



# Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During COVID-19:

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Case Study on Crisis  
Management in Elections

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# **Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka During COVID-19:**

## **Case Study on Crisis Management in Elections**

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IFES advances democracy for a better future. We collaborate with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As a global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy, our technical assistance and applied research develops trusted electoral bodies capable of conducting credible elections; effective and accountable governing institutions; civic and political processes in which all people can safely and equally participate; and innovative ways in which technology and data can positively serve elections and democracy. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries, from developing to mature democracies. IFES is a global, nonpartisan nonprofit organization based in Arlington, Virginia, and registered as a 501(c)(3).

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people with civic and  
voter education



**Trained 759,326**  
election officials  
in fiscal year 2019



**Worked in 145+**  
countries

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

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## Executive Summary

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.

The elections took place immediately after a countrywide lockdown was lifted when the risk of infection was still high and before the development of vaccines against the disease. The risk mitigation protocols and other measures established by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) in consultation with health authorities were largely successful in preventing a resurgence of COVID-19 through the election period. The ECSL made a series of adaptations to the electoral process in response to the health crisis. These included the banning of door-to-door canvassing;<sup>1</sup> restrictions on the number of people allowed at in-person campaign events; extension of voting hours by one hour; adjustments to the ballot counting process;<sup>2</sup> and the distribution of a detailed document specifying preventive measures to be followed during the elections, developed in coordination with the country's Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services (MOH).<sup>3</sup> The ECSL conducted a series of mock polls across the country to test and adapt these and other risk mitigation measures ahead of the election. The ECSL also took measures to set up polling centers in areas that were cordoned off due to COVID-19 to ensure that all persons were able to cast their votes freely.

Overall, election observers commended the ECSL's efforts in conducting safe elections during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The 75.89 percent voter turnout (compared to 77.66 percent in the previous parliamentary elections) represented a drop of less than two percentage points.<sup>5</sup> Despite this success, challenges in election implementation also underscored changes that the ECSL should consider in order to ensure high participation and electoral integrity during future crisis situations. Among the key lessons learned were the need to ensure robust crisis management capacity within the ECSL and among other electoral stakeholders; revise Sri Lanka's legal and regulatory electoral framework so that the ECSL has, during times of crisis, clear authority to determine the electoral calendar and enforce risk mitigation measures (e.g., during election campaigns and Election Day); ensure a more flexible and accessible voter registration process, especially during crises; and expand postal voting. In Sri Lanka, postal voting acts as an advance voting mechanism through which voters can apply to cast their ballots in designated locations ahead of Election Day. Those voters include health care workers, at-risk groups (e.g., the elderly and people with preexisting medical conditions), people with disabilities and other groups disproportionately affected by the crisis. These measures will be useful not only in health crises but also during periods of natural disaster or conflict, both of which have impacted elections in Sri Lanka's recent history. Lessons learned from the 2020 Sri Lankan elections can also contribute to emerging global best practices for conducting elections during pandemics and other periods of nationwide or global crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> "EC Bans Canvassing at Public Institutions." *Daily FT* [Colombo, Sri Lanka], [July 8, 2020](https://www.ft.lk/news/EC-bans-canvassing-at-public-institutions/56-702778). [www.ft.lk/news/EC-bans-canvassing-at-public-institutions/56-702778](https://www.ft.lk/news/EC-bans-canvassing-at-public-institutions/56-702778)

<sup>2</sup> "Ballot Paper Counting to Commence on August 6." *Daily Mirror* [Colombo, Sri Lanka], [June 30, 2020](https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Ballot-paper-counting-to-commence-on-August-6/108-190928). [www.dailymirror.lk/breaking\\_news/Ballot-paper-counting-to-commence-on-August-6/108-190928](https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Ballot-paper-counting-to-commence-on-August-6/108-190928)

<sup>3</sup> "Regulations Made by the Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services." *Department of Government Printing*, Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, [July 17, 2020](https://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34_E.pdf). [documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34\\_E.pdf](https://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34_E.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> ANFREL. "The 2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections: Defending Democracy Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." ANFREL, 2020. [anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf](https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf); CMEV. "2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report." CMEV, 2020. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](https://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> "Election Results: Parliamentary Elections 2020." *Election Commission of Sri Lanka*, Election Commission of Sri Lanka, August 6, 2020. [elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/AllIsland\\_01.pdf](https://elections.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/election-results/parliamentary-elections/AllIsland_01.pdf)

## Methodology

For this research paper, IFES engaged in in-depth literature reviews, including conducting extensive reviews of local country reports including the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA)'s "Legal and Policy Issues related to COVID-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka" report and "Is the cure worse than the disease: Reflections on COVID Governance in Sri Lanka" report, news articles and media reports of the conduct of the 2020 parliamentary election, international publications related to the conduct of elections during times of crisis and specifically during COVID-19, the national legal framework of Sri Lanka and international and national election observer reports. This research paper also draws on IFES' 2020 Global White Paper, *Safeguarding Health and Democracy: Considerations for Ensuring the Safety and Integrity of Elections During Health Crises - COVID-19* and its recommendations on general public health considerations for all key aspects of the electoral process. Additionally, 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 rigorous literature review included an examination of the public health guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka and regulations and guidelines issued by the ECSL for voters, poll workers and other stakeholders; all this combined informed the identification of a series of good practices implemented by the ECSL during the 2020 parliamentary election and lessons learned for future elections during times of crises. This research was also informed by discussions with and reviewed extensively by IFES' global electoral experts and national election stakeholders in order to ensure the findings and recommendations proposed in this research paper are reflective of the local context and in accordance with global standards and best practices for election administration.

## COVID-19 Adaptations for the 2020 Parliamentary Election

In early 2020, election management bodies around the world began to face the challenge of holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sri Lanka, political developments as well as the pandemic led to the rescheduling of parliamentary elections multiple times. While the election was not due until Aug. 5, 2020, in keeping with the end date of the five-year term of the eighth Parliament of Sri Lanka,<sup>6</sup> March 2, newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament and called for an early election in April. He cited provisions laid out in Article 70(1) of the Constitution that allow the president to dismiss the Parliament and call for elections at any time it has completed a minimum term of four and one-half years.<sup>7</sup> At the time of the dissolution of the Parliament and announcement of the April 25 election date, no COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in Sri Lanka. One week later, March 10, Sri

### Box 1: Parliamentary Elections, 2020

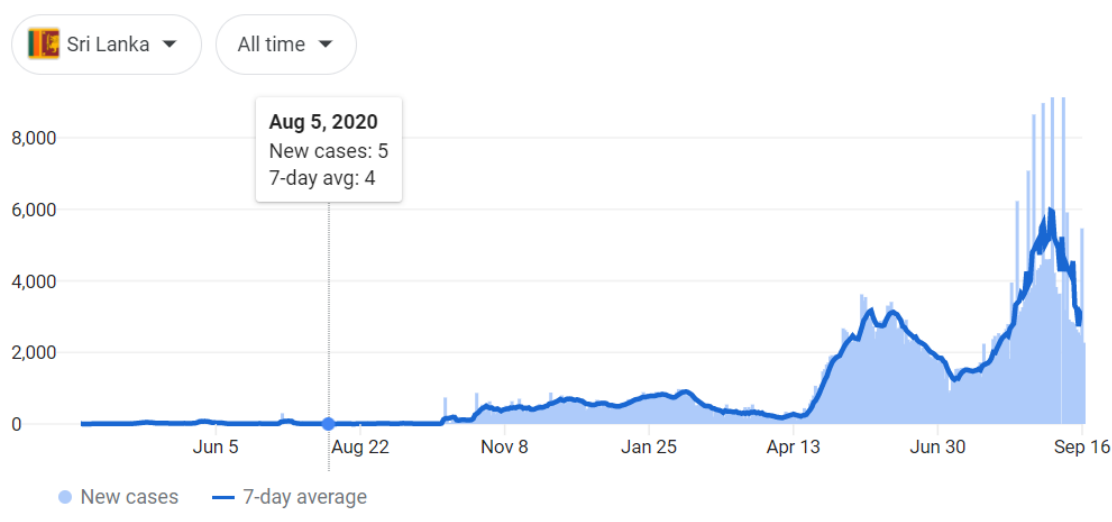
- Of the **225 seats** to be filled, **196** candidates were elected at the district level through a PR system and **29** were appointed through a national list.
- With **12 women in Parliament (5.3 percent)**, Sri Lanka ranks near the bottom worldwide in terms of women's national-level representation (181st of 190 countries).
- The elections were contested by **7,452** candidates, of whom **3,652** ran through **46** recognized political parties and the rest through independent groups. More than **715** women contested, with the vast majority from independent groups.
- The largest parties that contested in this election were the SLPP, Samagi Jana Balwegaya, Jathika Jana Balawegaya, United National Party and Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi.
- A total of **12,985** polling centers and **69** counting centers were set up for the elections, and over **82,091** personnel from the Police, Special Task Force, State Intelligence and Civil Security Department engaged in election duties.
- There were **16,263,885** registered voters as per the 2019 voter list. The elections saw a **75.89** percent voter turnout, approximately two percent lower than the turnout in 2015.

<sup>6</sup> If Parliament had not been dissolved ahead of schedule, it would have completed the full term of five years on September 1, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The 20th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka, passed after the elections, now allows the president to dissolve Parliament after one year.

Lanka confirmed its first case. Due to rising COVID-19 cases and a government-imposed lockdown to control the pandemic's spread,<sup>8</sup> the chair of the ECSL announced March 19 that elections would be postponed. On April 20, the ECSL set June 20 as the new election date. In light of continued pandemic risks and in consultation with health officials, the ECSL later changed the date to Aug. 5. Despite the delays, COVID-19 transmission remained a prevalent risk in the August election, even though the daily number of new cases was still relatively low. To contain the spread, the ECSL made substantial changes to election planning and implementation. Box 1 provides details of the election outcome.

There was no reported increase in infections immediately following the election. In fact, COVID-19 cases declined steadily throughout Sri Lanka by the end of September 2020.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the relatively low rates, Sri Lanka initially ranked 10th globally in the Global Response to Infectious Diseases Index,<sup>10</sup> which evaluates country responses to mitigating the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 2020 and throughout 2021, however, unrelated to electoral activities, the number of cases started to increase (see graph below). As of September 2021, Sri Lanka was still reporting high rates of infection, but vaccinations have recently reached 50 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup>



Graph showing the evolution of the number of COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka. Source: COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>8</sup> As of August 2020, the virus had been detected in 220 countries, infecting more than four million people. In Sri Lanka, the first confirmed case was reported March 10, 2020. By the time of the elections, there had been 2,839 reported cases and 11 deaths in the country (statistics from August 5, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> "Corona Virus 2020/2021." Epidemiology Unit: Ministry of Health. [www.epid.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=225&lang=en](http://www.epid.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=225&lang=en). Accessed September 8, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> D'Souza, Dr. Chris. "GRID Index 2: Ostrich Leadership and Ostrich Reactions – CMA Australia On Target." *Certified Management Accountants*, May 17, 2020. [cmaaustralia.edu.au/ontarget/grid-index-2-ostrich-leadership-and-ostrich-reactions](http://cmaaustralia.edu.au/ontarget/grid-index-2-ostrich-leadership-and-ostrich-reactions)

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing (August 2021), Sri Lanka was experiencing the deadliest wave of COVID-19 to date, and many countries had restricted or banned travel from Sri Lanka.

<sup>12</sup> Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations. *Our World in Data*. [https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID\\_WRL](https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL) (Accessed September 17, 2021).



# COVID-19 and the Conduct of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections

## Risk mitigation

Drawing on the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) study, “Electoral Risk Mitigation: Considerations to Ensure the Safety and Integrity of Parliamentary Elections During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka,” the ECSL conducted a preelection workshop in May 2020 during which senior officials, including district commissioners, drafted an election risk mitigation roadmap. The ECSL presented the document to health officials and finalized it after several rounds of consultations. The roadmap covered all stages of the electoral cycle and served as a blueprint to guide implementation of the parliamentary elections. Some of the key measures that the ECSL took are described below.

## Election costs

Election costs increased due to expenditures for personal protective equipment and other supplies and the sanitization and reconfiguration of 12,985 polling centers. Other expenses covered the deployment, logistics and training and mobilization of additional personnel. These included over 2,500 election officers to assist with tasks at polling centers and ensure voters adhered to health guidelines, more than 8,000 health officers to enforce strict compliance with preventive measures, 14,022 *Grama Niladharis* (village administrators) to assist with election duties and over 65,000 police officers to provide security for polling stations—particularly in COVID-infected areas. The state treasury allocated 8.5 billion Sri Lankan rupees (LKR, equivalent to \$45 million USD in August 2020) to the ECSL to cover the cost of the elections, a significant increase from the 2.95 billion LKR spent for the 2015 parliamentary elections.<sup>13</sup> In August 2020, the ECSL chair announced an effort to keep the cost under LKR 10 billion.<sup>14</sup>

### Box 2: Summary of COVID-19 risk mitigation measures by the ECSL

- Design of an elections risk mitigation roadmap.
- Consultations with health authorities.
- Development of Health Guidelines for Conducting Elections.
- Adoption of safety guidelines for campaigning.
- Incorporation of health and safety measures into voting and counting operations, including special hygiene measures at polling centers: temperature checks of election workers; sanitization of polling center premises; social distancing; hand sanitization of voters; special cubicles for poll workers; personal protective gear for election workers; use of cost-effective, disposable wax paper dabs to apply indelible ink; cardboard ballot boxes; polythene safety covers; and other measures as required.
- Creation of training videos for temporary election workers and ECSL officials, with special focus on COVID-19 risk mitigation measures.
- Development of a public awareness campaign on COVID-19–related safety guidance in addition to the usual voter education campaign, disseminated via electronic and social media.
- Partnerships with youth and civil society organizations to disseminate voter education messages, including COVID-19 safety instructions.
- Close consultations with election observer organizations on COVID-19 risk mitigation measures.
- Use of well-ventilated spaces for packing and storing ballot papers.

## Coordination with Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, police and other authorities

The ECSL appointed a committee comprising representatives from the MOH, political parties, election monitoring organizations, the Government Medical Officers' Association, the Sri Lanka Police and the Public Health Inspectors'

<sup>13</sup> Jayasignhe, Chanka. “Candidates Spend Rs 2.2 Bn over Sri Lanka's Polls Campaign Period.” *EconomyNext*, August 6, 2020. [economynext.com/candidates-spend-rs-2-2-bn-over-sri-lankas-polls-campaign-period-72677](https://economynext.com/candidates-spend-rs-2-2-bn-over-sri-lankas-polls-campaign-period-72677)

<sup>14</sup> “Upcoming Sri Lankan General Elections to Be Most Expensive.” *South Asia Monitor*, August 1, 2020. [www.southasiamonitor.org/index.php/sri-lanka/upcoming-sri-lankan-general-elections-be-most-expensive](https://www.southasiamonitor.org/index.php/sri-lanka/upcoming-sri-lankan-general-elections-be-most-expensive)

Association to coordinate activities leading up to the elections. The MoH, in collaboration with the ECSL, issued “Health Guidelines for Conducting the Elections Amidst the COVID-19 Outbreak” June 3, 2020.<sup>15</sup> The guidelines included special health measures to protect the general public, election workers and others involved in the electoral process.

The guidelines alone, however, were not sufficient to guarantee compliance. Adding their voices to the ECSL, election observers requested the formalization of the public health measures to give more power to health officials and electoral authorities to enforce them. The preventive measures were finally published in the official gazette July 17, 2020,<sup>16</sup> just a few weeks before the rescheduled election date of Aug. 5, and when the campaign period and preparations for Election Day had already commenced.

Two weeks before Election Day, public health inspectors (PHIs) went on strike, urging “a broader mandate” to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The PHIs protested against the Minister of Health, who had said that PHIs would not have the enforcement powers described in the gazetted COVID-19 health guidelines during the elections. The decision was based on allegations that PHI officers were causing embarrassment by revealing details of recently detected COVID-19 cases to the media without authorization. The PHI Union of Sri Lanka called off the action after a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.<sup>18</sup> On Election Day, the deployment of around 8,000 health services officers was a first for the health services sector during an election. Along with police officers, they assisted the ECSL in ensuring that voters were following the health guidelines.<sup>19</sup>

### Voter registration

Sri Lanka has a voluntary annual voter registration system operated by the ECSL. Enumeration is normally a door-to-door process that commences June 1 each year. While the list cannot be added to or modified after the enumeration process, updates are possible in the case of death, residence overseas, postal voting and suspension of voting rights. The voter list is usually finalized around January of the following year, and it is used in any election until the following year’s list is completed. The lengthy registration process means that young voters are disenfranchised for a period from around eight months to 20 months, assuming the previous year’s voter list is approved on schedule in January. However, in general, international observers consider the voter list to have integrity.<sup>20</sup>

The ECSL used the 2019 voter list for the parliamentary elections in 2020. Based on the demography of Sri Lanka, observers estimate that more than 270,000 people who had turned 18 after June 1, 2018, and were thus eligible to vote, did not have the opportunity to cast their ballots in the elections.<sup>21</sup> There is anecdotal evidence of delays and difficulties, as well as the suspension of door-to-door enumeration, during the enumeration processes in both 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19. However, this did not impact the 2020 parliamentary elections, which were held using the 2019 voter list as per standard procedure.

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<sup>15</sup> “Health Guidelines for Conducting the Elections amidst the COVID-19 Outbreak.” Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, June 1, 2020. [www.health.gov.lk/moh\\_final/english/public/elfinder/files/feturesArtical/2020/Election%20Guidelines%20Ministry%20of%20Health-English.pdf](http://www.health.gov.lk/moh_final/english/public/elfinder/files/feturesArtical/2020/Election%20Guidelines%20Ministry%20of%20Health-English.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “Regulations Made by the Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services.” *Department of Government Printing*, Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, July 17, 2020. [www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34\\_E.pdf](http://www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34_E.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> “A Question of Public Health.” *CeylonToday*, July 24, 2020. [ceylontoday.lk/news/a-question-of-public-health](http://ceylontoday.lk/news/a-question-of-public-health).

<sup>18</sup> “PHIs to call of strike.” *DailyMirror*, July 28, 2020. [https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking\\_news/PHIs-to-call-off-strike/108-192803](https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/PHIs-to-call-off-strike/108-192803)

<sup>19</sup> “Over 8000 Health Sector Deployed for Election Health Safety Duties.” *News.Lk*, August 5, 2020. [news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/30484-over-8000-health-sector-deployed-for-election-health-safety-duties](http://news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/30484-over-8000-health-sector-deployed-for-election-health-safety-duties)

<sup>20</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission. “Sri Lanka, Presidential Election, 16 November 2019, Final Report.”

<sup>21</sup> Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV). “2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report.” CMEV, 2020, [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](http://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf), p. 10.

## Electoral campaign

Realizing that large campaign gatherings can become super-spreader events, the ECSL requested that political parties and candidates rely on print and electronic media—particularly television, social media, radio, and digital banners and screens—for election campaigning. 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.<sup>22</sup> The regulations also required that health authorities be advised in writing at least three days prior to any campaign event. Campaign event organizers were obligated to record the contact details of all attendees to enable contact tracing, if needed. All participants were required to wear masks, maintain social distancing and adhere to health regulations. However, as noted by the ECSL chair, enforcement of these regulations was difficult given that the guidelines were not legally binding before the beginning of the campaign period.<sup>23</sup>

The gazetted (and therefore legally binding) version of the health guidelines issued July 17 relaxed several restrictions on campaigning.<sup>24</sup> For example, the attendance limit for political rallies was increased from 100 to 300 people (and to 500 for rallies that party leaders attended). The number of people allowed for door-to-door canvassing increased from three to five. Despite the gazetting of the guidelines and the relaxation of certain restrictions, political parties' compliance with the health guidelines across the country was "poor," according to the election observer group Asian Network for Free and Fair Elections (ANFREL).<sup>25</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that it would have been difficult for ECSL to enforce the gazetted guidelines due to limited resources and its focus on other COVID-19 safety protocols in addition to regular election preparations in advance of Election Day.

## Voter education

To educate citizens about how to vote safely and thereby encourage turnout, the ECSL developed and produced public service announcements (PSAs) in the form of posters, videos and audio recordings to disseminate on ECSL social media sites, television and radio in the weeks leading up to the elections. The PSAs aimed to inform voters, candidates and political parties of their responsibility to protect themselves and others against COVID-19, in keeping with health officials' guidance. The PSAs followed best practices in public health literacy, including utilizing short and simple messages, familiar words and culturally relevant visuals. The COVID-specific PSAs ran in tandem with voter education efforts on topics such as how to mark a ballot, employee leave policies for Election Day, access for people with disabilities, procedures for lodging complaints related to elections and Election Day procedures. Additionally, the ECSL conducted several voter education initiatives targeting marginalized groups, in coordination with a coalition of civil society organizations. Targeted outreach focused on people with disabilities and low-literacy populations including women in rural areas, youth and estate workers. The ECSL developed and disseminated COVID-related messages through a combination of platforms including print, public and community radio, social media, street drama and small in-person events that collectively utilized sign language interpretation, educational graphics and posters, and interactive training techniques to ensure that the information resonated with the target audiences.

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<sup>22</sup> "Health Guidelines for Conducting the Elections amidst the COVID-19 Outbreak." Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, June 1, 2020, [www.health.gov.lk/moh\\_final/english/public/elfinder/files/feturesArtical/2020/Election%20Guidelines%20Ministry%20of%20Health-English.pdf](http://www.health.gov.lk/moh_final/english/public/elfinder/files/feturesArtical/2020/Election%20Guidelines%20Ministry%20of%20Health-English.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Press Trust of India, posted by Harshit Sabarwal. "Covid-19: Sri Lanka Issues Strict Health Guidelines for Election Campaigning." *Hindustan Times*, July 18, 2020, [www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/covid-19-sri-lanka-issues-strict-health-guidelines-for-election-campaigning/story-tqsizUqbciK8u4LZebApGO.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/covid-19-sri-lanka-issues-strict-health-guidelines-for-election-campaigning/story-tqsizUqbciK8u4LZebApGO.html)

<sup>24</sup> "Regulations Made by the Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services." *Department of Government Printing*, Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, July 17, 2020. [www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34\\_E.pdf](http://www.documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2020/7/2184-34_E.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> ANFREL. "The 2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections: Defending Democracy Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." *ANFREL*, 2020. [anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf](http://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf), p. 37; CMEV. "2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report." *CMEV*, 2020. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](http://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf), p. 33.

The ECSL's focus on providing accessible information on COVID-19 mitigation procedures to people with disabilities was particularly critical given that this group faces increased barriers to electoral participation during a pandemic due to potentially greater risks of infection and limited access to voter education resources. There is also a significant digital gap among people with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty and/or in rural areas.<sup>26</sup> This can lead to further exclusion if information is being shared primarily through online mediums.<sup>27</sup>

### Poll worker recruitment and training

The ECSL took measures during poll worker training to ensure the safety of participants and organizers. The number of poll workers at each training session was limited to 30 to 35, down from 50 to 100 in previous elections. No one under active quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure could attend a training, and all participants received face masks and sanitizing supplies. In order to reduce the time spent on in-person training sessions, the ECSL produced training videos for poll workers on Election Day operations and counting. The videos incorporated step-by-step guidelines on COVID-19 mitigation measures to be adopted on Election Day and during counting center operations. Organizers played the videos during the trainings and shared them with poll workers via mobile applications for later reference.

The ECSL also arranged a series of mock polls in Batticaloa, Colombo, Jaffna and Kalutara districts to test proposed polling station adaptations ahead of the elections. These included social distancing requirements, the mask distribution process, testing of plastic protective screens and protective gear, time management and other precautionary measures. National observer groups participated and provided inputs on the conduct of the mock polls. These exercises enabled the ECSL to identify the best approaches to implementation of the health guidelines and gauge voters' preparedness during the pandemic.

### Ballots and Election Day materials

To address concerns about the transmission of COVID-19 via infected surfaces, the ECSL procured special supplies and implemented safety protocols for warehousing materials. This included organizing well-ventilated storage areas with sufficient space for the packing and distribution of ballot papers, allowing one meter (3.3 feet) of distance between ECSL staff. All staff were assigned special cubicles and personal protective gear, and they were requested to wear face masks and avoid sharing documents and supplies. Additional procurements included cost-effective, disposable wax paper dabs to apply indelible ink to voters' fingers, cardboard ballot boxes with polythene safety covers to transport ballots, and individual supplies of stationery and packing materials for each staff member.

### Election security

Sri Lanka Police deployed more than 65,000 police officers in the 2020 elections—up slightly from the 60,000 deployed in the 2019 presidential elections. The role of the police was mainly to provide security around polling and counting centers, but they also assisted in ensuring public compliance with COVID-19 precautionary measures, election laws during the campaign period and use of state resources, and in removing voters from polling centers for non-compliance with health regulations.

### Postal voting

The legal framework for national elections in Sri Lanka provides an option for advance voting for a limited group of voters. Only government staff engaged in election duties on Election Day, some government workers performing essential work, those serving in the security forces and candidates contesting outside their registered constituency

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<sup>26</sup> Wedasinghe, N., and Dr. R. Wicramarachchi. "ICT Model to Overcome Sri Lankan Disability Digital Divide." *International Journal of Information and Computation Technology*, Vol. 4, No. 11, 2014, pp. 1103–08. *International Research Publications House*, [www.ripublication.com/irph/ijict\\_spl/ijictv4n11spl\\_14.pdf](http://www.ripublication.com/irph/ijict_spl/ijictv4n11spl_14.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Atkinson, Virginia, et al. *IFES COVID-19 Briefing Series: Inclusion and Meaningful Political Participation*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2020. [www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_covid19\\_briefing\\_series\\_inclusion\\_and\\_meaningful\\_political\\_participation\\_july\\_2020.pdf](http://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_covid19_briefing_series_inclusion_and_meaningful_political_participation_july_2020.pdf)

can vote in advance. Postal voting for the parliamentary elections was held from July 14 to 17, 2020. While the legislation refers to this mechanism as “postal voting,” it is in effect a hybrid system, more akin to an advance in-person voting system.<sup>28</sup> Advance voting is present in all Sri Lankan elections.

The 2020 parliamentary elections introduced an expansion of postal voting facilities for health care workers based on an executive decision by the ECSL.<sup>29</sup> Also, given the number of postal voters and COVID-19–related logistical challenges, several rounds of postal voting enabled those who missed an earlier round to vote.<sup>30</sup>

### Election Day and polling station operations

The ECSL increased its budget and expanded procurements to enable the purchase of safety equipment before the election. All polling stations received alcohol-based sanitizers, soap and other forms of disinfectant. Senior presiding officers received specific instructions on screening poll workers to ensure that none were within the 14-day quarantine period following known exposure to COVID-19. Poll workers were also required to wear masks, face shields and gloves; disinfect their hands often; keep polling stations well ventilated; maintain a distance of at least one meter from other poll workers, observers and voters; and mark voting queues in advance as a reminder to maintain social distancing. Poll workers, along with the police and armed forces, monitored voters to ensure they wore masks, sanitized their hands before entering the polling center and kept a distance of at least one meter from others while queuing and voting. Voters were encouraged to bring their own pens, and workers regularly disinfected the pens in polling booths. Health sector officials, including PHIs, and *Grama Niladharis* of their respective divisions were on standby for any emergencies related to risks of exposure or illness among poll workers.

### Vote count and results management

The ECSL made several adjustments to the counting process to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission for election officials. In past elections, ballots were counted on Election Day following the closing of the polls and delivery of ballot boxes to counting centers. For the 2020 parliamentary elections, the counting process began the day after Election Day to allow time to sanitize the ballot boxes and to sanitize and arrange counting centers with at least one meter between counting staff. Everyone in counting centers was required to wear a mask and have their temperatures checked prior to entry. To minimize the risk of spreading the virus through contaminated materials, the ECSL advised counting staff to wear gloves. Before the count, ballot boxes were wrapped in plastic to prevent tampering. The ballot boxes were unwrapped in the presence of the Chief Counting Officer and other counting center staff and polling agents at the counting center, with designated waste bins provided for the discarded wrappings.

### Election observation

Due to COVID-19–related travel restrictions, no full international election observation missions observed Sri Lanka’s parliamentary elections, although ANFREL organized a limited “hybrid” observation, fielding six foreign observers who were already in Sri Lanka. However, a number of experienced domestic observer organizations conducted observation missions across the island. These included The People’s Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, the Movement for Free and Fair Elections, Campaign for Free and Fair Elections, and the National Polls Observation Centre. The ECSL required all election observers to comply with health directives for campaign events and polling stations, including wearing masks, sanitizing hands and observing social distancing. ANFREL published a set of COVID-19 guidelines for parliamentary

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<sup>28</sup> “Introducing Advance Voting for Sri Lankan Elections.” *Democracy Reporting International*, 2020. [democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-09-16-SR-Advance-Voting-Briefing-Paper.pdf](https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-09-16-SR-Advance-Voting-Briefing-Paper.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> “Postal votes for health workers,” *The Morning*, June 3, 2020. <https://www.themorning.lk/postal-votes-for-health-workers/>

<sup>30</sup> Postal voting for 2020 general election ends today, *ColomboPage*, July 21, 2020. [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_20B/Jul21\\_1595306104CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20B/Jul21_1595306104CH.php)



elections for election observers, which all domestic observers endorsed and adhered to.<sup>31</sup> In addition, PAFFREL published its own guidelines for election observers on COVID-19 preventive measures.<sup>32</sup>

## COVID-19–Related Challenges During the 2020 Parliamentary Elections

### Disenfranchisement of voters

Despite the efforts of election management, several groups of voters lost the opportunity to vote in the 2020 elections, at least in part due to issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *Voters in quarantine centers:* Election monitoring organizations noted that 2,000 to 3,980 persons in quarantine centers across the country and those in self-quarantine on Election Day were not able to exercise their right to vote.<sup>33</sup> The ECSL could not provide an alternative voting method for those in quarantine due to health regulations and the lack of flexibility in the legal framework regarding remote voting requirements. Other voting accommodations, such as special voting hours or use of special voting queues and booths for those in quarantine, were not provided. Local observer groups also noted that the ECSL's decision to allow advance voting for those in quarantine centers was not implemented after political parties raised concerns about the lack of sufficient polling agents for each center. As noted by CMEV, individuals in quarantine centers intended to challenge this decision but were unable to do so due to the lack of time and high legal fees.<sup>34</sup>
- *Health and security officials:* The monitoring organizations also noted that many election observers; journalists; and persons in the security, transport and health sectors were unable to cast votes at their polling stations on Election Day because they were on duty at facilities run by security forces across the country and in hotels used as quarantine centers.<sup>35</sup>
- *People with disabilities:* People with disabilities face unique challenges during pandemics, both in terms of access to information as well as the heightened risks of infection that can preclude their participation in the electoral process. While the ECSL took steps to adopt accessible voter education outreach that also communicated COVID-19 mitigation measures, one area—postal voting—remained weak. The law does not extend postal voting to people with disabilities, thereby disenfranchising a number of voters who could not come to polling stations due to the health risks.
- *Citizens on duty:* The COVID-19 pandemic increased fears of unemployment across the country—a reality that likely contributed to workers feeling pressured to work on Election Day given their commitment to their jobs and fear of unemployment. As an example, those working in export processing zones were reluctant to take leave, given the demand for jobs as factories shut down or reduced operations in response to global lack of demand for products and services. An estimated 300 to 400 employees in a number of garment factories in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone could not vote during the elections as they were not granted voting leave and did not feel they could challenge the denial.<sup>36</sup> Unions and volunteer organizations working on workers' rights submitted complaints to the ECSL regarding the issue. After the election, reports state that the ECSL was informed of this issue and will seek to provide alternative opportunities for these groups

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<sup>31</sup> ANFREL. "The 2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections: COVID-19 Code of Conduct for Election Observers." ANFREL, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Ariyaratne, Dr. Vinya, and Dr. Sumudu Avanthi Hewage. *COVID-19 Health Guidelines for Election Observers*. Colombo, Sri Lanka. PAFFREL, 2020. [www.paffrel.com/posters/200818090859Book.pdf](http://www.paffrel.com/posters/200818090859Book.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> CMEV. "2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report." CMEV, 2020. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](http://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf), p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> "Several Garment Factory Workers Denied Right to Vote." *Lanka Information*, August 5, 2020. [lankainformation.lk/news/latest-news/item/34153-several-garment-factory-workers-denied-right-to-vote](http://lankainformation.lk/news/latest-news/item/34153-several-garment-factory-workers-denied-right-to-vote)

in future elections.<sup>37</sup> As noted above, workers in other sectors, such as the security and health fields, felt similar pressures.

### Unclear legal framework

As outlined in Section 24(3) of Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981, the ECSL has the authority to postpone elections in any electoral district in the event of an emergency or unforeseen circumstance.<sup>38</sup> However, it is not clear whether this provision gives the ECSL authority to postpone elections nationwide rather than on a district-by-district basis. The lack of clarity in the act is echoed by similar ambiguity in the Constitution and the presidential election law regarding the ECSL's authority to postpone elections due to a crisis. Although the Constitution gives the ECSL full authority to determine the date of a presidential election within the timeframe it mandates upon the vacating of office or death of a sitting president, it does not specifically address postponement due to an unforeseen event or crisis.<sup>39</sup>

The ECSL's authority to issue and enforce regulations is inconsistent across the legal framework. For example, the presidential election law states that the ECSL may draft regulations, but that Parliament must approve them before they can come into force, whereas the parliamentary election law is silent on the matter. Hence, the ECSL could not issue legally binding public health guidelines before the start of the campaign period for the 2020 parliamentary elections.

### Election health guidance violations

Despite efforts by election management, there were a number of alleged violations of health guidelines during the election period. Domestic observer organizations reported a number of election violations in the preelection period, with the second highest number of cases related to violations of health guidelines (illegal campaigning and propaganda was the most frequently reported violation). Observers reported 360 health guideline violations, the majority of them violations of medical rules, such as exceeding campaign rally sizes.<sup>40</sup> However, the lack of a clear legal framework warranting punitive measures for the violations rendered any action against violators unenforceable.

### Electoral marginalization and violence

Overall, the 2020 parliamentary election was less violent than the 2019 presidential election,<sup>41</sup> likely due to the more controlled and restricted electoral environment during the pandemic. In general, however, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on groups and individuals already facing marginalization and discrimination.

Because the ECSL does not disaggregate turnout data, the impact of COVID-19 on women's voting is difficult to estimate. Women in many countries, including Sri Lanka, often are expected to take on the majority of care duties within the home, and these expand exponentially during a health crisis such as COVID-19. Furthermore, women make up the majority of the informal sector in Sri Lanka and can count on few if any economic safeguards during such crises. Due to the pandemic, many of those women were left without secure incomes.<sup>42</sup> Most households, especially those previously ravaged by Sri Lanka's civil war (especially in the Northern and Eastern provinces) are single-income households headed by women. In these circumstances, women serve as primary caregivers and also must meet their families' basic needs. The global increase in violence against women during this period further

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Section 24(3) of the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981 empowers the ECSL to postpone the election to another day when, due to any emergency or unforeseen circumstances the poll for the election in any electoral district cannot be taken on the day specified in the notice relating to the election published under subsection (1). The commissioner may, by order published in the Gazette, appoint another day for the election that is no earlier than the 14th day after the publication of the order in the Gazette.

<sup>39</sup> The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (as amended up to 29th October 2020) and Presidential Elections Act (No. 15 of 1981).

<sup>40</sup> PAFFREL. 2020. *Parliamentary Election 2020 Final Report*, [www.paffrel.com/posters/210531130526combinepdf.pdf](http://www.paffrel.com/posters/210531130526combinepdf.pdf), pp. 18–20.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> "Supporting Female Heads of Households to Overcome COVID-19's Economic Toll in Sri Lanka—Sri Lanka." *ReliefWeb*, March 1, 2021. [reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/supporting-female-heads-households-overcome-covid-19-s-economic-toll-sri-lanka](http://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/supporting-female-heads-households-overcome-covid-19-s-economic-toll-sri-lanka)

impedes their participation in civic and political life. Amid such difficulties, playing an active role in the electoral process, especially election campaigns, could be the last of their priorities,<sup>43</sup> and the pandemic may have had an inhibiting effect on women running for office.

It is also important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a global uptick in online hate speech and misinformation due to campaigns moving partially online. In the 2020 elections in Sri Lanka, this led to an increase in anti-minority sentiment online, particularly against Muslims and ethnic minorities,<sup>44</sup> as well as hate speech toward and harassment of women candidates.<sup>45</sup>

### Increased campaign costs

COVID-19 mitigation efforts had a significant impact on the cost of campaigning. Safety guidance led to an increase in campaigning through media advertisements rather than traditional door-to-door campaigning. As Sri Lanka has no campaign finance laws, restrictions on less costly traditional campaign efforts had a disproportionate impact on smaller parties and candidates with less access to funds. Election observers highlighted the impact this had on the elections. For example, CMEV and PAFFREL reported that candidates with financial power had an even larger advantage during this election given that COVID-19 safety guidelines prevented many from resorting to traditional door-to-door campaigning.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, this election's extended campaign period of 154 days caused most middle-class candidates to abandon their campaign midway. This gave larger political parties with more robust funding an additional advantage, and it also increased opportunities for the abuse of state resources.<sup>47</sup>

CMEV observed that the ruling party, SLPP, spent an estimated 1.076 million LKR (nearly \$6 million USD) on campaign-related expenses—nearly half of the total expenses of all political parties in the period from July 2 to Aug. 1, 2020. The exact amount is estimated to be higher, as CMEV believes that it captured only about 30 percent of the actual campaign expenses due to several limitations.<sup>48</sup>

As the pandemic limited in-person campaigning, election campaigns relied heavily on media advertising. The major political parties and candidates utilized their resources to buy costly airtime on radio and television or to publish print advertisements. In contrast, many minority candidates and parties were at a disadvantage due to the high cost of digital advertising and electronic media campaigns.

The lack of campaign finance laws has been a longstanding issue in Sri Lanka. Campaign finance remains unregulated, and there are no limits on donations or spending. This results in a lack of transparency and accountability and the reinforcement of an unlevel playing field among candidates. Indeed, CMEV showed the vast disparity in election expenses among political parties.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, concerns about the abuse of state resources were raised in connection with instances of politicization of quarantine centers and public subsidies due to COVID-19. There were complaints that the ruling party exploited these monetary disbursements to gain an electoral advantage.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Brechenmacher, Saskia, and Caroline Hubbard. "How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 17, 2020. [carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/17/how-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-women-s-political-exclusion-pub-83213](https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/17/how-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-women-s-political-exclusion-pub-83213)

<sup>44</sup> CMEV. "2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report." CMEV, 2020. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](https://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf), p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> ANFREL. "The 2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections: Defending Democracy Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." ANFREL, 2020. [anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf](https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sri-Lanka-Report-2020-FINAL-ol.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> CMEV. "2020 Sri Lankan Parliamentary General Election: Election Observation Report." CMEV, 2020. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf](https://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PGE-2020-Final-Report-English-Final-1.pdf), p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> CMEV. 2020, *Estimated Election Campaign Costs Monitoring Initiative: Parliamentary Election 2020, Sri Lanka*. [cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Report\\_Campaign-Finance\\_CMEV\\_Parliamentary-Election\\_2020-1.pdf](https://cmev.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Final-Report_Campaign-Finance_CMEV_Parliamentary-Election_2020-1.pdf), p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 20.



## Lack of alternative registration and voting methods

Sri Lanka's voter registration system lags behind demographic changes and hence disenfranchises a large number of young potential voters in each election. Although this did not directly impact voting in the 2020 parliamentary election, as enumeration was conducted before the pandemic, the absence of door-to-door enumeration two years in a row (2020 and 2021) will likely impede the participation of young people and marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, in future elections.

The increased need for advance voting brought on by the pandemic underscored the need to expand access to this voting option in future elections. The ECSL received 753,037 postal voting applications and rejected 47,430 due to delays in receiving the applications or other reasons, such as the same person submitting duplicate applications, inadequate information or other inaccuracies.<sup>51</sup> Although postal voting was expanded to include health care workers, the ECSL did so under an unclear legal mandate and did not include other groups of people who were potentially unable to vote on Election Day due to COVID-19, such as persons with disabilities, export processing zone workers, people in quarantine centers and people in long-term care facilities.

## Limited election observation and media reporting

Domestic election observation groups PAFFREL and CMEV deployed observers in numbers similar to those for the presidential election less than a year prior. However, they faced logistical and financial challenges due to travel restrictions and health concerns, and they made extra efforts to keep their observers safe and compliant with health guidelines. Due to travel restrictions and the shifting timeline for the 2020 parliamentary election, no international observation missions were deployed. Only ANFREL was able to conduct a hybrid mission, fielding six foreign observers who were already in Sri Lanka; this contrasts with ANFREL's 40 international observers in the 2019 presidential elections. Although little information is available about any difficulties that media organizations experienced in reporting during the campaign period and on Election Day, it is reasonable to presume that movement restrictions (although media organizations were exempt from most of them) and health concerns affected the amount and quality of electoral reporting. These factors led to an information and analysis deficit for the 2020 parliamentary elections.

# Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique challenge for election management bodies and electoral stakeholders. Ensuring that people are able to exercise their lawful rights in a safe environment is a cornerstone of democracy. The public health crisis stemming from the pandemic has forced election management bodies around the world to adopt special measures to protect the health of all participants in the electoral process. In Sri Lanka, the ECSL has implemented numerous good practices, such as launching comprehensive public awareness, voter education and voter etiquette campaigns and ensuring that all polling stations adopted social distancing and other guidelines outlined by health authorities. Importantly, there was no evident increase in the number of COVID-19 infections in the country as a result of the 2020 parliamentary elections. It is also critical to reflect on and learn lessons for future elections during crises in order to continue to improve the electoral process, particularly given that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact elections both globally and regionally. Recommendations for future elections include the following:

- *Amend the legal framework to protect the franchise during crises.* A number of areas within the Sri Lankan electoral legal framework need review and reform in order to ensure the democratic participation of all voters and establish a level playing field for all candidates. This need is often exacerbated for elections held during a crisis. Key areas of reform could include a more flexible and timely voter registration system. Despite the

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<sup>51</sup> The high percentage of rejected postal vote applications is also likely due to the complexity of the postal voting application form and the ECSL's strict interpretation of the application requirements.

fact that voter registration issues did not affect this particular election, the weaknesses of the current system that were exacerbated by COVID-19 will likely impede voter participation in future elections. Other reform areas could include the establishment of advance voting and/or expansion of postal voting for citizens who are disenfranchised either due to crisis situations or their work or living status, along with persons with disabilities, election observers, persons in long-term care, health workers and export processing zone workers.

- *Clarify the authority of the ECSL in times of crisis.* The lack of clarity regarding the ECSL's authority to determine the electoral calendar and enforce public health guidelines negatively impacted its ability to carry out the 2020 elections safely and without confusion. Minor changes to the legal framework clarifying these issues would enable the ECSL to deal with similar crises more decisively and with greater authority. There is also a need to clearly define the ECSL's enforcement powers throughout the legal framework, and the ECSL should have the power to draft and implement regulations during elections to mitigate issues arising from crises or unforeseen circumstances.
- *Plan for elections during different types of crises, and train election officials in crisis management.* Strong electoral leadership during crises is required to minimize impacts on people's democratic rights. Proactive and innovative crisis management and planning is necessary for the ECSL to be able to respond quickly and decisively as events unfold. During crises, the ECSL may also encounter difficulties in poll worker recruitment and training, and election workers will also need special protection and training to discharge their duties safely.
- *Budget in advance and appropriately for elections during crises.* As the greatest peacetime logistical exercise that most countries undertake, elections are unavoidably expensive. During crises, costs will inevitably increase, so advance scenario-based budgeting is needed to ensure the allocation of appropriate funding early in the electoral process. It is particularly important to have sufficient funding to ensure the safety of the public when conducting elections during a crisis. It is also important to initiate procurements early to comply with regulations and ensure fair prices, especially during global shortages of products such as personal protective equipment. Similarly, election observation and media election reporting will likely be more costly and require additional funding.
- *Create crisis coordination mechanisms between the ECSL, public health authorities, and the police and other security forces.* Close coordination between electoral management boards and health authorities is crucial for all key decisions regarding elections during public health crises. This will help to ensure smooth communication among the various authorities and provide greater clarity to voters, with state bodies speaking with one voice. Coordination with the police and security forces might also help ensure the enforcement of preventive measures.
- *Establish mechanisms that address challenges that women, minorities and persons with disabilities face in participating in political life during times of crisis.* Creating broader understanding among political parties, election officials, observer groups and other stakeholders on disparities in the political process that are exacerbated during times of crisis is an important step in ensuring more equal participation. Special measures to address these challenges are needed, including the establishment of hotlines, creation of targeted awareness campaign and increased monitoring of on- and offline violence and hate speech.
- *Strengthen campaign finance frameworks to promote more equal access to the electoral process:* In the recent elections, political parties' inability to leverage less costly in-person campaign events, and the resulting need to utilize more expensive campaign platforms, such as traditional media, disproportionately impacted smaller parties and underscored the need for campaign finance spending limits. Similarly, abuse of state resources became an ever-greater challenge due to accusations of the politicization of government aid and handouts during this period. Codification and enforcement of abuse-related laws and regulations could help curb incumbent advantage in future crises.
- *Develop a comprehensive voter education strategy that takes into account enumeration and elections during crises.* A voter education strategy requires a year-round implementation plan that accounts for the challenges posed by different types of national or sub-national crises. It should explore creative strategies to reach the most marginalized groups that do not have access to digital communication, as well as groups that are cut off from digital communication due to the crisis.

- *Adapt, fund and plan for observation of elections held in times of crisis.* National observer organizations successfully deployed election observers during the parliamentary elections. Adaptation of election observation to crisis settings could include providing enhanced training on and funding for alternative observation methods in times of crisis—such as remote focus group discussions to bolster data collection in areas where travel is not feasible—as well as establishing remote knowledge exchange platforms so domestic observers can share information with international observers who are unable to travel. Such platforms could be particularly helpful to engage international observation groups experienced in observing in similar crisis situations in order to highlight common trends, anticipate observation challenges, identify mitigation measures and help with quality control.



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