



2024 Sri Lanka Election: Competing Visions for Social Protection and Education in Election Manifestos



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Overview

As Sri Lanka prepares for its ninth presidential election on September 21, 2024, the country stands at a critical juncture, with voters eager to assess the candidates' visions for addressing pressing socio-economic issues. Central to this election are the themes of education and social protection, two areas deeply impacted by the economic crisis that triggered mass protests in 2022, known as the Aragalaya (Struggle). The protests, which resulted in the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, reflected widespread dissatisfaction with economic mismanagement and deepening inequality.

Since then, under President Ranil Wickremesinghe's leadership, Sri Lanka has secured a US\$2.9 billion IMF bailout, leading to some economic stabilization, including lower inflation and increased foreign reserves. However, the cost of living remains high, and poverty levels have surged, exacerbating inequalities. In this context, education and social protection have become focal points of political debate, as both are seen as key to rebuilding a more equitable society and restoring public confidence in the government.

This election serves as a referendum on the current government's handling of the economic crisis and its broader recovery efforts. The manifestos of the leading candidates — Anura Kumara Disanayake of the National People's Power (NPP), Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), President Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP), and Namal Rajapaksa of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) — reflect their differing approaches to addressing the urgent needs of education and social protection. This analysis explores how each candidate envisions these two critical areas, offering insights into their proposed policies and the implications for Sri Lanka's future.

Sri Lanka Presidential Election 2024 At A Glance:

Election purpose: Elect the 10th President of Sri Lanka

Election date: September 21, 2024

Total candidates: 38

Total voters: 17,140,354

Gender balance among candidates: None

Who can vote: Any registered citizen over 18. People with criminal and corruption records and people with "unsound minds" are barred from voting

Who conducts the election: The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL)

Social Protection

Ranil Wickramasinghe proposes to continue the implementation of The National Social Protection Policy which emphasises to establishing a universal social protection framework, overseen by a committee that includes government representatives as well as members from private and civil society organizations, thereby adhering to the principles and fundamental guarantees set forth by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The manifesto lacks mechanisms focused to maternity and child welfare.

The manifesto of Sajith Premadasa reflects on implementing a universal social protection system by recognizing the migrant workers, the 'Malaiyaha' community and veteran welfare. The strategies outlined for empowering vulnerable communities through skill development and capacity building demonstrates commitment to economic empowerment. He proposes conducting a fresh scientific survey before introducing the new poverty alleviation scheme and consolidating all welfare schemes under Welfare Benefit Board and establishing a unified beneficiary data base, to strengthen the targeting and coverage and minimize the duplication of mechanisms. His proposals include government mechanisms to strengthen the implementation of government policies by establishing a cabinet ministry for policy planning and implementation which is responsible for policy formulation, updating and reviewing. He proposes to form a commission under the Ministry composed of scholars and professional in relevant fields to ensure the implementation of policies which will enhance the monitoring and evaluation.

The NPP takes a comprehensive approach for social protection, emphasising the fundamental social security guarantees established by the ILO recommendations. He proposes a universal approach in social protection where the programs cover a wide array of demographics including pregnant mothers, children, people with disabilities, people with chronic illnesses, senior citizens, unemployed graduates, public sector workers, private sector workers, informal workers, women led households and single parent households. A key focus is given to ensure principles of solidarity, lifecycle approach, ensure social justice and effective participation throughout the mechanisms. The NPP policies recognize empowerment in all of their poverty alleviation programs. The proposals include, a comprehensive participatory study on the causes of poverty and family dynamics in low-income families, identifying and analysing development remedies through community-based projects, establishing training, technical assistance and financial assistance for low-income families to initiate income generation and appointing field officers to monitor the progress.

Namal's manifesto on social protection presents a framework that prioritizes the urgent resolution of the challenges faced by individuals through expedited relief programs designed to satisfy essential food needs. He also advocates for the fortification of the Samurdhi program, recognized as the principal social welfare scheme in the country. Although his framework outlines various approaches to ensure social protection for different demographics, such as children, senior citizens, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities, it is characterized by a lack of integration and institutional framework to direct and manage these varied mechanisms.

Education

An element of Dissanayake's school education policy that has not been mentioned by other candidates is the emphasis on expanding and improving the tertiary education system, with a commitment to reducing delays in student enrolment. His commitment to university level education includes activities to enhance the Mahapola educational welfare program and boost research and development in universities through targeted initiatives. Dissanayake is the only candidate to include a specific policy on Piriven education by pledging to allocate funds and provide necessary facilities for Pirivens. Premadasa's policy on higher education is visible in his commitment to improving universities' international rankings although it has not provided a detailed methodology. Moreover, his higher education policy includes a plan to collaborate with IIT/IIM in India on establishing a university in Sri Lanka and a university twinning program. Rajapaksa's manifesto has highlighted the improvement of quality and competitiveness of state universities, with a goal of raising them to top global rankings. The proposal to establish a government body dedicated to maintaining the standards of degree courses would come in this direction. Additionally, the policy also aims at regulating large-scale private tuition. Wickremesinghe's higher education policy initiatives focus on establishing new educational institutions. He proposes several technology-focused educational initiatives, including the establishment of a new university in Galaha, Kandy, in collaboration with Chennai IIT, alongside the establishment of several technological universities. His policy also includes adding an International Climate Change University and a University of Agricultural Technology to Sri Lanka's university network.

One of the Dissanayake's commitments on school education is his proposal to build a government primary school system within 3 km of every child's home or their parents' workplace. Additionally, the inclusion of age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education at the junior secondary level is another policy proposal on school education. Premadasa emphasizes the integration of technology to school education and commits to launch the "10,096 Foster School" program, aimed at attracting donors to support the development and enhancement of SMART schools and digital infrastructure. His policy also includes expanding 'Sakwala' program by ensuring student access to digital learning platforms in schools. Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, focuses on enhancing the school curriculum by incorporating additional components aimed at equipping students with soft skills, life skills, and moral values. Rajapaksa's policy on school education proposes to increase the average time students spend in formal education. His vision also introduces the concept of "Smart Education," aiming to integrate AI from school to university level. Only Dissanayake's, Premadasa's and Rajapaksa's education policies show a commitment to incorporating modern digital learning and IT-driven education. Only three candidates have articulated a clear policy stance specifically on religious education at the school level. Among them, Dissanayake has a direct and explicit policy vision focused on religious education in the school curriculum. Although Rajapaksa does not address school curricula specifically, his policy aims to enhance understanding of various religious beliefs and philosophies by providing basic education on different religious teachings to every citizen. Premadasa's policy pledges to include inter-religious education in the school curriculum to provide children with an adequate understanding of religions other than their own.

With the goal of delivering high-quality, affordable, inclusive, and accessible early childhood education, Dissanayake's policy on early childhood development focuses not only on infrastructural improvements in early childhood education sector in Sri Lanka, such as the establishment of early childhood development centres, but also on implementing student-centered policies within the classroom. Rajapaksa's policy on early childhood education primarily relies on one financial assistance provided, focusing only children from low-income families, through the Samurdhi social welfare program. While Wickremesinghe's manifesto underscores the need for improving and regulating preschool education, it does not provide specific details on how these improvements will be implemented. Similarly, his stance on preschool teachers remains unchanged, with no clear strategy

outlined to achieve his vision for their professional development. Premadasa recognizes Early Childhood Education (ECE) as crucial to shaping responsible citizens. His policy focuses on a long-term initiative that involves establishing a regulatory authority with a multi-stakeholder advisory committee, upgrading child-friendly and modern infrastructure, enhancing teacher training and accreditation, and promoting greater parental involvement in early education.

Dissanayake's proposal introduces a vocational education stream parallel to the general education stream from Year 10 to Year 13. Premadasa proposes the modernisation of vocational curricula to align more closely with market needs. Wickremesinghe is committed to launching a vocational training program specifically aimed at youth who do not complete their Ordinary Level and Advanced Level exams. This initiative will provide a monthly allowance of Rs. 35,000 for one year, helping them gain valuable skills. His policy package also plans to establish provisional vocational training boards in all nine provinces by the end of 2026. Additionally, he vows to upgrade existing vocational training centres into vocational schools, bringing them under these boards. Rajapaksa's manifesto however, does not address vocational education. None of the candidates have addressed the issue of the lack of qualified teachers and staff in vocational education sector. Dissanayake's policy on education infrastructure development places an emphasis on expanding internet access and enhancing open and distance education facilities. Wickremesinghe's policy stance aligns with this, focusing on infrastructure development to prepare for a technology-driven era. However, it falls short of providing a comprehensive methodology for policy implementation. Premadasa's policy is centred around the "smart school" concept. Rajapaksa's policy makes no mention of education infrastructure development.

All four leading candidates emphasize teacher training in their policy platforms. Premadasa plans to expand teacher training facilities by establishing an additional College of Education. His policy covers another area—meeting the demand for religion teachers. Dissanayake proposes a comprehensive one-year professional training program including the creation of a National University of Education specifically for teacher training. He focuses on teacher development programs slated for 2025. Rajapaksa highlights the continuous professional training for both school and university teachers. Regarding teachers' salaries, Dissanayake prioritises reducing disparities by promoting more equitable pay among teachers and principals. Premadasa's manifesto, however, lacks specific policy actions on salary and pension issues, merely suggesting the formulation of a future plan. Both Wickremesinghe's and Rajapaksa's manifestos do not address salary and pension matters at all. Wickremesinghe is the only one to acknowledge the shortage of English teachers.

One of Dissanayake's policy stances on school curriculum development is his commitment to shaping the curriculum around subjects that allow children to pursue higher education or vocational training based on their abilities and special skills. He plans to increase flexibility in the curriculum, by allowing students to switch between different streams during their senior secondary education. To ensure that national examination evaluations are completed within a specific timeframe, he proposes to implement an annual school calendar. Premadasa commits to incorporate expert opinions from domestic and multilateral institutions, foreign governments, and private sector human resource specialists in updating the school curriculum. However, his policy overlooks the involvement of religious leaders. Rajapaksa's policy aims to innovate and adjust syllabi and teaching methods across formal education, including universities. He is committed to revising syllabi in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors efficiently and cost-effectively through the use of ICT. Wickremesinghe's manifesto proposes revising curricula and overhauling the method of compiling school textbooks. Additionally, he aims to revisit the examination and evaluation system to enable students to begin university education at the age of 17.

In conclusion, the 2024 Sri Lankan presidential election presents voters with distinct visions for the future of education and social protection, as outlined in the candidates' manifestos. While some prioritize technological advancement and vocational training, others focus on reducing inequalities and expanding access to essential services. The approaches vary in scope and ambition, reflecting different

understandings of the challenges facing the country. As Sri Lanka continues to recover from its economic crisis, the policies chosen in this election will play a crucial role in shaping not only the nation's social fabric but also its path toward equitable growth and stability.

However, the role of civil society will be equally critical in the post-election period. Monitoring the implementation of these promises and holding the winning candidate accountable will ensure that the proposed reforms translate into meaningful progress. Civil society must remain vigilant, ensuring that education and social protection are prioritized as key pillars for Sri Lanka's future development.