



## Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During COVID-19: Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections

Sri Lanka's most recent parliamentary election was held Aug. 5, 2020, after two postponements due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the district level, 196 members were elected through a proportional representation (PR) system, and 29 were appointed through a national list. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was sworn in as prime minister Aug. 9 after his party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), secured 59 percent of the popular vote and 145 seats in Parliament. Overall, election observers [commended](#) the Election Commission of Sri Lanka's (ECSL) efforts in conducting safe elections during the pandemic. Despite this success, challenges in election implementation also underscored changes that the ECSL should consider to ensure high level of participation and electoral integrity in future electoral cycles during crisis situations.

To assess adaptive measures taken by the ECSL, challenges and key lessons learned, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) published *Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During COVID-19: Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections*, which includes in-depth literature reviews from various sources, examination of the Sri Lankan national legal framework, assessments of international and national election observer reports, examination of public health guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka (MOH) and regulations and guidelines issued by the ECSL for voters, poll workers and other stakeholders. IFES gathered information based on the firsthand experience of providing technical support to the ECSL on a series of election operation efforts in the 2020 electoral period. The paper informed the identification of good practices implemented by the ECSL during the 2020 parliamentary election and lessons learned for future elections during times of crises. Highlighted below are key findings and recommendations proposed in the research paper.

### ECSL COVID-19 Adaptations for the 2020 Parliamentary Elections

The ECSL implemented numerous good practices to mitigate disenfranchisement and adhere to guidelines outlined by local health authorities. These include:

- **Risk mitigation:** Drawing on an IFES study on electoral risk mitigation, the ECSL presented health officials with an election risk mitigation roadmap to plan for all stages of the election—adopting guidelines for campaigns, electoral operations and voting. The ECSL further developed training videos for workers, public awareness campaigns for citizens and coordinated with youth, civil society and observer organizations to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus.
- **Coordination with health professionals and authorities:** To ensure a robust and inclusive approach, the ECSL coordinated with the MOH, police and other authorities, to issue guidelines and preventative actions before the election to ensure all election-related activities complied with public health measures. Through this effort, the ECSL provided more authority to health officials and elections officials to enforce public health measures through the formalization of these measures through set guidelines.
- **Electoral campaigns:** Recognizing that the principles of freedom of association and assembly during election time are important to uphold even during a pandemic, the election-related guidelines jointly published by the ECSL and MOH allowed campaign events to take place but mandated that no more than 100 people could attend in-person events. Campaign event organizers were obligated to record the contact details of all attendees to enable contact tracing, if needed.
- **Voter education:** The ECSL prioritized voter education, organizing PSAs about voter safety to encourage turnout. Despite pandemic fears and health restrictions, turnout was down only three percent.
- **Poll worker recruitment and training:** Adjustments were made to poll worker recruitment and training to decrease in-person class sizes, the production of electoral operations videos to reduce training time and mock polls to quickly familiarize workers with adaptation measures.
- **Election Day supplies and setup:** The ECSL included cleaning supplies, ventilated rooms and distancing guidelines between staff to address COVID-19 concerns.
- **Postal voting:** The 2020 parliamentary elections introduced an expansion of postal voting facilities for health care workers based on an ECSL executive decision. Given the number of COVID-19-related logistical challenges, several rounds of postal voting enabled those who missed an earlier round to vote.
- **Vote count and results management:** The ECSL adjusted vote count and results management procedures, shifting counting to the day after Election Day to sanitize poll locations, providing PPE for all staff and checking temperatures of all employees.

- **Election observation:** The pandemic limited election observation to a “hybrid” format in response to COVID restrictions, fielding local observers and no foreign observation missions, except for six foreign observers already in Sri Lanka.

## COVID-19—Related Challenges During the 2020 Parliamentary Elections:

Challenges in election implementation underscored changes that the ECSL should consider ensuring high participation and electoral integrity during future crises. Select challenges highlighted in the research paper include:

- **Voter disenfranchisement** during the pandemic **impacted** 2,000 to 3,980 voters restricted to quarantine centers or under self-quarantine on Election Day. Other voters left out included health sector officials, journalists, election observers and transport personnel at facilities run by security forces or in quarantine centers. Persons with disabilities who encounter barriers or lack access to transportation additionally lost the opportunity to vote as postal voting in Sri Lanka does not extend to persons with disabilities.
- **Unclear and inconsistent legal framework** created confusion during the pandemic when the ECSL’s guidance and leadership were most important. While Section 24(3) of Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 defines the ECSL’s power to postpone elections at the district level, this is unclear at the national level. Furthermore, the ECSL framework requiring parliamentary approval of ECSL-drafted laws prevents the ECSL from issuing legally binding health guidelines in a pandemic.
- **Electoral violence** was **less prevalent** than in the 2019 election, but the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a global uptick in online hate speech and misinformation due to campaigns moving partially online.
- **Increased campaign costs** during the pandemic disproportionately impacted smaller parties and increased the wealthy parties’ advantage, highlighting the need for campaign finance laws. Safety regulations pushed campaigns toward more costly avenues as opposed to door-to-door methods.
- **Lack of alternative registration and voting methods** drives voter disenfranchisement during crises. COVID-19 safety protocols limited door-to-door enumeration during the pandemic, which specifically impacts marginalized persons, further highlighting a need for an expansion of advance voting.
- COVID restrictions drastically **limited observer missions and media reporting**, leading to an information and analysis deficit for the 2020 parliamentary election.

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges for election management bodies and electoral stakeholders. Select targeted recommendations for future elections during times of crisis are:

- **Amend** legal frameworks to protect the integrity of elections during crises by allowing a more flexible and timely voter registration system and the expansion of both advanced and postal voting.
- **Clarify** the authority of the ECSL to eliminate confusion in times of crisis by clearly defining the body’s **enforcement powers** throughout the legal framework and further enabling the ECSL to **draft and implement regulations** to mitigate issues arising from crises.
- **Plan** for unforeseen challenges by establishing crisis management protocol overseeing election official training, **poll worker recruitment/training** and providing special protections and training for election workers to safely discharge their duties.
- **Budget** to account for crisis-driven cost increases to include electoral operations, media reporting and observations by employing advanced scenario-based budgeting. This will ensure compliance with regulations and ensure fair prices during global shortages.
- Create **crisis coordination mechanisms** between the ECSL, public health authorities, the police and other security forces to provide greater clarity to voters and to ease communication between government bodies, **ensuring the enforcement of preventive measures**.
- **Establish mechanisms**—such as hotlines, awareness campaigns and hate speech monitoring programs—to address challenges that women, minorities and persons with disabilities face in political participation during crises and build a broader understanding of these disparities among stakeholders.
- **Strengthen campaign finance frameworks** to promote equal access to the electoral process by enforcing finance limitations and abuse-related laws to curb incumbent advantage.
- **Develop a comprehensive voter education strategy** that considers the updated enumeration process and elections during crises.