Sri Lanka’s Bumpy Road to a Political Reset

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Front page: Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake speaks during the inauguration of "Nation United - National Drive", a National Mission against drug abuse, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, October 30, 2025. REUTERS / Thilina Kaluthotage

Principal Findings

What's new? Almost eighteen months into its term in office, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's National People's Power (NPP) government has kept Sri Lanka's economic recovery on track and made notable efforts to fight corruption. But it faces growing questions about its ability and commitment to achieve its bold promises of "system change".

Why does it matter? Dissanayake's election in September 2024 and the NPP's subsequent parliamentary majority created a rare opening to address the country's most important and intractable governance problems. Failure to achieve a substantial portion of their ambitious agenda threatens to open the way to a return to ethnic tensions and political authoritarianism.

What should be done? To regain momentum for reform, Dissanayake's government should reinforce its anti-impunity campaign through investigations of wartime atrocities; adopt a more inclusive, less defensive style of governance; strengthen independent oversight of the state; end abuses of counter-terrorism policing; and do more to protect the most economically vulnerable.

Executive Summary

As it nears completion of eighteen months in power, the National People's Power (NPP) government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has kept Sri Lanka's fragile economic recovery on track but is struggling to live up to bold promises of "system change". Dissanayake's election in September 2024 was made possible by Sri Lanka's 2022 economic collapse and the subsequent popular uprising that toppled the president and ruling family. The two-thirds parliamentary majority the NPP won later in 2024 created a rare opening to address longstanding governance challenges, whether the protection of top officials involved in serious crimes, the concentration of powers in the presidency or the ethnic fault lines underlying the country's civil war. So far, however, the government has made little progress on key reforms. To show that it is willing to do politics differently and regain momentum, the NPP should reinforce its anti-impunity campaign to include investigation of wartime atrocities, strengthen independent oversight of the state and do more to protect the economically vulnerable.

Dissanayake's and the NPP's 2024 campaign platform was extremely ambitious. It promised to bring relief from economic austerity, end deeply entrenched corruption and impunity for crimes by the politically connected, restore the rule of law, put an end to ethnically divisive politics, and adopt a new constitution that reduces the concentration of power in the executive. Previous governments had promised much of the same, without ever delivering. But the NPP's outsider status and limited involvement in past administrations made them, for many voters, more credible agents of systemic change.

By the time of local elections in early May 2025, these high hopes had faded somewhat: the NPP's share of the vote fell to 43 per cent, placing it well ahead of its rivals but far short of its 61 per cent share in the parliamentary vote the previous November. The reduced support stemmed partly from the sweeping nature of the new government's promises of a reset in governance. Lack of experience in state office fed optimism that the NPP could break with traditional politics. But it also hindered the government in managing the machinery of state and arguably contributed to the authorities' poor preparation for and slow response to November's devastating Cyclone Ditwah. The party's rhetoric about "clean" governance has, in turn, allowed critics who see it as self-righteous to seize on any misstep as proof of its supposed hypocrisy and dishonesty. NPP responses to such accusations have often sounded arrogant and defensive.

On the economy, the NPP has sustained the fragile recovery, but only by abandoning key electoral promises. Facing the realities of a weak fiscal position and an uncharitable global financial system, Dissanayake and the NPP shifted gears, embracing the reforms prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of a 2023 bailout, which they had earlier criticised. Their pragmatism has won praise from the IMF and other creditors, helping ensure economic stability in the short term. Sticking so closely to the IMF program, however, has left them with little money to address the needs of millions of newly impoverished Sri Lankans. With a debt burden that remains, even after successful restructuring, one of the highest of any middle- or low-income country, Sri Lanka remains dangerously vulnerable to external shocks, such as storms supercharged by climate change and now the Middle East war.

As for the NPP's signature issue of fighting corruption and restoring the rule of law, newly invigorated police and anti-corruption agencies have produced a notable increase in arrests and investigations. Previously unencumbered by the corrupt relationships that have plagued parties with long histories in power, the NPP must now prove itself capable of answering accusations about its own procurement deals. To fulfil its pledges to hold accountable those responsible for the 2019 Easter bombings and political killings during previous administrations, the NPP government will also need to face down powerful sections of the national security apparatus, particularly following February's arrest of the former intelligence chief.

Should it extend its anti-impunity campaign to military atrocities during the civil war, the challenge will be even greater, given the military's political clout and its prestige among the Sinhalese majority population. Tamil families of the forcibly disappeared and other rights activists in the north continue to face harassment and surveillance by the military and counter-terrorism police. A key test of Dissanayake's leadership will be whether, building on speeches denouncing war and stressing the need to prevent ethnic or religious conflict, he can take the first step toward accountability for wartime abuses. Legal and constitutional reforms designed to meet Tamil and Muslim aspirations will require distancing the NPP from the long history of Sinhala nationalism of its main constituent party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), while still managing the expectations of the NPP's predominantly Sinhala and Buddhist voter base.

With its continued popularity and large parliamentary majority, the NPP is better placed than preceding governments to take on these challenges. But if it wishes to reinvigorate its reform project and preserve its credibility as an agent of change, the NPP should tone down the moralising and instead move to strengthen the independence of the police and oversight bodies to the point where they can hold the incumbent government and ruling party to account. To reinforce its anti-impunity drive, and build trust with Tamils and Muslims, the government should provide backing for exhuming mass graves and pursuing any criminal prosecutions that might follow. It should either withdraw or amend its draft anti-terrorism legislation to remove the threat it poses to democratic norms, while ending intimidation of rights activists by counter-terrorism police.

To share the burden of economic recovery more fairly, the NPP should push for wealth taxes, while preparing a case with its international creditors for greater debt relief. Foreign powers could in turn do more to support governance reforms as well as renegotiate debt payments to create more fiscal space for the government as it deals with post-cyclone rebuilding and the effects of the Middle East war.

Dissanayake and the NPP are learning how hard system change can be. Still, with careful doses of political courage, a bit of luck and support from abroad, they have the chance to move Sri Lanka further away from its violent and unstable past.

Colombo/Brussels, 16 April 2026

I. Introduction

The election of Anura Kumara Dissanayake as president in September 2024, and the landslide parliamentary victory of his National People's Power (NPP) two months later, transformed Sri Lanka's political landscape. The twin victories constituted a decisive rejection of the established political order and the two traditionally dominant political blocs, which had been fatally weakened by the country's 2022 economic collapse and the mass protest movement that ensued, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign in July that year. Following a profound economic shock and the program of austerity and structural reforms negotiated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2023, Dissanayake and the NPP seized the political initiative. They campaigned on bold promises of "system change" and a "new political culture", harnessing popular discontent with the presidency of Rajapaksa's successor and ally Ranil Wickremesinghe, as well as the austerity associated with the economic bailout.[1]

The NPP's election was made possible by the collapse of the mainstream parties' legitimacy – the result of years of large-scale corruption, cronyism and abuse of power, economic mismanagement, and failure to address either the causes or consequences of the three-decade civil war. That conflict, which came to a catastrophically bloody end in May 2009, saw 150,000 or more killed in fighting between Tamil separatists and forces of a state dominated by the Sinhala and Buddhist majority, with Muslims caught in the crossfire.

Founded in 2019, the NPP is an alliance of various progressive social and political groups, built around the nucleus of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front), a longstanding political party whose roots lie at the intersection of Sinhala nationalism and revolutionary left traditions. Burdened by its legacy of violent uprisings in 1971 and 1987-1989, the JVP had, until the 2022 economic crisis, struggled to gain great public support or political influence since its return to electoral politics in 1994.[2]

While the JVP is by far the most powerful part of the alliance, the NPP's electoral success hinged on the broader appeal it gained from its newer, more liberal elements: professionals, civil servants, small and medium-scale business owners, trade unionists, women's activists and other community groups. Desperate for a new political and economic direction, a critical mass of voters decided to give Dissanayake and his fellow outsiders a chance. Quietly charismatic and an eloquent speaker, Dissanayake had a humble rural upbringing. His rise from these origins, and his

[1] On Dissanayake's victory, see Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka's Third Way", *Inside Story*, 30 October 2024. For earlier Crisis Group reporting on the economic crisis and its political effects, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°341, *Sri Lanka's Bailout Blues: Elections in the Aftermath of Economic Collapse*, 17 September 2024; and Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka's Economic Meltdown Triggers Popular Uprising and Political Turmoil", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 April 2022; "Sri Lanka's Uprising Forces Out a President but Leaves System in Crisis", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 July 2022; and "For Lanka, a Long Road to Democratic Reform Awaits", *Hindustan Times*, 25 July 2022.

[2] On the JVP's militant period, see Mick Moore, "Thoroughly Modern Revolutionaries: The JVP in Sri Lanka", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 (July 1993). On the NPP's emergence and relationship with the JVP, see Kalinga Tudor Silva, "Sri Lanka's democratic turn to the left", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 April 2025.

survival of state repression as a teenage member of the JVP, won the respect and admiration of many voters.[3] His backers included a sizeable number of Tamils, who were attracted to the NPP's promises of economic development and a reduced presence of the military in the Tamil-majority north.

This report examines the first year and a half of the NPP government in office, as it struggles to live up to its ambitions to remake Sri Lankan politics. It looks at the NPP's economic policies under continued IMF tutelage, the government's early moves to fight corruption, the challenges of ending impunity and strengthening rule of law in the face of resistance from vested interests and a powerful security sector, and the government's tentative moves to foster a meaningful sense of national unity. The report also examines the difficulties the inexperienced NPP has faced in managing the state machinery and the risks the party's moralistic approach poses to its reform goals. The report draws on dozens of interviews with politicians, social and political activists, business owners, journalists, lawyers, academics and diplomats, roughly half of whom were women, conducted in person and by telephone or email between November 2024 and February 2026.

[3] See D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "Remarkable rise of Anura Kumara Dissanayake in Sri Lankan politics", *Daily FT*, 20 November 2024.

II. The Political Earthquake of 2024

A. A Tale of Three Elections

The first step in Sri Lanka's political transformation came with the 21 September 2024 election of President Dissanayake, which was quickly followed by the crushing victory of his NPP alliance in parliamentary elections on 14 November. With these votes, Sri Lankans ended decades of rule by political dynasties, including the Rajapaksa family of former presidents Mahinda (2005-2015) and Gotabaya (2019-2022), whose years in office were associated in the public's eyes with rampant corruption, nepotism, economic mismanagement and repression. Today, just three legislators from the party the Rajapaksas founded – the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) – are serving in parliament, with Namal Rajapaksa the sole member of the family now in elected office. Most of Sri Lanka's best-known politicians – of all ideologies and ethnicities – were either defeated or chose not to run in the parliamentary elections. More than two thirds of legislators are first-timers.

Promising sweeping change in how politics is done and whose needs the economy serves, the NPP's parliamentary landslide surpassed Dissanayake's presidential victory. While he captured 42.3 per cent of the vote, his party won 61.5 per cent of ballots in the parliamentary poll. Sri Lanka's voting system magnified the victory, giving the NPP 159 seats in the 225-person parliament, more than the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution.[4] The largest opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), saw its number of parliamentary seats fall from 54 to 40. The remaining 26 seats are held by a range of Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala nationalist parties.

Despite its almost entirely Sinhalese leadership and membership, the NPP was able to tap into the growing anti-incumbent sentiment among Tamil voters, too. The party won the most votes in the northern Tamil heartland districts of Jaffna and Vanni, allowing it to secure parliamentary representation from every one of the country's 22 electoral districts. It was a first for a party based in the island's Sinhala-speaking south, and notable as well given the militant Sinhala nationalist past of the NPP's dominant partner, the JVP, which actively supported pursuing military victory over the Tamil Tigers during the civil war.[5]

The local government elections of 6 May 2025, however, demonstrated that the NPP's claims to a nationwide, pan-ethnic mandate may be overblown.[6] While the party won twice as many votes as its nearest rivals – coming in first in three quarters of the local council votes – its tally was down by nearly a third from the parliamentary elections. It lost ground in the north and east, where a more unified Tamil opposition, led by the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, won most of the councils it contested. Notably, turnout

[4] The NPP is the first party under the current voting system – which gives extra seats to the party that wins a given district – to gain a two-thirds majority on its own.

[5] For a valuable analysis of the JVP's evolution since its failed 1987-1989 uprising, see Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, "The Revival of the JVP after 1989", *Polity*, vol. 13, no. 1 (June 2025).

[6] "Regional parties regain lost ground in north and east; discuss coalitions", *The Sunday Times*, 11 May 2025.

was much lower.[7] As a journalist put it on the eve of the vote: "For many people outside the north and east, the only reason they give for voting NPP is that there is no alternative".[8]

B. The Different Faces of National People's Power

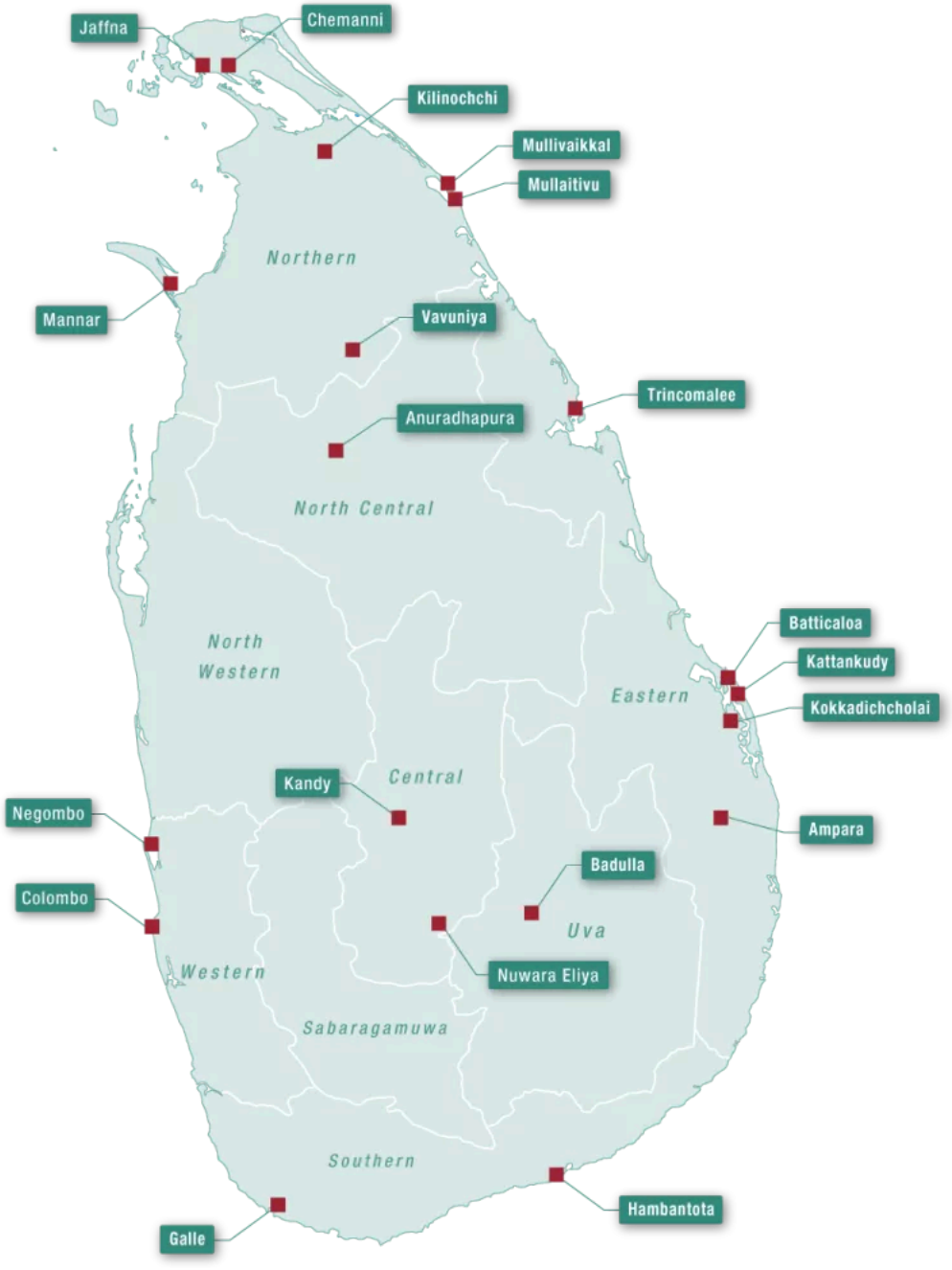
Dissanayake and the NPP won the 2024 elections in part because of their promises to bring relief to the millions experiencing economic hardship. Equally important was the chance they offered to remove a political establishment widely seen as out of touch, arrogant and corrupt. The NPP's promise to create a "new political culture" made the most of the fact that – with the exception of the JVP's two years as a junior coalition partner twenty years earlier – they were untainted by experience in government and had for decades campaigned against corruption.[9] Still, many NPP voters had to overcome doubts about the alliance's dominant partner, the JVP, and its violent past and doctrinaire Marxism.[10]

Voters made that leap in part because the alliance consciously distanced itself from the JVP's traditional positions. The NPP has dropped the overt Sinhala nationalism that was central to the JVP's past electoral campaigns. Instead, the NPP's electoral platform touted a sweeping set of liberal and progressive reforms, including a more frugal, transparent and inclusive model of governance; an end to entrenched corruption; the restoration of rule of law and a functioning justice system; relief from economic hardship and a more equitable society; and remedies for the longstanding political grievances of Tamils, in part through a new constitution that would end the system of presidential rule and restore parliamentary supremacy. About half of Dissanayake's ministers, including Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, come from civil society and are not members of the JVP.

The JVP's transformation into the NPP remains a work in progress, however, and has led to tensions in almost all the key areas of the government's reform plans. JVP members hold most of the key positions in Dissanayake's government.[11] The vision of pluralist, liberal and inclusive politics promised in the NPP manifesto is struggling to assert itself against the JVP's traditional statist, nationalist tendencies and its organisational strength relative to its younger coalition partners.[12] Despite the alliance's overwhelming parliamentary majority, its first year in office saw it make

[7] Turnout fell to 60 per cent, down from 80 per cent in the last local elections in 2018.
[8] Crisis Group correspondence, May 2025.
[9] "The NPP will bring about a new political culture: AKD", *The Sunday Times*, 15 September 2024. The JVP had four ministers in President Chandrika Kumaratunga's cabinet in 2004-2005.
[10] See Moore, "Thoroughly Modern Revolutionaries: The JVP in Sri Lanka", op. cit.
[11] JVP leaders hold the foreign affairs, transport, industry, health, trade and agriculture portfolios. Crisis Group interviews, JVP and NPP members, Colombo, February 2025.
[12] The JVP, in the tradition of left revolutionary parties, is built on a tightly and hierarchically organised national network, which reaches into virtually every village, especially in Sinhala areas. The much younger NPP, by contrast, has a national executive committee, which also includes senior JVP leaders, but little local organisation beyond the activities of its constituent groups.

little tangible progress on its reform agenda, leaving it unclear whether the NPP government can – or wants to – craft a political program that is in fact distinct from the JVP's.[13]



Map of Sri Lanka

[13] Little is known about how JVP decision-making – made by its politburo and central committee – feeds into government policy or how much independent influence the NPP has in the process. Crisis Group interviews, politicians, NPP activists and journalists, Colombo, February 2025.

III. The Economy and the International Monetary Fund

The NPP leadership understood they needed to maintain the country's fragile economic recovery in order to have a chance of staying in power. The economy has improved markedly since the depths of the 2022 crisis. Growth reached 5 per cent in 2025; foreign currency reserves are up; inflation and interest rates are at healthy levels; and government revenue is sharply higher.[14] Overall economic output is still below 2018 levels, however, and hardship remains widespread. Almost a quarter of the population lives in poverty – double the pre-pandemic rate – with another 10 per cent just above the poverty line. Food insecurity remains high, and real wages are well below their pre-crisis levels.[15]

A. Staying within the IMF's Guardrails

Given the JVP's Marxist heritage, many have been surprised by the close working relationship the government has developed with the IMF. Dissanayake and the NPP campaigned on a platform of "economic democracy" and relief for Sri Lankans hit hard by the economic crisis and subsequent IMF-backed austerity.[16] Initially opposed to the previous government's decision to seek an IMF bailout after defaulting on the country's external debt, Dissanayake and the NPP tempered their criticisms when campaigning. They agreed to work with the Fund, but they also pledged to enact changes to the reform program and seek more debt relief from international creditors.[17]

In his address to parliament just days after the party's landslide victory, however, Dissanayake argued that his government had little choice but to press on with the IMF program as the economy was "hanging on a thread" and "there is no room for mistakes".[18] Lacking a well-developed alternative set of economic policies and not wanting to antagonise international markets and creditors, his administration retained the officials who had negotiated the agreement with the IMF and adopted it with only marginal adjustments. Dissanayake also appears to have relaxed his government's opposition to "growth-enhancing structural reforms" – including the adoption of a more flexible labour law. While that measure draws ire from powerful trade unions as it loosens worker protections, the IMF favours it as a way to expand exports and encourage foreign investment.[19]

[14] See "Annual Economic Review 2024", Central Bank of Sri Lanka, April 2025, p. 3.; and "Better Spending for All: Sri Lanka Development Update", World Bank, October 2025.
[15] "Better Spending for All", op. cit. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) notes that post-crisis austerity has reduced a range of essential services that predominantly benefit women. "Concluding Observations on the Ninth Periodic Report of Sri Lanka", UN CEDAW, 28 February 2025, p. 16.
[16] See the NPP's electoral manifesto: "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life", August 2024, pp. 55-61.
[17] Ibid., p. 59. For NPP campaign positions on the economy, see Crisis Group Report, *Sri Lanka's Bailout Blues,* op. cit., p. 26.
[18] Speech by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake at first session of tenth parliament, 21 November 2024.
[19] Higher U.S. tariffs announced in April 2025 – later reduced through negotiations – brought a bracing reminder of Sri Lanka's over-dependence on U.S. and European markets, where half of its exports go, and

The IMF, in turn, commended the government for being "committed to staying within the guardrails" of the 2023 bailout program.[20] Following completion of a bond restructuring the previous administration had agreed to, and publication of the NPP government's first budget, the IMF Executive Board endorsed the government's progress and released another $334 million in February 2025.[21]

B. Political and Economic Risks

The party's adherence to the IMF program has helped sustain the economic recovery but also brought political risks. The requirement that the government run a substantial "primary surplus" has left little money for the economic relief the NPP promised voters.[22] The 2025 budget, adopted on 21 March, and the 2026 budget presented in November, offered only modest assistance, most of which went to government workers or recipients of social welfare.[23] Both budgets have been well received by business groups and mainstream economic think-tanks, but opponents to the NPP's left and right criticised them for contradicting the party's campaign promises, arguing as well that the government had no mandate to impose the strict spending limits found in the IMF deal.

Implementation of the IMF plan has led to a substantial rise in state revenues – from 8 per cent of GDP in 2020 to 15.9 per cent in 2025 – but three quarters of the increase comes from indirect taxes, especially VAT, which disproportionately fall on those with lower incomes.[24] A major challenge for the government is to expand the tax base and shift more of the burden to higher-income taxpayers. While that is difficult to pull off, the NPP has given surprisingly little priority to achieving more equitable tax arrangements, particularly in light of its earlier calls for economic justice.[25]

A separate risk to the government lies in its decision – again contrary to campaign promises – to accept the IMF's debt analysis, which brought very modest relief from foreign creditors. Doing so gave the new government initial breathing space, but left

of its vulnerability to "trade policy uncertainty and geopolitical tensions". "IMF Staff Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on the Fifth Review", press release, IMF, 9 October 2025.

[20] "IMF approves third review of Sri Lanka's $2.9 billion bailout", Reuters, 23 November 2024.

[21] "Sri Lanka launches long-awaited bond swap in key step to emerge from default", Reuters, 26 November 2024. "IMF Executive Board Completes the Third Review under the Extended Fund Facility Arrangement with Sri Lanka", press release, IMF, 28 February 2025. Another tranche of the loan was released in July 2025.

[22] The IMF program requires the government by 2025 to run a "primary surplus" – where revenues exceed expenditures other than interest payments – equivalent to 2.3 per cent of GDP, a level critics argue imposes unnecessarily deep austerity. "Report of the Committee on Public Finance on Appropriation Bill for the Financial Year 2026", 14 November 2025.

[23] Relief has included increases in salaries and pensions for government employees; tax reductions for some lower- and middle-income workers; increased funding for the Aswesuma poverty relief program; and small increases in support for a range of people including the elderly, pregnant mothers, the disabled and tea estate workers. Total state expenditure for social protection in 2025 nonetheless remained just 0.7 per cent of GDP, the lowest in South Asia. Niyanthini Kadirgamar, "IMF's iron clasp, a maiden budget and protecting the poor", *Daily FT*, 21 February 2025.

[24] See "Towards a Balanced Fiscal Adjustment: Sri Lanka Public Finance Review", World Bank, September 2025.

[25] To generate "sustainable and equitable revenue mobilisation", the World Bank recommends a range of reforms designed to expand the number of taxpayers and increase receipts from the wealthy, including a minimum corporate income tax. Ibid., p. 13.

Sri Lanka with one of the highest debt burdens of any middle-income country. The 2026 budget estimates that even after successful restructuring, interest payments will absorb 49 per cent of total revenues in 2026, one of the highest rates in the world.[26] Under the IMF program, public debt is forecast to reach 88 per cent of GDP as late as 2032, down from its current level of 110 per cent of GDP.[27] The IMF itself acknowledges that the risk of a resurgent debt crisis "will remain high for many years".[28] If, as expected, Sri Lanka returns to the international bond market, much will depend on the ability of the newly established Public Debt Management Office to prevent a renewal of excessive borrowing.[29]

Sustaining Sri Lanka's tentative recovery has grown even more difficult in the wake of Cyclone Ditwah, which struck the country in late November 2025, followed months later by the economic disruptions from war in the Middle East. The natural disaster was Sri Lanka's most destructive ever, killing more than 800 people and inflicting extensive damage to infrastructure across the island. While the immediate economic losses are estimated at $4.1 billion, expected knock-on effects include increased poverty, slower growth, higher prices, a weakened balance of payments and a higher government deficit.[30] Opposition leaders called on the government to renegotiate the terms of the IMF bailout, while left-oriented activists and international economists called for a moratorium on Sri Lanka's external debt repayments and new debt restructuring that takes into account the island's vulnerability to the effects of climate change.[31]

Shortages of oil and gas resulting from the Middle East war have added further strains. In mid-March, the government imposed fuel rationing and announced a four-day working week for state institutions to conserve fuel, as economic shocks began to be felt. Higher energy prices threaten to reignite inflation and slow growth, with agricultural production at risk as fertiliser stores also run low.[32]

[26] Repayment of principal and interest together are forecast to account for 85.29 per cent of all revenues in 2026. "Report of the Committee on Public Finance on Appropriation Bill for the Financial Year 2026", op. cit.

[27] "Staff Assessment, Fourth Review of Extended Funds Facility", IMF, 2025, p. 45. The challenge of servicing the debt will begin to rise in 2028, when Sri Lanka must start repaying principal, not just the interest, on bilateral and commercial debt, including restructured sovereign bonds. See "Report of the Committee on Public Finance on Appropriation Bill for the Financial Year 2026", op. cit., pp. 51-52.

[28] See Figure 1. Sri Lanka: Risk of Sovereign Stress and Sustainability (Restructuring Scenario), in "Staff Assessment, Fourth Review of Extended Funds Facility", op. cit., p. 42.

[29] This office, established under the Public Debt Management Act of 2024 (approved by the previous parliament), began operating in December 2025.

[30] "Global Rapid Post-Disaster Damage Estimation Report, Cyclone Ditwah 2025, Sri Lanka", World Bank, December 2025.

[31] B. Skanthakumar, "The Great Flood", *Polity*, vol. 13, no. 2 (December 2025); "The call for immediate suspension of SL's external sovereign debt payments", *Daily FT*, 23 December 2025.

[32] "Sri Lanka struggles to avert economic collapse over Middle East war", Agence France Presse, 4 April 2026.

IV. Challenging Impunity and Reforming the Law

On the hustings, the NPP leadership promised to tackle corruption and end the misuse of state resources, which they argued had played a prominent role in causing the 2022 economic crisis. They also pledged to cease the partisan misuse of the police and judiciary that has provided impunity for human rights abuses and crimes by government officials, ruling-party politicians and their family and friends. Previous governments have made similar pledges but largely failed to deliver on them.[33] Given that the appeal of the NPP largely rests on the promise to clean up politics, and that the JVP's long absence from power gave it fewer opportunities to engage in corruption, many Sri Lankans hoped that their efforts would be more determined than their predecessors'.

A. Fighting Corruption

Under Dissanayake and the NPP, there is noticeably more political space for a range of state institutions to pursue corruption cases free from political interference. In January 2025, Dissanayake appointed a retired high court judge as director general of the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC).[34] Since then, the independent agency, along with anti-corruption units in the police, have indicted or launched new investigations into numerous former ministers and senior officials.[35] The attorney general indicted two of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's sons in separate money laundering cases begun ten years earlier but later dropped. Two of Mahinda's former ministers – originally charged in 2015 by the CIABOC for misusing state funds – were convicted in May 2025.[36] On 20 July, the National Police Commission fired senior police officer Nilantha Jayawardena for failing to act on advance warnings of the lethal 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. The following month, Parliament impeached the inspector general of police for gross misconduct.[37]

There is, of course, a difference between initiating prosecutions and seeing them to fruition. Lawyers and anti-corruption activists caution that the government bureaucracy, much of which is believed to remain loyal to the Rajapaksas, could

[33] See, for example, Crisis Group Asia Report N°286, *Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere*, 16 May 2017.
[34] "President appoints High Court Judge Ranga Dissanayake as new DG of CIABOC", *Daily FT*, 11 January 2025. That same month, police re-established a Financial Crimes Investigation Division to re-invigorate stalled corruption investigations. "Yahapalana-era FCID to be revived as CID unit", *The Sunday Times*, 12 January 2025.
[35] "Parade of high-profile cases this week as CIABOC launches fresh probes", *The Sunday Times*, 8 June 2025. CIABOC has been using new powers – found in the 2024 Anti-Corruption Act and the 2025 Proceeds of Crime Act – to file cases and prosecute individuals directly, rather than relying on the police and attorney general, and to freeze and confiscate assets related to corruption.
[36] "Krrish deal: Namal indicted for 'misappropriation', *The Morning*, 19 February 2025; "Indictment filed against Yoshitha Rajapaksa, Daisy Forrest", *Daily Mirror*, 4 April 2025. "Sri Lanka ex-ministers jailed up to 25 years for corruption", Agence France Presse, 29 May 2025.
[37] "Sri Lanka's parliament votes to fire country's police chief over abuse of power", Associated Press, 5 August 2025. "Sri Lanka sacks senior cop over Easter Sunday bombings", Agence France Presse, 20 July 2025. Police also filed cases in 2025 against the sitting prisons chief and immigration controller.

interfere in meting out justice.[38] It is also unclear whether NPP leaders will be eager to see the law enforced when there are credible allegations of malfeasance on the part of NPP and JVP members.[39] Opposition parties and anti-corruption activists point to a growing list of government purchases – of coal, vehicles and passports – where the procurement process has allegedly been designed to the advantage of particular companies, at a potential financial loss to the government.[40]

Thus far, the government has sent mixed signals as to whether it will block investigations into its own top ranks. CIABOC commissioners formally authorised staff in August 2025 to indict Energy Minister Kumara Jayakody for alleged misappropriation of funds when he worked for the Fertiliser Corporation in 2015.[41] Following a more than six-month delay – due in part to legal moves by Jayakody – CIABOC reaffirmed the decision to indict in late February.[42] Toward the end of 2025, CIABOC also launched investigations into the assets of six senior ministers.[43] But the NPP's decision to support Jayakody and oppose a 10 April parliamentary no-confidence motion calling on him to resign has sparked cries of betrayal and hypocrisy from anti-corruption activists, including prominent NPP supporters, and badly damaged Dissanayake's and the NPP's credibility as reformers.[44]

B. Easter Bombings and Other Political Killings

The government has also promised to seek justice for victims who were allegedly abducted and murdered by military intelligence units during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa or killed in the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings.[45] This pledge will be difficult to fulfil, given the political influence of the security sector and the severity of the crimes the intelligence units are accused of committing.

Dissanayake moved quickly on this front, having made justice for victims of the Easter bombings a central plank of his electoral platform. Within weeks of coming to office, he reappointed two senior police officers who had led investigations into the terrorist attack and a series of other crimes that appear to implicate key members of

[38] Crisis Group telephone interviews, government lawyer, anti-corruption researcher, February 2026.
[39] To date, all those facing criminal cases are loyalists of previous governments or senior bureaucrats with no ties to the NPP or JVP.
[40] Apparent irregularities in the purchase of multiple shipments of substandard coal have generated considerable media attention and parliamentary debate, with calls for Energy Minster Kumara Jayakody to resign. See "Coal scam has become litmus test for NPP: FSP", *Island*, 7 February 2026.
[41] "Bribery case against NPP minister", *The Sunday Times*, 17 August 2025.
[42] "Energy minister faces indictment over fertiliser tender", *Sunday Times*, 1 March 2026. The long delay has led observers to question CIABOC's ability to withstand political pressure. See Kishali Pinto Jayawardena, "Questions for the NPP upon one year in power", *The Sunday Times*, 5 October 2025.
[43] "CIABOC probes assets of six cabinet ministers", *Ceylon Today*, 27 December 2025.
[44] Crisis Group phone interviews, civil society activists, April 2026. "Energy Minister survives no-confidence vote: 153 against, 49 in favour", *The Sunday Times*, 12 April 2026.
[45] On Easter Sunday of 2019, small group of Islamists pledging allegiance to ISIS bombed churches and hotels, killing 270 people and injuring more than 500. A growing body of evidence points to intelligence officials giving support to the attackers, in an alleged effort to destabilise the government and pave the way for Gotabaya Rajapaksa to win the presidency on a security and anti-Muslim platform. "Easter Sunday attack engineered for Rajapaksa comeback, says Sri Lankan minister", *Tamil Guardian*, 10 July 2025.

Mahinda's family and administration.[46] In October 2024, he removed the head of the State Intelligence Service, Suresh Sallay, suspected of involvement in the Easter attacks.[47] That same month, the police announced they were reopening and fast-tracking ten other high-profile cases, a commitment Dissanayake reiterated in a November 2025 speech to parliament.[48]

On 25 February 2026, police arrested Sallay for allegedly conspiring with and assisting the Islamist network responsible for the Easter bombings.[49] His arrest comes after more than a year of government promises that breakthroughs in the case were imminent. These pledges have often come in response to public pressure from the influential archbishop of Colombo, Malcolm Ranjith, as most of the victims were Catholics from his diocese.[50] Sallay has yet to be indicted, however, and putting together a successful prosecution will be challenging. Efforts to investigate and hold accountable the state intelligence networks that police allege were involved in the Easter attacks, as well as in previous political killings, appear to be meeting considerable resistance.[51] In a September 2025 address to Parliament in which he declared that a number of military officers would soon be arrested, Dissanayake said the investigation had been slowed by, among other things, the destruction and manipulation of evidence under previous governments.[52]

Some analysts, as well as opposition legislators, argue that the NPP's own links to the military add an additional obstacle to a thorough investigation of the Easter bombings.[53] More generally, even as police investigations have picked up steam, the NPP government has made no move to restructure Sri Lanka's intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies in order to place them under more effective political supervision. Dissanayake's government – spurred by public outrage at a series of high-profile underworld killings – nonetheless appears to be making a serious attempt to purge the police and break entrenched ties among police, organised crime,

[46] The officers in question were dismissed and their investigations shut down by Gotabaya Rajapaksa soon after he was elected president in November 2019. "Bimal alleges Easter attacks were part of plot to bring back Rajapaksas", *Ceylon Today*, 10 July 2025.

[47] Sallay has long denied all accusations of wrongdoing. Catherine Philp, "Rajapaksa officials 'linked to Easter Sunday Sri Lanka bombs'", *The Times* (London), 4 September 2023.

[48] These are among what the UN and others refer to as "emblematic cases". "Govt clarifies decision to investigate 7 high-profile cases", *Newswire*, 15 October 2025. "President rules out racist politics, defends justice probes and security crackdown", *Daily FT*, 19 November 2025.

[49] "Sri Lanka arrests ex-spy chief over 2019 Easter bombings", Agence France Presse, 25 February 2026. The April 2025 arrest of former Eastern Province Chief Minister S. Chandrakanthan (better known as Pillayan) for alleged involvement in a separate crime reportedly led to new evidence on the Easter bombings, including alleged links between the bombers and military intelligence officers. Crisis Group telephone interview, sources close to police, October 2025. "Pillayan had prior knowledge of Easter attacks: Minister", *Daily Mirror*, 9 July 2025.

[50] "President assures to reveal key suspects in Easter Sunday attacks before 21 April", *Daily FT*, 31 March 2025.

[51] Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyers, journalists and diplomats, November 2025.

[52] "Former army officials to be arrested over Easter Sunday attacks: President", *Daily Mirror*, 26 September 2025. Crisis Group interviews, lawyers and journalists, London, November 2025.

[53] Opposition legislators have in particular called for removing the deputy defence minister, Aruna Jayasekera, given his role as chief of army intelligence in Batticaloa district, and later Eastern Province security forces commander, during the period when the network of east coast-based Islamist bombers was preparing its attacks. "No-confidence motion handed over against Deputy Defence Minister Aruna Jayasekara", *Ada Derana*, 12 August 2025.

especially drug networks, and politicians, which Dissanayake has labelled "the black state".[54]

An initial flurry of activity in police investigations into Rajapaksa-era political killings, which saw police arrest senior military officers and promises of new indictments, has so far produced little. Without the kind of powerful lobbying the Catholic Church has provided in the Easter bombings, investigations into these "emblematic cases" do not appear to enjoy the high-level political backing they will likely need to overcome resistance from within the national security system.[55] One of the few cases to have come to trial – the 2009 abduction of cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligaoda – appears to have stalled, with the victim's wife appealing to the president for protection from threats and objecting to the promotion received by one of the accused, who remains a serving army officer.[56]

C. War-related Accountability

Should the government turn its attention to the serious violations of international law committed during the war with the Tamil Tigers and in the aftermath of the government's victory in 2009, it will likely encounter even greater resistance from the Sri Lankan military and its supporters.[57] Speaking before the UN Human Rights Council in September, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath announced that the government was "committed to advancing accountability through credible domestic processes".[58] He averred that recent court decisions "demonstrate the independence of the Sri Lankan judiciary" and expressed the government's commitment to "strengthen the domestic reconciliation mechanisms – the Office on Missing Persons, Office for Reparations and Office of National Unity and Reconciliation" with increased funding and independence.[59]

The foreign minister's promises met with scepticism from Tamil and human rights organisations, both in Sri Lanka and abroad. Successive governments have demonstrated no interest in securing justice for wartime crimes; indeed, there has been active resistance to doing so. As a result, few of those pressing for accountability believe it can be accomplished through domestic efforts alone.[60] But with no viable route to international courts, and the collapse of a 2015 government plan to establish a special domestic tribunal with limited international involvement, activists have, at times reluctantly, placed their hopes for accountability in the Sri Lanka Accountability Project (OSLAP), sponsored by UN Office of the High Commissioner

[54] "No two states: Withdraw now or be removed: AKD", *News First*, 31 October 2025.
[55] Lawyers and rights activists have criticised the attorney general for dropping charges or not pursuing key cases. "Key suspects ordered freed in high-profile Sri Lanka assassination", *Economy Next*, 4 February 2025; "AG defends dropping cases; says 'YouTubers' want him to ignore law", *The Examiner*, 30 January 2026.
[56] "Threatened Sandhya Ekneligoda urges president to protect her", *Daily Mirror*, 6 February 2026.
[57] See Crisis Group Asia Report N°191, *War Crimes in Sri Lanka*, 17 May 2010.
[58] "Statement of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath to UN Human Rights Council", 8 September 2025.
[59] Ibid.
[60] See Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka Needs Truth, but Not (Yet) a Truth Commission", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 September 2023.

for Human Rights.[61] Established in March 2021, the project is tasked with gathering and preserving evidence of alleged international crimes for possible future accountability mechanisms.[62] Like the two governments before it, however, the NPP rejects the project as divisive and "counterproductive to the government's efforts on promoting unity, reconciliation and human rights".[63]

If its proclaimed accountability processes are to bring redress for victims of the war, the government will, at a minimum, need to fulfil its promise to establish the "enabling environment and space for civil society to operate freely".[64] It has yet to do so. Indeed, under the NPP, counter-terrorism police and military intelligence units continue to regularly question and intimidate Tamil activists and survivors' groups calling for justice for rights violations, especially disappearances. The surveillance also targets journalists reporting on the military's activities in the majority Tamil-speaking northern and eastern provinces.[65] The government has made no evident move to discipline military officers who have worked to delay or block judicial inquiries into alleged military atrocities. For many activists in the north, the surveillance, questioning and intimidation appear in part to be a deliberate strategy to prevent accountability. The government's insistence that state forces are not engaging in these tactics increases the activists' sense of vulnerability.[66]

Despite the JVP's tradition of Sinhala nationalism, the party's experience of suffering state terror and impunity could, in principle, make it more receptive to calls to investigate at least some of the military atrocities against Tamils.[67] Recent parliamentary debate over an inquiry into the torture and murder of JVP suspects by government death squads in the late 1980s prodded minister and senior JVP leader Bimal Ratnayake to promise the delivery of "justice to all victims", including those killed in "the massacres that occurred in the north from both sides".[68]

Discoveries across the island of mass graves dating back decades, believed to contain the bodies of not just Tamils but also Sinhalese and Muslims, offer an opportunity for

[61] A 2015 UN Human Rights Council resolution co-sponsored by Sri Lanka foresaw the creation of a special court with the participation of international judges. But in the face of strong political pressure from nationalists and the military, the government abandoned the hybrid court and indefinitely postponed the promised truth and reconciliation commission. Two other transitional justice elements included in the same resolution – offices on missing persons and on reparations – were established in 2016 but are seen as ineffective by disappointed victims' and survivors' groups, as well as many justice campaigners.

[62] See the Sri Lanka Accountability Project website.

[63] In October 2025, the NPP government rejected a UN Human Rights Council resolution on "promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka", largely because it included a two-year extension for OSLAP. "Statement by Sri Lanka as the Country Concerned during the Consideration of Draft Resolution", Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6 October 2025. Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats and lawyers, September 2025.

[64] "Statement of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath to UN Human Rights Council", 8 September 2025.

[65] See "A Phantom That is Real: Persisting Culture of Surveillance and Intimidation in the North-East", Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, February 2025.

[66] Crisis Group telephone interviews, northern province rights activists, October 2025.

[67] The foreign minister assured the UN Human Rights Council that the JVP's experience of "oppression and rights violations" meant "we identify with the immense pain and suffering of Sri Lankans who were affected by conflicts on all sides". "Statement of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath to UN Human Rights Council", op. cit.

[68] "NPP's Bimal vows in parliament to prosecute Ranil for Batalanda", *Daily FT*, 11 April 2025.

the administration to demonstrate a commitment to non-discriminatory justice. The government has pointed to the exhumation of a mass grave in the northern town of Chemmani as evidence of Sri Lanka's independent judiciary at work, and it has promised to solicit the UN's technical assistance.[69] Families of the disappeared will be watching to see if it provides the resources, technical expertise and political backing to procure evidence capable of supporting prosecutions.[70]

D. Legislative Reforms

Addressing entrenched impunity in Sri Lanka requires not just action on the part of administration officials, but also legal and institutional reforms. Progress on this front has been uneven. In February, the justice ministry announced it had begun the process of establishing a public prosecutor's office, independent of the Attorney General's Department.[71] Long sought by rights activists, and promised in the NPP's election manifesto, the move aims to overcome the perennial conflicts of interest that have undermined the department when dealing with criminal allegations against state officials.[72] Of course, it is just a first step: proponents of reform have criticised the lack of transparency and consultation in drafting the legislation. Resistance to the new institution from officials in the Attorney General's Department also raises questions about whether it will in fact be established.[73]

Strengthening the rule of law is not only a matter of enforcing the law equally and prosecuting the guilty. It also involves protections from abuse of state power. Here, the government's failure to act on election promises to repeal the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and amend the Online Safety Act (OSA) – as urged by the European Union as a condition for renewal of valuable trade benefits – has raised alarm both in Sri Lanka and abroad.[74] The NPP government's continued use of the PTA to detain dozens has deepened doubts about its commitment to reform.[75]

[69] Dissanayake reportedly promised the UN Secretary General in September that his government would formally invite the UN to provide support for the exhumations. The UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings has asked to visit. Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, December 2025.

[70] See Ingrid Massagé, "More mass graves at Chemmani and Sri Lanka's old failures of justice", *Himal*, 28 October 2025.

[71] Crisis Group correspondence, lawyers and rights activists, April 2025. See also "Sri Lanka to establish independent prosecutor unit 'very soon': Justice minister", *Economy Next*, 24 February 2025.

[72] An independent public prosecutor's office was endorsed in the IMF's 2023 analysis of corruption vulnerabilities in Sri Lanka. Crisis Group Report, *Sri Lanka's Bailout Blues*, op. cit., pp. 27.

[73] Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyers and journalists in Colombo, October 2025. In November, the Attorney General Department's lawyers announced their collective opposition to the proposed new office. "AG's officers adopt resolution, rejecting separate Public Prosecution Office", *The Sunday Times*, 16 November 2025.

[74] Sri Lankan and international human rights groups have condemned the PTA, which allows indefinite detention without charge or trial, as the main cause of the growing number of cases of custodial torture since it was made law in 1979. The OSA, made law in 2023 with little public consultation, gives the government wide powers to monitor and restrict online speech. Media and rights activists are calling for its repeal, not its amendment. "Sri Lanka tells EU it's committed to repeal Prevention of Terrorism Act to ensure GSP+", *Economy Next*, 7 May 2025. "EU pressure mounts to amend Online Act", *The Sunday Times*, 27 April 2025. See "Observations, Comments and Recommendations on the Online Safety Act", International Commission of Jurists, 12 September 2025.

[75] "Sri Lanka: 49 arrested under PTA in first five months of AKD administration", *Sri Lanka Brief*, 15 August 2025.

Criticism grew stronger in December 2025, after the justice ministry released draft legislation to replace the PTA with a Protection of the State from Terrorism Act. Detractors say the bill's broad definition of terrorism and expanded powers to proscribe and place restrictions on designated organisations and individuals offer the scope to suppress dissent.[76] The text, which is based on an earlier proposal drafted during Ranil Wickremesinghe's presidency, suggests the NPP government has come to agree with, or remains reluctant to displease, state prosecutors and powerful individuals in the security sector who have long supported the PTA.

Legal and policy reforms for gender equity were also important planks in the Dissanayake and NPP campaigns, which mobilised women and women's groups to an unusual degree.[77] Eighteen months in, many activists express frustration that women's issues do not seem to be a priority for the NPP government. They point to the decision of the chair of the newly established National Women's Commission to resign from her post, citing the government's failure to provide funds and resources needed to activate the commission. They also note the appointment of an all-male committee to manage the post-cyclone Rebuilding Sri Lanka fund.[78] Rights advocates have further criticised what they saw as the lacklustre performance of the government delegation to the February 2025 meeting of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the absence of formal consultation between officials and women's groups before and after the event.[79] In addition, campaigners cite the government's apparent reluctance to address key concerns affecting Muslim and Tamil women.[80]

[76] The bill would allow individuals to be detained for up to two years without charge or full judicial review, including at special police sites that fall outside the judicial and prison systems. See Ermiza Tegal, "Initial reactions to the National People's Power government's Protection of the State from Terrorism Act", *Groundviews*, 18 December 2025.

[77] The choice of academic and feminist activist Harini Amarasuriya as prime minister was hailed by women's groups, as was the selection of Saroja Savitri Paulraj as women's affairs minister, the first-ever woman minister from the Malaiyaha Tamil community. The 21 women elected to parliament in November was the highest ever in Sri Lankan history; nineteen of them were with the NPP. "21 female lawmakers secure place in national political history", *The Sunday Times*, 17 November 2024.

[78] "First women's commission chair resigns four months in", *The Examiner*, 27 January 2026; "Govt. announces robust post-disaster rebuilding fund", *Daily FT*, 2 December 2026.

[79] Crisis Group telephone interviews, women activists, May 2025. CEDAW's "concluding observations" criticised the government for underfunding the women's affairs ministry, among many other things. See also Nabeela Iqbal, "The government showed up mediocre at the UN in Geneva for CEDAW", *Daily Mirror*, 1 March 2025.

[80] Crisis Group telephone interviews, women activists, May 2025. Despite numerous visits to the northern province, neither the president nor the prime minister has met any of the hundreds of Tamil mothers campaigning to learn the fate of disappeared relatives. Facing resistance from Islamic leaders and male Muslim politicians, the government has yet to act on its promise to approve amendments to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, which are backed by Muslim women's rights activists and in CEDAW's "concluding observations". See Ermiza Tegal, "MMDA reform is about women's and girls' lives not political games", *Groundviews*, 19 March 2025.

V. A New Constitution?

The NPP's flagship proposal is a new constitution that would end the concentration of power in the presidency and central government. The NPP's election manifesto promised a new charter that would remove the president's executive powers and restore the supremacy of parliament. It also promised "devolution of political and administrative power to every local government, district and province so that all people can be involved in governance within one country".[81] These reforms aim to address two of the main drivers of political conflict in Sri Lanka since the current constitution was adopted in 1978. First, the extensive – and until recently, virtually unchecked – powers of the executive have enabled partisan political control of the judiciary, police, military and other state institutions, paving the way for human rights abuses and the 2022 economic collapse. Secondly, the concentration of authority in Colombo, even after a constitutional amendment formally devolved limited powers to provincial councils in 1987, has redounded to the detriment of Tamils and Muslims in the north and east.[82]

In principle, the NPP's two-thirds majority in parliament gives the government the power to amend the constitution or draft a new one entirely. But the Dissanayake administration has yet to put forward a timetable for drafting a new constitution, fuelling scepticism about its commitment to reform.[83] Many fear that the NPP, now that Dissanayake is enjoying the benefits of the president's extensive powers, will join the long line of parties that have promised to abolish the executive presidency when campaigning but failed to do so once in office.[84]

There is even more scepticism about the government's commitment to devolve powers to provincial governments.[85] Many Tamil and Muslim voters welcomed the NPP's promise to promote "national unity" built on "respecting the diversity of identities and ensuring their survival and protection".[86] That rhetoric diverged from the Sinhala nationalist positions of the JVP, whose unitary conception of the state did not accommodate Sri Lanka's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. But the NPP has offered no details on how a new constitution would address the challenge of sharing power equitably among Sri Lanka's various communities. There is also no sign of consensus within the NPP to accept even the limited devolution that would come with full implementation of the 1987 amendment. No government in Colombo has allowed provinces to enjoy the powers over police and land that this amendment

[81] "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life", op. cit., sections 4.1 and 4.9.
[82] On the obstacles to meaningful devolution, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°239, *Sri Lanka: Tamil Politics and the Quest for a Political Solution*, 20 November 2012.
[83] In the latest of a series of shifting timetables, the president reportedly promised Tamil legislators that the constitutional reform process would begin in early 2026. "Sri Lanka President Dissanayake assures Tamil party of action on constitution, PC polls next year", *The Hindu*, 19 November 2025.
[84] The partial exception to this rule came in 2015, when the coalition government of President Maithripala Sirisena secured the 19th amendment, which substantially reduced the president's powers.
[85] Sri Lanka has a three-tiered administrative system. The central government controls policy on most issues; provincial councils set policy in a limited number of areas, including education and health; the third level consists of urban and local councils with few powers and financed entirely by the central government.
[86] "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life", op. cit., p. 128. For an argument that the NPP has moved to a civic nationalist vision of the state, see Jayadeva Uyangoda, "NPP in power: Possibilities for post-war reconciliation through civic nationalism", *Midpoint*, 14 December 2024.

granted them; yet doing so is the bare minimum Tamil parties are likely to regard as progress.[87]

The Dissanayake government did not meet its deadline to hold provincial elections within a year of coming to power – as it had promised in its campaign –strengthening doubts about its commitment to devolving power.[88] All nine provincial councils have been dormant since 2019, following a failure to delimit the boundaries of constituencies needed to hold the polls. The government has promised to hold provincial elections in the first half of 2026, but its January decision to establish a parliamentary committee to devise a new system for provincial elections threatens further delay.[89] The government's silence about its vision for devolved powers and hesitation over provincial elections is feeding growing disenchantment among Tamils and Muslims in the north and east, who see little substantial progress on the NPP's ambitious campaign promises.[90]

While his government appears to be dragging its feet on issues of core interest to Sri Lanka's minorities, Dissanayake has been somewhat bolder. He has made a series of speeches denouncing war and stressing the need to prevent ethnic or religious conflict, while moving away from previous governments' public celebrations of military heroes.[91] While not directly challenging Sinhala and Buddhist nationalism, or criticising the military, Dissanayake has begun to articulate a more inclusive vision of the nation and has been willing to challenge what he sees as divisive expressions of Buddhist nationalism, including temples built with military assistance in traditionally Tamil areas in the north.[92]

[87] The JVP's powerful general secretary, Tilvin Silva, has dismissed the need for provincial devolution, arguing instead that what Tamils in the north and east want and need is accelerated economic development. "No devolution for Tamils, confirms JVP general secretary", *Tamil Guardian*, 17 October 2024.

[88] "A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life", op. cit., p. 128. NPP leaders have repeatedly said they will respect the current system of provincial councils until there is a new constitution. That is a departure from the JVP's previous opposition to the 1987 amendment, which established the councils.

[89] "Speaker names PSC to rework provincial council poll system", *Daily FT*, 21 February 2026. Elections could be held in a few months simply by amending the Provincial Council Elections Act to return to the earlier proportional representation system, using previous district boundaries, while the parliamentary committee debates long-term reform. "Reinventing the wheel", *Island*, 21 February 2026.

[90] For a detailed analysis of the NPP's policies to address grievances and concerns of Tamils and Muslims, see Alan Keenan, "Sri Lanka's National People's Power Faces the Legacy of Civil War", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 September 2025. The government's appointment in November of a nineteen-member, all-Sinhalese committee to advise it on highly contested archaeology issues and its apparent acquiescence in the illegal establishment of a Buddhist shrine in multi-ethnic Trincomalee have further undermined trust in its even-handedness. "Archaeological advisory committee appointed for two-year term", *News First*, 8 November 2025; "Authorities try to demolish illegal Trinco café, monks livid at police upholding the law", *Examiner*, 21 November 2025.

[91] "War is a tragedy, we will not allow such a tragedy to occur again in our country", Sri Lanka President's Media Division, 19 May 2025.

[92] His unusually harsh criticism of Buddhist worshippers who visit these newly built temples provoked strong reactions from monks and many lay Buddhists, as well as opposition politicians. "President targets racist forces in both south & north at Jaffna event", *Newswire*, 17 January 2026; Sanjana Hattotuwa, "Devotion or provocation? The contestation of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's presentation of Buddhist pilgrimage", Sanjana Hattotuwa (blog), 20 January 2026.

VI. The Obstacles to Reform

As Dissanayake and the NPP approach eighteen months in office, they remain broadly popular. A February public opinion survey found that nearly two thirds of those interviewed approved of the government's performance and 59 per cent expressed overall "satisfaction with the way things are going in Sri Lanka at this time".[93] Satisfaction levels were particularly high with respect to the economy and government action against drugs and crime, as well as corruption. Reforms scaling back what many see as politicians' unfair perks and privileges have also been lauded.[94]

For those hoping the NPP can bring into being more transparent and accountable forms of governance, however, there are reasons for worry. The government has made progress on only a handful of its signature legislative reform proposals, and, except for the occasionally outspoken Dissanayake, there are few obvious champions of reform in the cabinet or other senior positions. At the same time, there are increasing examples of the NPP becoming ensnared in some of the same political practices it promised to end.

A. High Expectations, Slow Progress

Proponents of reform, including some in the NPP, express growing doubts about the government's commitment or ability to achieve many of its most important promises.[95] They point to continued high levels of poverty, slow progress in investigating the Easter bombings and other high-profile political killings, reluctance to pursue meaningful reform of anti-terrorism laws, the absence of a clear plan for constitutional change, and limited moves to address Tamil and Muslim concerns in the north and east. With the exception of laws removing presidential and parliamentary benefits, the NPP has passed no legislation or made other decisive policy moves on any of its electoral priorities.[96] Some supporters argue the NPP too often appears to "act as if they are still in opposition, not in government".[97]

These frustrations are in part an inevitable result of the sweeping nature of the NPP's agenda. Combating corruption and rebuilding the independence and effectiveness of the police and judiciary will necessarily be slow processes that face resistance.[98] But the government's indecisiveness also appears to reflect difficulties the NPP has had taking control of the state bureaucracy. While the party's lack of previous government

[93] "Sri Lanka turns more optimistic amid strong govt. approval: Mood of the Nation poll", *Daily FT*, 16 February 2026.

[94] Crisis Group telephone interviews, academics and journalists, February 2026. In September 2025, parliament approved the Presidents' Entitlements (Repeal) Act, which stripped ex-presidents and their families of official residences and other benefits; the following February, it passed the companion Parliamentary Pensions (Repeal) Bill, which abolishes pensions for members of parliament and their spouses.

[95] Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyers, academics and journalists, February 2026.

[96] It also passed the Proceeds of Crime Act, drafted by the previous government on the IMF's recommendation, which empowers officials to identify, seize and recover assets acquired through crime.

[97] Crisis Group correspondence, civil society activist, July 2025.

[98] Crisis Group interviews, businesspeople and journalists, Colombo, February 2025. Dissanayake has regularly complained of resistance from criminal elements within the state. See Section IV.B below.

experience was a selling point in the campaign, it has proven a disadvantage in staffing government ministries. Businesspeople, civil society activists and diplomats all report that decisions are made by a small number of ministers, who often find it difficult to delegate authority outside their immediate staff.[99] The NPP's mistrust of several senior bureaucrats, and its tendency to work with less experienced officials who often have longstanding personal ties with ministers or the president, have exacerbated the problem.[100]

The impact of Cyclone Ditwah in late November 2025 threw the government's struggles to manage the bureaucracy into painful view. The administration faced widespread criticism for failing to prepare adequately for the typhoon, despite meteorologists' warnings days in advance, and for responding slowly in the aftermath.[101] Life-saving alerts, for example, were issued only in Sinhala and English, endangering thousands of Tamils in the worst-affected central hills, while several district-level officials reportedly hesitated to authorise emergency relief expenditures for fear of being investigated later for corruption.[102]

At the same time, on some issues, NPP leaders appear to be more vulnerable to bureaucratic resistance.[103] Their dependence on existing officialdom and senior civil servants from previous governments – most clearly in the foreign ministry and the finance ministry (whose staff is the chief point of contact with the IMF) – has made it harder to pursue systemic change. As one diplomat put it, the administration is "caught between experienced civil servants with a different political vision, or none at all, and inexperienced loyalists".[104]

Except for a few business leaders, the government has invited almost no outside experts to help devise and carry through its policies. Unlike previous administrations, whose reform strategies – for example on constitutional changes – were developed with and sometimes led by non-party academics or professionals, the NPP "seems unwilling to appoint or work with independent experts", according to a journalist.[105] A number of social justice and economic development experts who backed the NPP's electoral campaign have expressed disappointment with the government's failure to accept offers of support from international economists interested in helping Sri Lanka develop more equitable economic reforms and debt relief.[106]

Even many of the professionals, civil servants and community activists who joined the NPP in the hope of contributing to policymaking, including through local government, now complain of being sidelined at all levels by the larger and much

[99] Crisis Group interviews, businesspeople, diplomats and activists, Colombo, February 2025.
[100] Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Colombo, February 2025; Crisis Group telephone interviews, businesspeople and journalists, May and November 2025.
[101] "Sri Lanka cyclone tragedy exposes government failures", Deutsche Welle, 2 December 2025.
[102] Crisis Group telephone interviews, humanitarian workers, December 2025. See also Shreen Saroor, "Cyclone Ditwah: Voices from the hills and a nation's questions", *Groundviews*, 2 December 2025.
[103] In the words of an anti-corruption activist, "Criminal networks, business interests, politicians – all are waiting to figure out how to recapture the state and public officials". Crisis Group interview, Colombo, February 2025.
[104] Crisis Group telephone interview, October 2025.
[105] Crisis Group telephone interviews, journalist, November 2025.
[106] Crisis Group telephone interviews, economist and development researcher, November 2025.

better-organised JVP.[107]"There is a real risk of JVP ruining the NPP", said a discouraged supporter.[108] Given that the NPP's 2024 manifesto reflected the priorities of the newer, non-JVP members and promised shifts from the JVP's traditional positions, the relative weakness of other voices within government help explain the lack of progress in fulfilling the administration's pledges. Indeed, on most of the important items on the NPP's reform agenda – particularly those involving ethnic relations and the legacy of the war – Dissanayake is the government's only clear and influential champion of reform, with other senior JVP ministers in the cabinet rarely speaking out.

B. The Double-edged Sword of Moralism

Lofty promises to create a "clean Sri Lanka" has made the NPP particularly vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy when members of the party have failed to meet their high ethical standards.[109] NPP officials view themselves as embattled reformers vulnerable to attacks by representatives of the old regime and have often reacted defensively when accused of policy mistakes or personal improprieties. More worrying, ministers and senior officials have regularly asked police to investigate the sources of what they claim are politically motivated "fake news" items or defamatory claims, bypassing established complaints procedures.[110]

While presenting themselves as reformers, NPP leaders have at times displayed the arrogance and used the tactics associated with Sri Lanka's disgraced old order. Critics point, for instance, to the president's warnings to voters when campaigning in local elections that the central government would be especially careful in funding councils won by opposition parties, given their history of corruption; NPP-majority councils, by contrast, could be trusted not to misuse funds.[111] NPP leaders also claimed that in towns where the coalition won the most seats, but not an outright majority, it would be "undemocratic" for smaller parties to unite and form a working majority on councils.[112]

JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva's praise for the "democratic" characteristics of China's one-party rule and argument that the NPP would need to be "in power for fifteen, twenty or 25 years … to [be able to] take the country forward under one vision, one policy framework" also raised alarm bells. Silva did add that the party intended to stay in power by winning elections, but his emphasis on the value of "work[ing]

[107] Crisis Group telephone interviews, NPP activists, November 2025.
[108] Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, November 2025.
[109] The inability of the NPP's first parliamentary speaker to show evidence of the doctorate he claimed to have, and his slowness to resign, was an early blow to the government's ethical reputation. Release of mandatory assets declarations revealing the wealth of several NPP legislators has also undermined the party's emphasis on frugality and its claims to speak for the poor and working class. See, for example, "Sri Lanka's millionaire ministers and the politics of explanation", *Ceylon Today*, 20 September 2025.
[110] See, for example, "Public security minister complains to CID over 'fake' news, bypasses press complaints procedure", *The Examiner*, 28 November 2025; and "Statement on the Freedom of Expression and Online Safety in Sri Lanka", Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, 3 February 2026.
[111] "President's campaign remarks prompt second complaint to Election Commission", *Sunday Times*, 20 April 2025.
[112] In a further twist, the NPP faced widespread criticism when it ended up negotiating coalitions to form working majorities with smaller parties it had previously denounced as corrupt and pledged not to work with.

toward one direction, one plan" raised doubts about the NPP's commitment to respect political pluralism.[113]

Critics of the administration point to the arrest of former president Ranil Wickremesinghe on 22 August 2025 as evidence that the NPP is merely perpetuating the autocratic practices of previous Sri Lankan governments.[114] Wickremesinghe's supporters dismissed the case as a "political witch hunt", arguing that his arrest and brief detention were designed to humiliate the six-time prime minster.[115] Parties across the political spectrum protested what they said was the NPP's attempt at establishing a "constitutional dictatorship".[116] Many in liberal civil society also questioned the arrest.[117]

In contrast, the NPP and many of its supporters pointed to Wickremesinghe's arrest as evidence that on their watch "no one is above the law" and that private use of state resources would be investigated and punished.[118] To their minds, the way leaders representing virtually every party that had been in government the past 30 years defended Sri Lanka's ex-president was evidence of a corrupt political class only the NPP was committed to fighting.[119]

C. Independent Commissions

It is not just political rivals who have questioned the administration's commitment to maintaining institutional checks on its power. Good governance advocates are critical of what they see as the government's efforts to undermine the independence and effectiveness of key oversight commissions.[120] Many blame the president for the fact that the position of auditor general remained vacant for most of 2025, after the Constitutional Council rejected four consecutive Dissanayake nominees as unqualified.[121] Critics also point to the president's long delay in nominating a chair of

[113] "As NPP eyes long haul in government, alarms over one-party rule", *Sunday Times*, 10 August 2025.
[114] Wickremensinghe is accused of using $60,000 of public funds to pay for a trip he took with his wife and official nine-person entourage to Wolverhampton University for her to receive an honorary degree. Prosecutors argue that Wickremensinghe should have paid for this travel himself; supporters counter that official staff are required to accompany a president even on personal trips. "Ranil Wickremesinghe remanded over UK trip spending scandal", *Sri Lanka Brief*, 24 August 2025.
[115] DBS Jeyaraj, "Is JVP-led NPP govt. weaponising the law to target Wickremesinghe?", *Daily FT*, 5 September 2025.
[116] "Opposition parties rally for Ranil", *Daily FT*, 25 August 2025.
[117] Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyer and right activist, September 2025. See also post on X by Rohan Samarajiva, analyst, @samarajiva, 9:05am, 23 August 2025.
[118] "Jeevan Ravindran, "Sri Lanka: Ex-president's arrest sparks corruption debate", Deutsche Welle, 25 August 2025.
[119] Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomat and academic researcher, September 2025.
[120] Concerns grew following reports the government planned to amend the constitution so that members of the Constitutional Council and independent commissions could be replaced whenever a new government takes office. "'Structural changes' await CC, commissions", *The Sunday Times*, 20 July 2025. Public interest advocates argue this change would fundamentally weaken the independence of oversight commissions. Crisis Group correspondence, September 2025.
[121] Many civil society leaders believe that Dissanayake wants a loyalist in the position. Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyer and anti-corruption activist, December 2025. On 3 February, the council approved the nomination of Samudika Jayaratne, one of the president's earlier candidates, after a change in the council's membership. The terms of the three members appointed from civil society had expired, and the prime minister and opposition had agreed upon their replacements.

the Right to Information Commission (RTIC), reportedly the result of his unsuccessful attempt to win approval of his preferred candidate, a former civil servant widely viewed as hostile to information requests.[122]

Funding problems have also weakened many of the commissions. In November 2025, the RTIC itself issued a strongly worded statement criticising the government's refusal to give it dedicated funding, as stipulated by law, forcing it to operate with "a skeleton staff" despite "an increasing caseload".[123] Journalists and civil society activists argue that the media ministry uses its de facto control of the commission's budget to weaken it, complaining as well of government departments' regular refusals to release information that has been requested.[124] Anti-corruption campaigners warn that CIABOC, which remains underfunded and understaffed, faces a new threat to its independence stemming from the government's belief that the rules hand the finance ministry control of CIABOC's budget.[125]

[122] Crisis Group correspondence, Sri Lankan lawyer, August 2025. See "Will the AKD/NPP sabotage or support the RTIC? A burning question for 'system change'", *Colombo Telegraph*, 30 July 2025. The five-month logjam was broken in August when the president accepted the Constitutional Council's nominee for the commission's final seat and then appointed him as chair. This came only after a campaign by media and civil society groups, including activists aligned with the NPP, challenged what they saw as the government's attempt to undermine the commission. "Daya named new RTI commission chief", *The Sunday Times*, 10 August 2025.

[123] "Public statement", Right to Information Commission of Sri Lanka, 20 November 2025.

[124] Crisis Group correspondence, lawyer and journalists, November 2025. See also Gagani Weerakoon, "Presidential secretariat withholds names amid RTI commission chair delay and integrity concerns", *Ceylon Today*, 12 July 2025.

[125] This contention runs counter to the language of the Anti-Corruption Act. Restoring CIABOC's budgetary autonomy will likely require new legislation. "TISL warns of threat to Bribery Commission's financial independence", *Newswire*, 15 November 2025. See "'Independent' commissions without independent funding", *Sunday Times*, 16 November 2025.

VII. A Way Forward

Despite the frustration felt by many proponents of reform, including some within the NPP, the current moment nonetheless remains a rare opportunity to achieve at least some of the "system change" the NPP promised its supporters. The government's popularity with voters, its big parliamentary majority and the opposition's continued weakness give Dissanayake and his government room to act more boldly than they have to date. They should take the calculated risk of extending their anti-impunity campaign into wartime atrocities and accept stronger checks on executive and state power. In part to help keep open political space for more challenging reforms, the government should also do more to ensure that the burdens and benefits of the economic recovery are distributed more equitably.

A. Fighting Impunity and Asserting Control of the Security Apparatus

The administration should make it a priority to demonstrate that state security personnel will not enjoy impunity for crimes they have committed. Pursuing prosecutions in emblematic cases involving attacks on journalists, as well as the Easter bombings, has broad public support. How the police and prosecutors handle the case against former intelligence chief Suresh Salley, and any others implicated in those bombings, will do a lot to determine the success of the NPP's larger campaign against impunity. The postwar prestige of the military and continued strength of Sinhala nationalist ideas within government institutions, however, mean that justice for state crimes committed during the civil war will be more difficult to pursue.

Nonetheless, police and prosecutors should aim to use any successful prosecutions in abductions and killings believed to have been carried out by army and naval intelligence to build greater support among Sinhalese for accountability for crimes committed on or near the battlefield. The government should, as promised, strengthen the Office on Missing Persons and ensure that necessary resources are provided for exhumation of mass graves – which contain Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil victims – and for supporting families of the disappeared whose loved ones may be among the buried. Courts and victims' lawyers must be allowed to pursue cases toward prosecution. Political leaders will need to be willing to discipline police and military officers who continue harassment and intimidation of victims and their families and supporters.

Repealing the PTA has been a signature JVP demand for years – and it is now the NPP's. But the government's proposed replacement – the aforementioned Protection of the State from Terrorism Act – contains provisions as draconian as its controversial predecessor.[126] The government should listen to the concerns of lawyers and domestic and international human rights advocates and either abandon the draft legislation and simply repeal the PTA, or, at a minimum, remove any provisions in the new law that enable extended arbitrary detention or threaten a fundamental right like

[126] See UN special mandate holders' joint letter to Sri Lankan government on draft Protection of the State from Terrorism Act, 9 February 2026.

that to protest and dissent. Doing so is essential if the government is to assert its control of the militarised, repressive state machinery that has helped define, and distort, Sri Lankan politics for half a century.

B. A Change in Tone

The government's reform efforts would also benefit from a return to the more humble, collaborative tone set by Dissanayake in his early speeches as president, in which he acknowledged that "the profound crisis before us" cannot be "resolved by a single government, political party or individual" and affirmed the importance of "constructive criticism" and "public scrutiny".[127] Pulling back from their moralism and defensiveness and more readily acknowledging government mistakes, or failures to meet promised ethical standards, could help restore some of the NPP's tarnished credibility as reformers. In practical terms, government ministers will need to resist the temptation to initiate police investigations into alleged cases of "fake news" or defamation, instead using the established media complaints procedures.

The NPP reform project could also be re-energised by reaching beyond the small circle of advisers now involved in developing reforms to invite experts, activists and community leaders outside the JVP. New members could include those in the NPP who feel shouldered aside by the JVP, as well as academics and civil society figures with expertise in key parts of the government's agenda, including constitutional reform and anti-corruption efforts. The JVP leadership has long been suspicious of liberal, Colombo-based civil society groups, in part because of the foreign funding many of them receive and the links some of their senior staff have to mainstream parties. While many officials are likely to remain reluctant to engage this constituency, doing so could improve the quality of and support for reforms.[128] Colombo-based, rule-of-law oriented organisations, in turn, could see their policy proposals gain greater traction with the government if they were developed in consultation with the more left-oriented and community-based civil society groups that are part of or close to the NPP.

C. Strengthening Oversight Commissions and Checks on the Executive

To demonstrate commitment to forging a new way of doing politics in Sri Lanka, where the executive is constrained by law and can be held accountable by other institutions, Dissanayake and his government should strengthen the independence of oversight commissions and the Constitutional Council that underpins them. They can start by providing CIABOC, the RTIC and other oversight commissions with additional staff and funding, including by removing the legal ambiguities that have

[127] "Together, let's build our nation", speech by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake speech at swearing-in ceremony, 23 September 2024; speech by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake at his inauguration, 25 September 2024; and speech by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake speech at the first session of the Tenth Parliament, 21 November 2024.

[128] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, civil society activists and researchers, Colombo, February 2025.

been used to block these measures.[129] The president and senior officials should also commit to returning the Constitutional Council to its original configuration, in which the majority of members were drawn from civil society rather than government and parliament.[130] This change will require amending the constitution, as will creating a public prosecutor's office; both should be essential parts of the new constitution, shorn of an executive presidency, that the NPP has promised.

For the government's anti-corruption drive to achieve lasting change, the president and ruling party must demonstrate greater willingness to be challenged and held accountable. To that end, the administration should move beyond prosecuting officials in previous administrations and allow its own officials to be held to account when there are credible allegations of wrongdoing. The Auditor General's Department must be allowed to monitor unhindered the collection and distribution of post-cyclone relief and reconstruction funds, while the government should act decisively on any evidence of corruption that is uncovered.

A further simple but essential step to show the government is open to being challenged and held accountable would be to expedite the long-delayed provincial council elections. Getting preparations for these polls under way would also send an important signal to Tamil and Muslim voters and political leaders that the NPP is open to accommodating their interests.

D. Economic Equity

Remaining within the terms of the IMF deal has left little room to offer substantial economic relief to the millions of Sri Lankans whose living standards remain well below pre-crisis levels, much less to achieve the economic justice the NPP promised voters. The fuel and fertiliser shortages and other economic disruptions from the Middle East war have put further pressure on the government budget, raising prices and likely reducing prospects for growth in 2026. Much worse effects would follow from extended conflict.

Should the war end quickly, however, there are steps the government can take to relieve pressure on the most vulnerable and shift the burden to those better able to bear it. A further funding increase for the anti-poverty Aswesuma program, particularly if targeted at the rural elderly, who have few other sources of income, could have a meaningful impact without putting major strain on the budget. Further efforts should be made to adjust Aswesuma eligibility criteria so that fewer of the poorest households are excluded from welfare payments.[131] To continue expanding its

[129] Crisis Group telephone interviews, lawyers, journalists and rights activists, September 2025. The IMF has included increased funding and staffing for CIABOC as a priority recommendation to the government. "IMF Staff Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on the Fifth Review Under Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility Arrangement", op. cit.

[130] The Constitutional Council was first established in 2001, with strong backing from the JVP, to vet appointments of key officials and members of independent oversight commissions, including on elections, police, human rights and bribery. Subsequent constitutional amendments weakened the council's independence, with seven of its ten positions now allotted to parliamentarians, four of them from the ruling party. Originally, seven members were drawn from civil society.

[131] Poverty and development researchers report that considerable numbers of the very poor complain of continued exclusion from Aswesuma benefits. Crisis Group telephone interviews, February 2026.

revenue base, while shifting the burden of taxation to the well-off, the government should expedite creation of a property tax, while committing to increasing the technical capacity and personnel needed to administer it and other wealth and corporate taxes.[132]

To reduce the risk of a return to debt distress, the government should ensure that the newly established Public Debt Management Office has the institutional capacity and political independence to manage its debt safely, especially if, as expected, Sri Lanka returns to the international financial markets. To be able to hire staff with the high levels of technical expertise and experience needed, the office will likely require its own dedicated cadre, with salaries on par with those of the Central Bank.[133]

While doing all it can to manage its debt responsibly, the government should, at the same time, be prepared for the possibility that more debt relief will be needed, especially after the unexpected losses from Cyclone Ditwah and the potentially huge economic costs of the unfolding conflict in the Middle East. To address this risk, the government should resurrect one of the more creative policy proposals in its election manifesto: conducting its own independent debt sustainability analysis. To do so, it should reach out to a wide range of foreign and domestic economists to develop a model of debt sustainability more accurately tailored to Sri Lanka's economic situation, including the growing frequency of devastation related to climate change.

E. International Cooperation

International policymakers, for their part, can play a modest but important role in supporting what is arguably Sri Lanka's best-ever – but still tenuous – chance to address its most important and longstanding governance problems.

On corruption, foreign governments that have offered Sri Lanka financial and logistical support for anti-corruption efforts should establish a coordination mechanism with the IMF, World Bank, UN and other international partners, to maximise the effectiveness of their programming. One important initiative would be support for prosecutions that have cross-jurisdictional aspects and for assets recovery efforts with the assistance of the UN-World Bank Stolen Assets Recovery program.[134]

Foreign leaders – especially in India and Japan – and the UN should also encourage the government to follow the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council's resolution adopted in October aimed at ending impunity and addressing the legacy of civil war. They should especially press the administration in Colombo to accept UN offers to assist in exhuming and identifying remains from mass graves and strengthen the work of the Office of Missing Persons.

Foreign donors and the UN should also urge the government to end police and military surveillance and harassment of civil society organisations. Important in its

[132] See "Towards a Balanced Fiscal Adjustment", op. cit.
[133] For a valuable overview of the challenges facing this office, see Umesh Moramudali, "Why should the govt. take the PDMO seriously?", *The Morning*, 8 June 2025.
[134] For more on this program, see Crisis Group Report, *Sri Lanka's Bailout Blues*, op. cit., pp. 27-28. See also "World Bank, UN StAR Initiative to support Sri Lanka in recovering crime-linked foreign assets", *Newswire*, 3 December 2025.

own right, this step is also necessary if victims and survivors are to participate freely and safely in any truth commission or domestic accountability process the NPP establishes. The European Union should continue to use its trade engagement to press Sri Lanka to cease using the Prevention of Terrorism Act and ensure that any new anti-terrorism law respects international human rights norms.

Finally, on the economy, development partners and international creditors should remain open to the possibility that Sri Lanka will need additional debt relief, particularly after the destruction wrought by Cyclone Ditwah and the economic damage from the Middle East war, and accept – or at least not actively oppose – the government undertaking, with outside experts, an independent debt sustainability analysis. They should also work with the government to ensure that post-IMF economic reforms designed to increase growth, spur public and private investment, and reduce state inefficiencies are implemented in ways that reduce, rather than increase, Sri Lanka's high levels of wealth inequality.

VIII. Conclusion

The historic victories of Dissanayake and the NPP at the ballot box in 2024 opened a rare window of opportunity to forge a more inclusive, transparent political system in Sri Lanka that might inhibit the misuse of power and prevent a recurrence of the armed conflict that tore the country apart in decades past. That window has already begun to narrow, however.

Despite its two-thirds parliamentary majority and the weakness of the opposition, the NPP has yet to make decisive moves on the core items of its reform agenda. These include ending impunity for corruption and political crimes; reining in the national security state; addressing the legacy of civil war; drafting a more ethnically inclusive constitution shorn of the executive presidency; and working toward a more equitable economic recovery. How seriously the government pursues these goals will define the NPP's uncertain political identity, in part by clarifying to what extent it differs from its most powerful constituent element, the JVP.

Making progress on any of these issues will take time. Ensuring that there is no impunity for officials accused of serious crimes will send a clear signal to Sri Lanka's political system that no one is untouchable. Nurturing more open, inclusive debate and decision-making, including within the ruling alliance, respecting the independence of oversight institutions, ending abuses of counter-terrorism policing, and sparing the poorest the heaviest burden of tax and economic reforms could help provide the ideas, trust and support needed to achieve the NPP's policy goals. This shift in approach could also, in itself, help create the new, more genuinely democratic political system that the president and his coalition have promised – one whose legacy might outlive this, and any future, government.

Colombo/Brussels, 16 April 2026

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