous. This is reflective of an overall trend in Sri Lanka, where many political parties are rumoured to be heavily financed by major businesses and oligarchs in a non-transparent way.

At the same time, too great a reliance on party funds could also come with its own inherent risks, potentially breeding corruption within the system. If MPs heavily rely on party funds, it could compromise their independence, hindering their ability to take unbiased stances on matters of national policy. Complicating matters further, candidates and even sitting MPs, sometimes receive financial payments in exchange for

supporting specific political factions, or to vote for legislation in favor of the ruling party, during no-confidence motions or coalitions. This practice blurs ethical lines and raises profound questions about the autonomy of elected representatives.

The exchange of financial incentives for political allegiance creates a precarious situation, undermining the integrity of the democratic process.

Outlook

i. Exclusion

The costs associated with entering parliamentary politics have far-reaching consequences. One glaring repercussion is the exclusion and under-representation of the average citizen from the hallowed halls of parliament. Even in instances where younger MPs exist, they tend to be affluent individuals, or from prominent political families. Parliament has become the domain of the elite, and is perceived as a self-selecting affluent clique, further eroding their legitimacy in the eyes of wider society.

The cost of parliamentary politics in Sri Lanka is therefore hindering meaningful participation of youth and women⁴³ and other marginalised groups and communities in democratic decision-

making processes. This issue poses a serious challenge to ensuring an inclusive electoral democracy considering that women constitute the majority, and youth 23%⁴⁴ of the population. The exclusion perpetuates an under-representation of marginalised groups, including women, youth, and specific ethnic communities, in policy debates and discussions. To start to address this political parties should be encouraged to commit internally to specific quotas regarding the representation of women and youth as candidates in elections, or even consider amending their party constitutions to accommodate more inclusive and diverse representation. Building on this, designated funds for female and youth aspirants could further aid their electoral prospects.

ii. Reduced accountability

Faced with a parliament dominated by an affluent elite, driven by self-interests and financial obligations, voters are left disillusioned. They find it hard to believe that their elected representatives prioritise the interests of constituents or the nation⁴⁵. The decisions made by MPs often seem motivated by the necessity to pacify financial backers or advance personal financial interests. This can cause a series of undesirable outcomes. MPs may advocate for inflated pay and allowances, cloaked in opacity, or engage in unwavering loyalty to political leaders, hoping for lucrative government appointments that grant access to higher remuneration and state

resources and greater opportunities for corruption. Disillusionment with politicians breeds cynicism among voters, transforming the electoral process into a transactional affair in which voters cast their ballots based on immediate gains rather than the candidate's genuine commitment to their constituency or the country's welfare.

In this political landscape, politicians are as concerned with retaining their parliamentary positions as opposed to upholding any genuine political ideology. This is demonstrated by increased instances of politicians switching parties strategically, solely to secure their

continued presence in the next parliament⁴⁶. Consequently, the core roles of parliament, namely holding the executive accountable and engaging in meaningful debates to address the nation's challenges, are jeopardised.

iii. Regulating spending

Politicians have taken advantage of the absence of effective campaign financing laws, exploiting the system to purchase votes through financial contributions from well-connected businesses during elections. Less wealthy or connected candidates often find themselves at a disadvantage leading to a distortion of the democratic process and hindering the representation of the people's true choices in government.

In 2023 the Sri Lankan parliament passed the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act⁴⁷ which establishes comprehensive guidelines governing the financial expenditure incurred by recognised political parties, independent groups, and candidates during local, provincial, parliamentary, and presidential elections. The primary objective of this Act is to promote fairness, transparency, and integrity in the electoral process by ensuring responsible financial conduct. It is designed to serve as a cornerstone for fostering democratic ideals, safeguarding the electoral process from financial manipulation, and ensuring that the voice of the people is genuine, unbiased, and reflective of their true choices.

Section 6 requires a submission of a return documenting all donations or contributions accepted or received by a political party, an independent group or candidate on behalf of a political party, independent group or candidate and a return of all expenses incurred by the political party, independent group, or candidate. However the legislation is focused on regulating expenditure and does not propose limits on donations, although it does list some prohibited sources of electoral financing. Under Section 3(3)

(b) of the Act, pertaining to elections conducted under the Parliamentary Elections Act, a specific formula is outlined. This formula calculates the allowable campaign expenditure for candidates contesting in a particular electoral district. The calculation involves multiplying the total number of registered voters in that district by a predetermined monetary value, which is to be set for each election by the ECSL. In short, this provision establishes a standardised method for determining the permissible campaign spending limit for candidates participating in parliamentary elections.

However, the legislation is yet untested as the country is yet to face an election since its passage. Furthermore, it is ambiguous on the effective monitoring mechanism or body to be mandated, or created, with the capacity to ensure compliance. Ideally a state body should be assigned and effectively empowered to receive complaints, investigate, and prosecute violations. Otherwise, as one MP contended, "the absence of such a comprehensive state mechanism to monitor such violations may pass the burden onto the civil society organisations to monitor who-spent-what. But that exercise would be pointless, as civil society will not be able to take immediate legal action against those who violated such laws. When the state is not effectively and collectively involved in these matters, non-state actors will have to act, but as toothless watchdogs, and if power changes, then these findings will be used a witch-hunt to prosecute the MPs of the opposing parties"⁴⁸.

iv. Improved media space

The colossal sums spent on advertising, particularly on broadcasting campaign messages, needs to be addressed. Efforts to compel media houses to disclose all political donations and payments in a publicly accessible manner, should be a part of advocacy efforts. To further enhance transparency, candidates should declare their media affiliations on nomination forms submitted to ECSL, in addition to declarations of assets and liabilities.

Beyond this, it is imperative to cultivate a free and independent media committed to impartial coverage and scrutinising arguments presented by candidates without bias. Publicly funded media outlets should maintain unwavering impartiality, especially during elections, while private media entities must uphold rigorous journalistic standards encompassing the right of reply, fact-checking, and challenging narratives.

Upholding these standards is essential to preserve journalism's integrity and will guard against the transformation of media into mere propaganda tools. The effective enforcement of the 2019 Media Regulations by relevant regulatory authorities can significantly improve the information environment. Furthermore, supporting and encouraging media programming that is focused more on policy debates would provide a platform for political candidates and aspirants to articulate their priorities and positions on critical issues as opposed to resorting to personal attacks and mudslinging.

v. Citizen engagement and awareness

It is imperative to reform existing educational curricula to instil awareness of civic education from an early age, especially about the significance of voting and the consequences of using it for the right reasons. In economically disadvantaged societies, determining what constitutes a "right reason" may differ among individuals. Nonetheless, incorporating civic education into the educational system or creating school clubs focused on democratic practices is crucial. By doing so a more informed and responsible future generation of voters can be created. Informed citizens are more likely to engage in constructive dialogue, advocate for policy changes, and hold authorities accountable, thereby strengthening the democratic fabric of society. But this will be a gradual change, as one MP contended. "For voter education to be effective there needs to be a system change. We cannot blame the voters for being

strategic to survive in this system by resorting to their old ways of getting things done"⁴⁹. Therefore, it is imperative to advocate for comprehensive reforms that connect increased accountability in political expenditure and transparency in public service, with a concerted effort in public education. Emphasising these interconnected aspects can fortify the effectiveness and sustainability of citizen-focused initiatives.

vi. Further understanding

Finally, there is a necessity to conduct more in-depth studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to grasp the true expenses associated with politics in Sri Lanka. This work should focus on better understanding regional and local dynamics that may vary across the diverse districts in the country and fine-tuning recommendations to address the challenges that persist across these different contexts.

Endnotes

- ¹ Naushalya Rajapaksha is an Attorney-at-Law with more than a decade of experience advocating for youth and women's rights in Sri Lanka.
- ² The Parliament of Sri Lanka comprises 225 members: 196 (87%) are directly elected from the 24 districts while 29 (13%) are indirectly elected as National List MPs
- ³ Amendment of Article 62 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka.
- ⁴ Insertion of Article 99 A of the Constitution of Sri Lanka.
- ⁵ Replacement of Article 99 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka.
- ⁶ These preferences are equally weighted. Voters can choose just to vote for one candidate if they do not wish to select three.
- ⁷ There are currently 15 political parties represented in Sri Lanka's legislature but only two - Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna and Samagi Jana Balawegaya- hold more than 10 seats.
- ⁸ For example, see Reuters. (2015). "Sirisena's party offers to form coalition government in Sri Lanka". 20 August. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-sri-lanka-politics-idUKKCN0QP0OS20150820/>
- ⁹ Wickramasinghe, K. (2022). "Increasing the Youth Quota in Parliament, reviving Sri Lanka's ailing political culture with young blood". Daily Mirror. 28 June. Available at <https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/Increasing-youth-quota-in-Parliament-Reviving-Sri-Lankas-ailing-political-culture-with-young-blood/131-239925>
- ¹⁰ Verité Research. (2016). 'Electoral reform in Sri Lanka: Mixed member proportional systems'. Available at <https://www.veriteresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Electoral-reform-in-SL.pdf>
- ¹¹ Sri Lanka ranked 101 out of 180 in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 36 out of 100. See <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/lka>
- ¹² 44% of respondents in Sri Lanka said they perceive most or all MPs as corrupt. See Transparency International. (2020). "Citizen's views and experience of corruption". Global Corruption Barometer Asia. Available at https://files.transparencycdn.org/images/GCB_Asia_2020_Report_Web_final.pdf
- ¹³ No concrete figures are available for the cost of running for political office but some estimates are provided in Jayasinghe, C. (2020). "Candidates spend Rs 2.2 bn over Sri Lanka's polls campaign period". Economy Next. 5 August. Available at <https://economynext.com/candidates-spend-rs-2-2-bn-over-sri-lankas-polls-campaign-period-72677/>.
- ¹⁴ According to section 16 of the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981, an independent group's leader is required to submit a deposit of Rs. 2000/= (less than US\$7) when submitting the nomination paper. This deposit will be forfeited if the independent group fails to secure more than 1/8th of the total votes cast in the election.
- ¹⁵ It is a common term used in Sri Lanka to best describe events hosted by families to celebrate the onset of their daughter's menstrual cycle.
- ¹⁶ A common phrase in Sri Lanka's political vocabulary this refers to individuals who have spent their money and bought a seat on the list, without having spent years at different political levels or in engaging with community concerns to secure success.
- ¹⁷ KII with national list female MP, 5 October 2023.
- ¹⁸ KII with political aspirant from Colombo district, 4 October 2023.
- ¹⁹ Edirisinghe, N. (2023). "Nepotism: Historical perspectives and lost opportunities in Sri Lanka". Daily FT. 15 February. Available at <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Nepotism-Historical-perspective-and-lost-opportunities/4-745299>
- ²⁰ KII with political aspirant from Colombo district, 30 September 2023.
- ²¹ KII with political aspirant from central province, 27 September 2023.
- ²² Verité Research. (2020). "Does the Sri Lankan media exploit parliamentary candidates during elections? A comparison". Available at <https://www.veriteresearch.org/insight/elections-and-media-in-sri-lanka/>
- ²³ Remark by senior media personnel at FGD, 18 September 2023.
- ²⁴ Election Commission of Sri Lanka. (2019). "Media Guidelines issued under the Constitution of Sri Lanka". Available at https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/publication/ext-gz/Media_Giudeline_E.pdf
- ²⁵ Tamil Guardian. (2020). "Sri Lanka's big Facebook spenders". 4 August. Available at <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lanka%E2%80%99s-big-facebook-spenders>
- ²⁶ The Democratic and Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. (2023). "Online Safety Bill 2023 Sri Lanka". Available at http://documents.gov.lk/files/bill/2023/9/284-2023_E.pdf
- ²⁷ Adaderana. (2023). "45 petitions filed against Online Safety Bill thus far – Speakers tells Parliament". 18 October. <https://adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=94168>
- ²⁸ Remarks by voter from Gampaha district, Colombo at FGD, 2 October 2023.
- ²⁹ Daily Mirror. (2023). "SJB political party settles Mihintale Temple's electricity bill". 4 August. Available at https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/SJB-settles-Mihintale-Temple-electricity-Bill/108-264596
- ³⁰ KII with National List MP from ruling party, 5 October 2023.
- ³¹ KII with senior trade union activist, 2 October 2023.

³² 1 USD was equal to 328 Sri Lankan rupees on 7 November 2023.

³³ Jayasinghe, U. (2023). "Electricity bill increase pushes crisis weary Sri Lankans to the brink." Reuters. 21 February. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/electricity-bill-increase-pushes-crisis-weary-sri-lankans-brink-2023-02-21/>

³⁴ Approximately USD 600-900

³⁵ KII with female MP from ruling party, 5 October 2023.

³⁶ For example see Kamalendran, C. (2018). "Two reservoir projects: Questions over tender processes" The Sunday Times. 18 February. Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/180218/news/two-reservoir-projects-questions-over-tender-procedures-282509.html> and Sirimanna, B. (2023). "Second sugar scam after questionable tax hike" The Sunday Times. 5 November. Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/231105/business-times/second-sugar-scam-after-questionable-sugar-tax-hike-537305.html>

³⁷ KII with female MP from opposition party, 5 October 2023.

³⁸ Remarks by senior media personnel at FGD, 18 September 2023.

³⁹ KII with female MP from ruling party, 5 October 2023.

⁴⁰ KII with political aspirant from the North Central province, 29 September 2023.

⁴¹ KII with trade union activist, 2 October 2023

⁴² KII with community leader from Anuradhapura, 28 September 2023

⁴³ Despite a proportional representation system, which often results in higher representation of traditionally marginalised groups, women's ⁴⁴ Markar, F B. 2016. "Unlocking the potential of youth report in Sri Lanka", United Nations Democracy Program. Available at <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/01/unlocking-the-potential-of-youth-undp-in-sri-lanka/>

⁴⁴ Markar, F B. 2016. "Unlocking the potential of youth report in Sri Lanka", United Nations Democracy Program. Available at <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/01/unlocking-the-potential-of-youth-undp-in-sri-lanka/>

⁴⁵ This came to the fore during Sri Lanka's revolutionary aragalaya in July 2022. See Ranaraja, M. (2022). "Notes from the field: Sri Lanka's revolutionary aragalaya." Asia Foundation. 22 July. Available at <https://asiafoundation.org/2022/07/20/notes-from-the-field-sri-lankas-revolutionary-aragalaya/>

⁴⁶ Madawala, J. (2020). "Crossover and party switching part of Sri Lanka politics" The Sunday Times. 5 December. Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/200802/news/crossovers-and-party-switching-part-of-sri-lanka-politics-411261.html>

⁴⁷ Parliament of the Democratic and Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. (2023). "Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 03 of 2023" Available at <https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/acts/gbills/english/6287.pdf>

⁴⁸ KII with MP from northern province, 6 October 2023.

⁴⁹ KII with national list female MP, 5 October 2023.

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