



CENTRE FOR MONITORING ELECTION VIOLENCE

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தேர்தல் வன்முறைகளைக் கண்காணிப்பதற்கான நிலையம்

Parliamentary General Election 2020

Field Visit Report II – Election Situation Analysis as of August 2, 2020

During the last week of the election campaign, CMEV launched its second evaluation of the ground campaign with an extensive focus given to voters' interest levels in participating in the election. This evaluation covers the period up to August 2, 2020, after which the silent period with a prohibition on campaigning begins.

Key Issues

Varying voter participation in election activities – According to CMEV field observers, voters' participation in election campaign activities such as major rallies and village level meetings were noticeably low compared to other recent national level elections. CMEV did observe, however, that almost all rallies organised by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) with the presence of the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Kurunegala District candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa had large numbers of participants. A similar situation was likewise observed in the district rallies of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) addressed by party leader and Colombo District candidate Sajith Premadasa.

Poor compliance with health guidelines – The compliance of health guidelines for election campaigning was observed to be poor by all political parties and candidates across the country. Despite the guidelines being gazetted, and certain relaxations in the campaigning restrictions (the canvassing maximum limit being increased to 5 and the maximum meeting attendance being increased to 300 or 500 with a party leader in attendance), the guidelines were still being violated. In large rallies with the attendance of the President, candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa or SJB leader Sajith Premadasa in particular, the attendance limits were flagrantly violated with large groups of supporters transported by hired buses violating the 500-person limit. Most of the sinks set up at campaign offices were observed as not being used and meetings were being conducted without health precautions being followed.

Treating voters and goods distribution – CMEV received reports of a number of occasions of treatments for large groups organised at hotels by candidates. For instance, Mr. Lakshman Wasantha, SLPP Matale district candidate no. 1, had organised a meeting of more than 1,000 people on July 31 at Grand Mount Hotel who were treated with lunch. A large group of women state workers had been distributed saris following a meeting held at the same venue in the afternoon of the same day. Treating becomes especially difficult to monitor and report where it involves direct cash payments and illegal items such as illicit liquor.

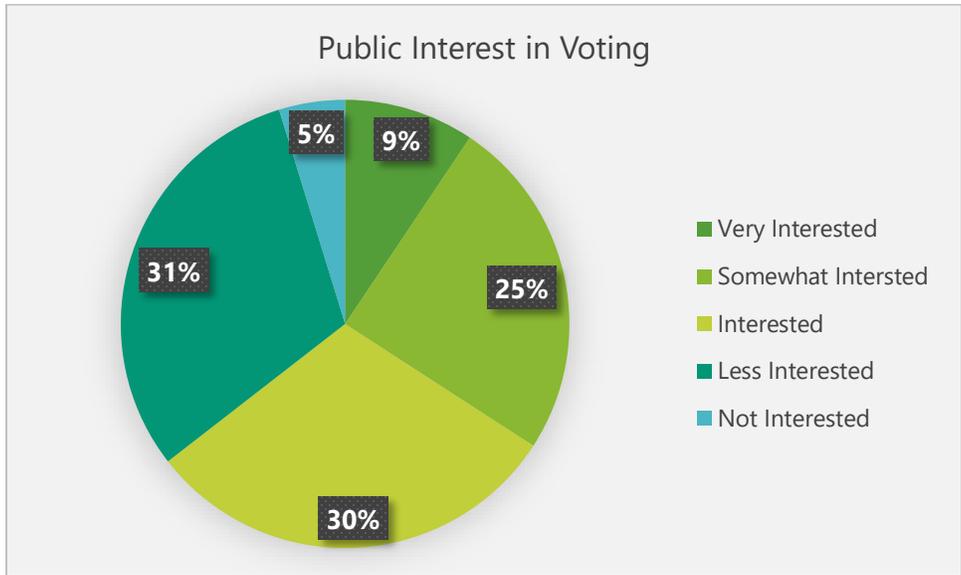
CMEV also received reports of many incidents of goods distribution. For instance, the distribution of plastic items for pregnant women was common in many places throughout the campaign period, particularly in the Hambantota, Badulla, and Polonnaruwa districts. SLPP Hambantota district candidate no. 5 Chamal Rajapaksa and Polonnaruwa district candidate no. 7 Maithripala Sirisena were the most prolific in violations regarding treating and offering goods.

Police bias in violation handling – CMEV is highly concerned about complaints it has received about Police bias and negligence in taking actions against violations of election laws. According to DIG (Elections) Priyantha Weerasuriya, investigations are being conducted in 12 Police officers in the Kalmunai, Sammnathurai, Puttalam and Kurunegala police divisions in this regard. Two OICs serving at the Ja-ela and Polonnaruwa Police stations have already been transferred for being politically supportive of certain political parties and candidates. CMEV has further received the following information about biased actions of certain Police stations and the Police officers serving there:

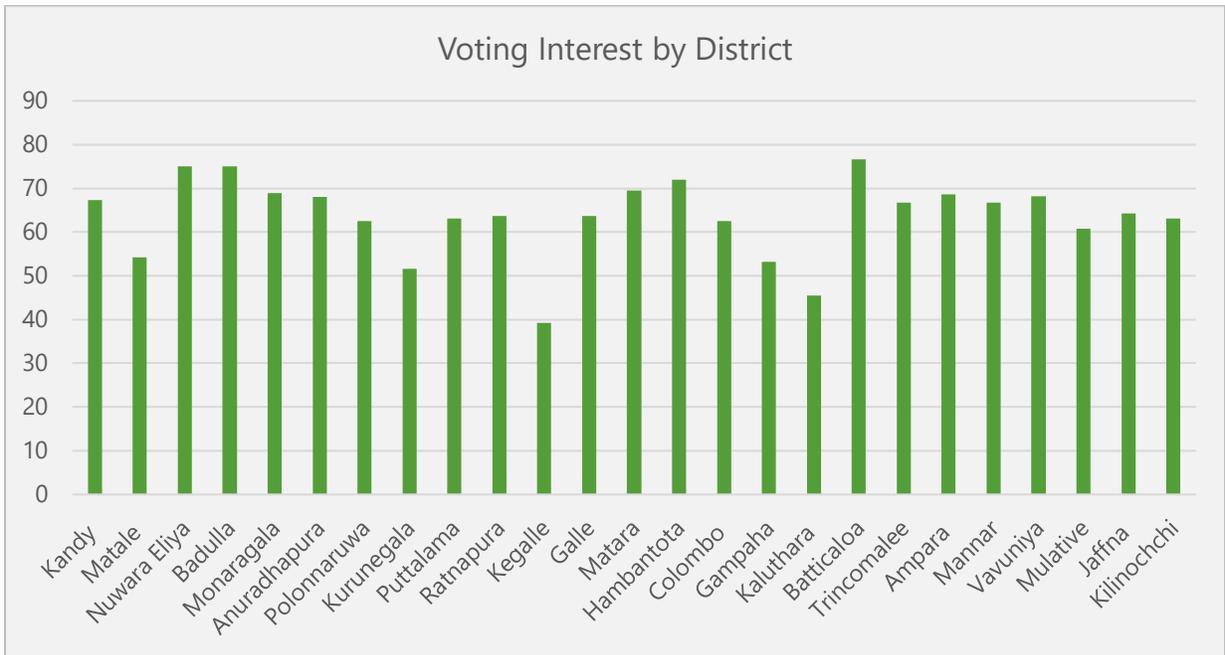
- Balangoda Police – the OIC did not take any action to stop a vehicle parade with more than 100 vehicles from Thubagoda to Balangoda town organised by the chairperson of the Ibulpe Pradeshiya Sabaha on July 29, 2020.
- Katugastota Police – IP Aravinda forced H.R.P. Bandu and Mohamed Shihad to lodge a complaint relating to an election offence under (the non-election related) CIB category.
- Kirinda Police – An intraparty conflict between supporters of SLPP candidates Chamal Rajapaksa (no. 5) and Namal Rajapaka (no. 8) reported on August 1 at Uchchakanda was recorded under the CIB category (complaint no. CIB 88/220).
- Kirinda Police has not taken any action to stop the distribution of goods for pregnant women organised by SLPP candidate Chamal Rajapaksa in many locations across Kirinda throughout campaign period.
- Hiniduma Police – An incident involving the assault of Independent Group 02 candidate Wickramasinghe Gunasekara Sidney Raweendra Gunsekara (no. 12) by the Chairman of Thawalama Pradeshiya Sabha Wasantha Thuduwege and a group of SLPP supporters was categorised as not election-related and a complaint was not recorded.
- Kotapola Police – An incident of the assault of Sanjeewa Arukgoda, the Chairman of the Kotapola Pradeshiya Sabha, by supporters of Nipuna Ranawaka, SLPP candidate no.7 in Hambantota district and a further 13 death threats received by him on phone was recorded under the category of CIB (complaint no. CIB 2 -314/295)
- Pallama Police – Officers were observed abstaining from taking legal action against SLPP Puttalam District candidate Sanath Nishatha for having illegal vehicle parades at several occasions.
- Pansilugama and Kurunegala Police – Officers at the election branch have not been cooperative with CMEV in confirming incidents relating to the election.

Public Interest in Voting

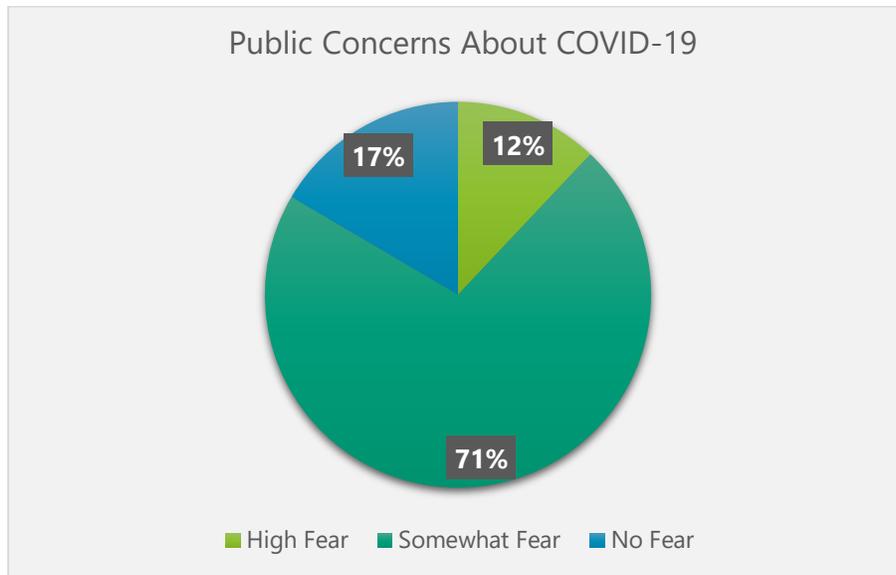
CMEV conducted a brief evaluation of the interest of voters in voting on Election Day with the support of 735 Election Day observers representing all 22 electoral districts (25 administrative districts) in the country. For the question of how much they are interested in voting in this election, 64.49% of participants of the evaluation responded that people in their areas are interested in voting while only 9.39% of respondents replied that they are highly interested. 35.51% of participants responded that people are not interested in voting in this election.



Respondents in the Batticaloa, Nuwara-Eliya, Badulla and Hambantota Districts reported being highly interested in voting in this election whilst respondents from the Kegalle District reported the least interest.



CMEV also asked people about their concerns about COVID-19 in relation to their participation in the election. 71% of respondents said they have somewhat fear in going to vote and 17% of respondents said they have no fear of COVID-19 in voting on Election Day.



Conversely, a sizeable 12% of responded said that they have a high level of fear in going to vote. CMEV strongly believes that this fear needs to be addressed immediately by the Election Commission which should take the necessary steps to establish people’s trust a health risk-free electoral process by communicating its health and safety precautions on Election Day more widely and effectively.

Election Interest in the North

CMEV field teams reported that interest of the public in the Northern electoral districts (Jaffna and Vanni electoral districts) is considerably low due to fears of a COVID 19 outbreak and prevalent frustration in politicians and political parties. CMEV can forecast the possibility of lower voter turnout at the Northern electoral districts compared to previous elections (voter turnout was 68.03% in Jaffna and 76.59% in Vanni at the Presidential Election 2019, and 61.56% in Jaffna and 71.89% in Vanni at the Parliamentary General Election 2015)

CMEV has also observed the increased presence of the Sri Lanka Army during the election campaign period despite not being involved in campaign activities. Mr.Mavaai Senathirasa, the Jaffna district Illankei Tamil Arasi Kachchi (ITAK) candidate complained that the increased presence of the Army could lead to a decrease in voter turnout as it would cause distress among the public leading up to and on Election Day. Several other candidates and members of the general public shared the same concern with CMEV. Mr.Suthakaran, a member of AITK complained to CMEV that Army civil officers attend their party meetings without invitations and collect their information. This has created fears among their party members to attend their meetings. The Media Spokesperson of Tamil Makkal Thesiya Kuttani (TMTK) Mr. Suresh Premachandra also complained that as Police and Army members are attending their meetings without invitation, the general public are not willing to attend their meetings.

CMEV stresses the necessity of ensuring an unimpeded and safe environment for voters all over the country during the election and on Election Day, and the non-partisan implementation of election laws against all perpetrators.