



## Considerations For Holding An Election During The Covid-19 Pandemic

This short guide has been prepared by CMEV to offer election stakeholders and voters a brief overview of some key considerations for holding an election during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It provides an outline of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected elections worldwide; special health and safety measures taken for elections already held worldwide; and important factors to note in the Sri Lankan electoral context. It is hoped that these considerations are taken into account by all election stakeholders when decisions are made regarding the Parliamentary General Election in Sri Lanka.

### Global Electoral Snapshot

From 1 March 2020 until 20 April 2020:

- at least 50 countries and territories across the globe have postponed national and local-level elections due to COVID-19
- around 18 countries and territories have held national or local-level elections as originally planned despite concerns related to COVID-19

#### **Some postponed national-level elections:**

- Referendum, [Italy](#) (originally planned for 29 March 2020)
- Referendum, [Armenia](#) (originally planned for 5 April 2020)
- Parliamentary election, [Syria](#) (originally planned for 13 April 2020, moved to 20 May 2020)
- Parliamentary election, [North Macedonia](#) (originally planned for 12 April 2020)
- Parliamentary election, [Kiribati](#) (originally planned for 7 April 2020, moved to 14 April 2020)
- Constitutional referendum, [Chile](#) (originally planned for 26 April 2020)
- Parliamentary election second round, [Iran](#) (originally planned for 17 April 2020, moved to 11 September 2020)
- Constitutional referendum in [Russia](#) (originally planned for 22 April 2020)
- General election, [Serbia](#) (originally planned for 26 April 2020)
- General election, [Bolivia](#) (originally planned for 3 May 2020)
- Presidential and legislative elections, [Dominican Republic](#) (originally planned for 17 May 2020)
- Federal vote, [Switzerland](#) (originally planned for 17 May 2020)
- Parliamentary election, [Ethiopia](#) (originally planned for 29 August 2020)

#### **Some postponed local level elections:**

- All municipal by-elections in [South Africa](#) (originally planned for March-May 2020)
- Municipal elections, [Austria](#) (originally planned for 15 March 2020)
- Referendum, [Gibraltar](#), (originally planned for 19 March 2020)
- Second round of local elections, [France](#) (originally planned for 22 March 2020)
- Local municipal elections, [Peru](#) (originally planned for 29 March 2020)
- Referendum, [Falkland Islands](#), British overseas territory (originally planned for 26 March 2020).
- Municipal elections in [Tunisia](#) (originally planned for 28-29 March 2020)
- Municipal elections, [Argentina](#) (originally planned for 29 March 2020)
- Sub-national elections, [Bolivia](#) (originally planned for March 2020)
- By-elections in [Nigeria](#) (originally planned for March 2020)
- By-elections, [Pakistan](#) (originally planned for March 2020)
- Primary elections, 15 states in [United States](#) (originally planned for March-May 2020).
- Local elections, [Maldives](#) (originally planned for 4 April 2020)
- By-election in [Zimbabwe](#) (originally planned for 4 April 2020)
- By-elections, [Canada](#) (originally planned 4 April 2020)
- Regional elections, [Spain](#) (originally planned for 5 April 2020)
- Local elections, [Kyrgyzstan](#) (originally planned for 12 April 2020)
- By-elections, [Gambia](#) (originally planned for 16 April 2020)

- Local Authority Elections, [Isle of Man](#) (originally planned for 23 April 2020)
- Primary elections, [Ghana](#) (originally planned for 25 April 2020)
- Local elections, Riga, [Latvia](#) (originally planned for 25 April 2020)
- By elections, [Kenya](#) (originally planned for April, June-July 2020)
- Local elections, [Germany](#) (originally planned from April-October 2020)
- Local elections, [United Kingdom](#) (originally planned for May 2020, moved to May 2021)
- Local elections, [Uruguay](#) (originally planned for 10 May 2020)
- Local elections, [Mexico](#) (originally planned for 7 June 2020)
- Local elections, [Romania](#) (originally planned for June 2020)
- Local elections, [Indonesia](#) (originally planned for 23 September 2020)
- Local elections in NSW, [Australia](#) (originally planned for September 2020)
- Local elections, [Paraguay](#) (originally planned for 8 November)

### **Some national-level elections held in March and April 2020:**

- Legislative Election in [Israel](#) (2 March 2020); General Election in [Guyana](#) (2 March 2020); General election in [Vanuatu](#) (19 March 2020); a constitutional referendum in [Guinea](#) (22 March 2020) General Elections in [Mali](#) (29 March 2020); Parliamentary Election in [Kiribati](#) (14 April 2020), Parliamentary Election in [South Korea](#) (15 April 2020).

### **Some local-level elections held in March and April 2020:**

- local elections in [France](#) (15 March 2020); local elections in Bavaria; [Germany](#) (16/29 March 2020); local elections in [Moldova](#) (15 March 2020); municipal elections in [Dominican Republic](#) (15 March 2020); primary elections in Arizona, Florida, Illinois and Wisconsin; [United States](#) (17 March; 7 April 2020); by-elections in [Poland](#) (22 March 2020); parliamentary election reruns in [Cameroon](#) (22 March 2020); local elections in Queensland; [Australia](#) (29 March 2020); local elections in [Switzerland](#) (29 March, 4 April 2020)

Voter turnout was reported as being lower than on average for nearly all these elections.

source: International IDEA, "Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections", <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>

## **Special health and safety measures taken for elections worldwide**

[Israel](#), 4 March 2020, National Election

- Separate polling stations made of plastic sheeting set up and staffed by election officials in protective clothing for voters under quarantine or precautionary home isolation

[South Korea](#), 15 April 2020, Legislative Election

- Voting from home implemented for persons with confirmed cases of COVID-19
- Voters required to wash their hands before going to the polling station; wear masks; keep a safe distance from others; and refrain from discussions in or outside the polling station
- Taking temperature checks and providing gloves on entrance to polling stations and regularly disinfecting all voting equipment.
- Temperature checks for anyone entering a counting centre; prohibition on entry for anyone with a fever or respiratory symptoms
- Voters in quarantine being escorted to vote at separate booths at a time close to the close of polls

[Maryland, United States](#), 28 April 2020, primary election; [Poland](#), 10 May 2020, Presidential Elections

- Voting being shifted entirely to postal voting and physical polling stations not being opened

## **Considerations for holding a national-level election in Sri Lanka amid COVID-19**

- **Reconsidering Polling Centres** – 12,845 polling centres operated during the last national-level election in Sri Lanka (Presidential Election 2019), and a similar number will need to operate for the Parliamentary General Election. There is large variance in the number of voters served by polling stations across the country, depending on the exact location of the polling centre and the population density of the area. In the present climate, some of these polling centres may not be appropriate due to their size, accessibility

and ability to serve all voters assigned to it in a timely manner amid extra health precautions. The Election Commission will therefore have to comprehensively review all polling centres and institute new ones where necessary, which may be a time-consuming process.

- **Revised health and safety measures at polling stations** – Strong physical distancing measures for voters arriving to vote, as well as health and safety measures such as hand washing/sanitising during voting itself, will need to be implemented. This may be difficult to do in a uniform manner across all polling centres. Additionally, comprehensive voter education prior to Election Day will need to be conducted across multiple media platforms so that voters are aware of these health and safety rules.
- **Extra health and safety resources required** – extra resources such as gloves, masks, hand sanitisers, plastic sheeting and emergency medical equipment for use by election officials and voters will need to be supplied to each polling centre and Election Commission office across the country. Voter education measures for new voting guidelines will also require additional monetary resources. This will incur a cost much greater than the amount earmarked for the Parliamentary General Election in March 2020 by Cabinet. It is unclear if sufficient funds are available at short notice to authorise these extra expenditures (particularly as the country in general is operating on a limited Vote on Account)
- **Revised election campaigning rules** – under the current climate, usual election campaigning activities such as public rallies and meetings and door-to-door voter canvassing should not be conducted. The Election Commission will need to revise the rules for what election campaigning activities are not permitted and clarify the penalties for violating them, all the while ensuring that there remains a level playing field for all candidates to campaign.
- **Stronger regulation of online space** – As CMEV has consistently highlighted, the online space in Sri Lanka for election activity is extremely unregulated, and the Election Commission does not have sufficient powers to identify and penalise online election violations such as hate speech, misinformation and unauthorised election advertising. Due to the likely absence or minimal occurrence of physical campaigning and advertising on print-media, election campaigning and advertising is likely to shift disproportionately to the online space. This will place an added burden on the Election Commission to effectively regulate the online space. The time and conditions for implementing a stronger regulatory framework at short notice are unfortunately not present.
- **Revised vote counting procedures** – vote counting is an intensive process where at least 18 persons are required to be present inside (usually small) vote counting rooms for a minimum of 8 hours (these figures can rise significantly depending on the number of votes cast in a particular division). This process will need to be revised to find different, larger rooms across the country for vote counting to observe appropriate physical distancing precautions. Additional precautions will need to be implemented for the transport of ballot boxes from polling stations to counting centres. This may be difficult to do at short notice.
- **Contingency plans for Election Officials on duty** – at least 250,000 election officials operate during the pre-election, Election Day, vote counting and post-election periods, from the polling centres, to the District Election Secretariats, to the National Election Secretariat. The methods of how election officials work will need to be revised to observe appropriate health and physical distancing rules, and contingency plans for replacement staff need to be made for if and when election officials are infected with COVID-19.
- **Contingency plans for Police on duty** – at least 70,000 police officers operate during the pre-election, Election Day, vote counting and post-election periods. The methods of how Police officers work will need to be revised to observe appropriate health and physical distancing rules, and contingency plans for replacement officers need to be made for if and when Police officers are infected with COVID-19.
- **Revised election observation** – due to the prevailing climate, election observation activities by domestic and international election observation organisations cannot be conducted as normal. The Election Commission may need to revise certain guidelines on how these organisations can conduct their election observation activities. Regardless, there will be a negative effect on the integrity of the electoral process due to election observation not being able to be done at the same scale as before, especially given that there will be new rules and restrictions in place which need monitoring.