



CENTRE FOR MONITORING ELECTION VIOLENCE

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தேர்தல் வன்முறைகளைக் கண்காணிப்பதற்கான நிலையம்

Parliamentary General Election 2020

Field Visit Report – Election Situation Analysis as of 15th July 2020

Background to the Evaluations

CMEV conducted its first evaluation of the ground situation during the election campaign for the Parliamentary General Election 2020. This observation mission was conducted two weeks since the official campaigns of the major political parties and candidates were launched. Four field teams together with field observers conducted these field evaluations in the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Batticaloa, Digamadulla, Nuwara-Eliya and Monaragala electoral districts with the primary objectives of observing the commitment of political parties and candidates in following the health guidelines for conducting election campaigning amidst the COVID-19 outbreak; gauging public interest in participating in the elections; and developments in the ground campaigns.

The Ministry of Health in consultation with the Election Commission issued a comprehensive set of guidelines to be followed during elections on June 9, 2020. These guidelines needed to be gazetted before they could be enforced by election officials, however, there was a long delay in doing so. It was only after significant pressure mounted by the Election Commission, election observation organisations including CMEV, the media and the public that a version of the guidelines was gazetted on July 17, 2020 by the Ministry of Health, as the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Elections) Regulations, No. 1 of 2020. These regulations relaxed a number of restrictions on physical campaigning (including meeting and canvassing participant limits) and omits a significant number of provisions in the original guidelines. It should be noted the field evaluations covered in this report were conducted before the Regulations were gazetted.

Compliance with COVID-19 Health Guidelines

In every electoral district CMEV visited, the commitment of candidates and organisers of most political parties to comply with the health guidelines was negligible. The establishment and daily functions of the campaign offices, meetings and door-to-door campaigns were all observed as operating with minimal precautions to prevent the spread of COVID 19 virus. CMEV field teams reported that most of the party supporters who work at campaign offices were seen not even wearing face masks.

However, when CMEV raised the issue with candidates and their main organisers, they responded that their meetings and canvassing would follow the necessary guidelines, while some mentioned that the guidelines had not even been communicated to them. All candidates said that while they would attempt to follow the guidelines for meetings and canvassing, it was unlikely they could be completely followed while on the campaign trail.

Mr. D.M.S.B. Dalpatiya, a Public Health Inspector (PHI) in Nuwara-Eliya informed CMEV that he has given health instructions to be followed at public meetings to all candidates and none of them were seen following those instructions. Mr. Nilanka Jayawickrama, Additional Health Officer in Monaragala also confirmed to CMEV that the majority of candidates are not complying with the health guidelines in their campaigns. He further added that candidates and their organisers do not inform PHIs about their campaign meetings. PHIs also have not received enough information and materials about the health guidelines from the Ministry of Health or elsewhere to keep party offices informed about those.

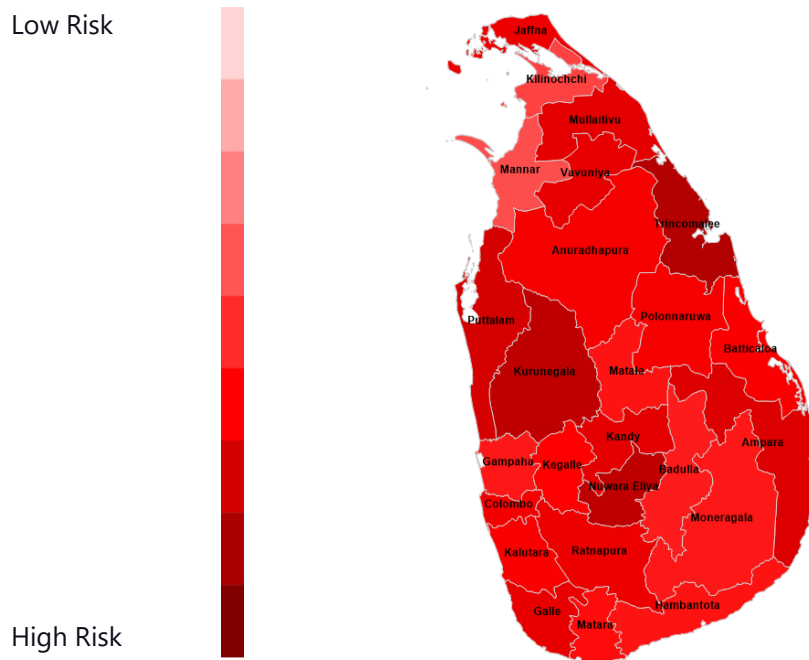
Anuradapura PHIs Mr. Nuwan Kulathunga, and Mr. Ajith Kumara revealed that they have not received any facility to visit campaign offices and meeting locations. They will only visit informed locations of campaign offices. According to them, only the NPP had submitted their campaign office list. The field team observing the Nuwara-Eliya and Monaragala electoral districts reported that most PHIs have neither visited campaign offices nor provided the required instructions to officers/caretakers in party offices. Assistant Election Commissioner for Nuwara-Eliya stated that even though candidates were conducting election campaigns not in compliance with health guidelines, election officers were not able to take legal action since the guidelines were not gazetted by that time.

Mr. Asanka Rantnayaka, a Divisional Secretary of Anuradapura, however, expressed to the CMEV team that they have deployed five teams to identify party offices operating in violation of health guidelines and election laws. He further revealed that only the supporters of the main candidates attended an awareness program organised for candidates with the participation of Divisional Director of Health, Mr. Thejana. Mr. Ruwan Jayasekara, Municipal Commissioner of Anuradhapura Municipal Council also confirmed that candidates are not following health guidelines in their campaign activities. He added further that according to unconfirmed information, one main party candidate has had close contact with a COVID-19 positive patient in the Rajangana area.

Ms. Piyumi Artigala, Assistant Election Commissioner for Polonnaruwa also stated that she has received information about the door-to-door campaigns taking place with large groups violating the health guidelines. According to her, she had taken steps to inform all candidates about the applicable laws and guidelines. A PHI who did not reveal his name as he was attending to postal vote duties said that as they do not have legal provisions to take actions against violators of health guidelines for election campaigns, they had stopped issuing permits for campaign offices and meetings temporarily.

Based on the information received by CMEV from field observers as of July 16, 2020, a number of indicators were used to measure party and candidate compliance with the COVID-19 election guidelines. Using these indicators, the following COVID-19 Risk Map in election campaigns was developed.

Over 90% of districts are estimated to have more than a 60% health risk in election campaigning due to the non-compliance of COVID-19 health guidelines by parties and candidates.



Public interest in the Election

CMEV field visit teams interviewed a large number of members of the public representing different genders, age groups, ethnicities and professions to gauge public perceptions about the election process and their satisfaction with measures taken to control the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in the during the election campaign. An overwhelming majority of interviewees responded that the health situation is not perfect to have free and fair elections. A corresponding majority rejected the idea of having elections under strict guidelines to control the health risk. A number of respondents said that elections should be conducted even under the present (risky) circumstances.

The majority of the respondents expressed that the public has no interest in elections as their main focus is about their economic issues which have been increased after COVID 19 outbreak. Some respondents questioned the government's motives in holding the election amid the pandemic, and there was some sentiment that the true pandemic situation was not clear yet. A three-wheel driver who was not willing to reveal his name at the three-wheel park in front of the Polonnaruwa Urban Council was in a view that the government is reluctant to reinforce curfew even after the sudden spread of virus because of the election. It is according to him a threat to the protection of the public. The three-wheel driver further added that even though, the public has much interest in elections under the present situation it should not be postponed.

The majority of the general public had little idea about health guidelines for election campaigning issued by the Ministry of Health. Mr. Kavudulle Jayathissa, a civil society activist, echoed the suspicions of many public members about low voter turnout as a result of decreased public interest and the fear of being infected by the virus at polling stations.

Other Issues in the Election Campaign

All the candidates and their organisers interviewed by CMEV field teams expressed their dissatisfaction with restrictions on election campaigning. They pointed out their difficulties in communicating their preference numbers without posters and cut-outs. They further stated that they cannot reach a large number of voters at one time without large meetings and have to have more pockets meetings and door-to-door campaigning than usual.

Most opposition party candidates and some of the ruling party candidates too alleged that the Police act with prejudice in implementing election laws and removing posters and cut-outs. Mr.M.P.S.T Jayalath, District Campaign Secretary of UNP Polonnaruwa District candidate Mr. Nalaka Kolonna, complained that they had to go to the election office to get approval for a campaign office in Minnariya as the Police intentionally delayed approval for more than three days. CMEV field teams observed large cutouts with the name, photo and preference number of SLPP Anuradapura District candidate Duminda Dissanayaka near his campaign office while other candidates complained about cutouts being removed at their campaign office premises by the Police. Farther of Mr. Dinesh Lanka Geeganage, SJB Candidate in Nuwara-Eliya District complained to the CMEV team that the Police has not taken any action against the illegal cut-outs of SLPP candidate C.B.Ratnayake. Mr. Roshan Gunawaradana, team leader of the SLFP in the Nuwara-Eliya District alleged that Kotmale Oolice are supporting the campaign activities of SLPP candidate S.B.Dissanayaka. Monaragala District NPP candidate Mr. R.M. Jayawarada accused the DIG Monaragala of attending a campaign meeting held at the house of the principal of Maligatenna School with SLPP candidate Shashendra Rajapaksha.

CMEV observed intraparty competition for preferential votes amongst SLPP candidates in various districts, and interparty completion between the UNP and SJB in Polonnaruwa, Anuradapura, Nuwara-Eliya, Monaragala, and Digamadulla Districts. Most of party supporters expressed their concern about this competition escalating to election violence in the final days of the election campaign.

A number of candidates expressed concern about the changed times for the counting procedures and the extra measures being taken as counting will not take place on the night of Election Day as in elections past. They sought assurance from the Election Commission that the ballot boxes would be secure and not subject to interference from the security forces or any other group. A number of voters, particularly Tamil and Muslim voters, also expressed concern about the expanded security and armed forces presence due to government pandemic combatting efforts, and hoped that this would not lead to disturbances during the election campaign or on Election Day itself.