

PROTECTING ELECTIONS IN SRI LANKA WITH A FOCUS ON NATURAL AND HUMAN-MADE HAZARDS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study explores Sri Lanka's approach to protecting elections since the current iteration of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) was constituted in 2015. It focuses on responses to natural and human-made disasters and elements of operational planning and disaster preparedness that the ECSL has formalized in cooperation with the government and other agencies.

The ECSL has, since 2019, developed a collaborative approach, to address threats as they arise during elections. The case study examines how recent events such as the Easter Sunday Bombings (2019) and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022) have tested the Commission's ability to mobilize rapidly in pursuit of safe and secure elections for all. Although its capacity was especially under scrutiny during the pandemic, the ECSL coped with multiple logistical and political challenges—ultimately delivering continuity of the electoral process without undermining public health. Sri Lanka's current disaster preparedness protocols recognize and account for the likelihood of growing climate related threats in the form of extreme weather events. However, the ECSL's readiness in this sphere is diluted by a limited remit to legally enforce guidelines and relevant legal acts. Moreover, political pressure remains a threat to the ECSL's functioning. With the indefinite postponement of local elections in 2023—ostensibly due to the financial collapse of 2022—the Commission was thrust into a crisis. It was only able to recover once the much delayed local elections were held on 6 May 2025.

The data gathering for the case study consisted of desk research and three interviews with stakeholders carried out in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The names

and other identifying information regarding interviewees have been removed to protect their anonymity. Drawing on the above methodology, the case study will explore the context in which the ECSL operates, the extent to which it has institutionalized risk management, and hence its resilience and ability to recover from crises.

INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan Constitution enshrines the people's right to the 'immutable republican principle of representative democracy' (Sri Lanka 1978), universal suffrage having been installed in 1931. Despite fractious ethnic politics, Marxist insurrections and a civil war, Sri Lanka has maintained a record of timely elections since independence in 1948 with successive electoral management bodies (EMBs) engaged in managing the associated risks. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, the most serious challenges to electoral integrity in the country include the Easter Sunday Bombings in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. Both required the ECSL's swift mobilization to hold secure and safe elections for all.¹

1. BACKGROUND

As a postcolonial, post-conflict country, Sri Lanka has inherited some of the institutional processes of the prior British system, and has retained the political and religio-ethnic cleavages that led to war (between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009) (Jayasinghe, Reid and Welikala 2019). Within this context, the iteration of the EMB that exists today in Sri Lanka, the ECSL, is the result of numerous transformations that began under British colonial rule (of then Ceylon) and continued after independence (Samararatne 2021).

The ECSL, based in Colombo, and its 25 district offices are responsible for overseeing all national elections in the country. It has done so since a 2015 reform (the 19th Amendment) which reinstated the Constitutional Council (CC) as a body with the authority to establish and oversee independent commissions (Sri Lanka 1978: chapter XIV A); the earlier Department of Elections became defunct with the creation of the ECSL. Members of the ECSL are recommended by the CC and appointed by the president (Sri Lanka 1978: article 103). Independent commissions have been a point of contention in Sri Lanka with the CC subject to various constitutional amendments. Since its inception, the ECSL has nevertheless conducted two presidential elections, two parliamentary elections and two local election in a free and fair manner,

¹ Interviewee 3. According to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), 'security' relates to measures taken against acts such as terrorism or political violence (human-made adverse events that threaten the peace) while 'safety' relates to measures taken to handle natural or weather-related hazards. Also according to this interviewee, animal attacks such as human–elephant confrontations are another cause for concern in rural Sri Lanka, while there have also been casualties from wasps (see also: *Sunday Times* 2014).

overseeing peaceful transfers of power under three different chairpersons. Referendums are also the purview of the ECSL although none have been held thus far.

The model of government in Sri Lanka is semi-presidential with a powerful executive presidency and a subordinate parliament (Jayasinghe, Reid and Welikala 2019: 13). The latter consists of 225 members, of which 196 are directly elected by a system of proportional representation and 29 are indirectly elected via a national list, all for a period of five years. Presidential terms are also of five years (CPA 2015). At the time of beginning data collection for this paper, provincial and local government elections were long overdue having been subjected to various political pressures.

2. HAZARDS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Marxist insurrections of 1971 and 1987–1989, both comprehensively crushed by the state, affected the south of the country predominantly (Moore n.d.). During the civil war from 1983 to 2009, security was consistently a concern throughout the country even though most of the fighting occurred in the north and the east. Concurrent to the civil war was widespread electoral violence. For instance, voting was annulled in 22 polling centres in six electoral districts during the 2000 parliamentary election due to violence and malpractice (Höglund 2009); the Commissioner of Elections annulled 37 voting centres in the parliamentary elections of 2001 (CMEV 2002). Heightened security, military checkpoints and curfews have been a feature of Sri Lankan elections over the years. However, with the end of the civil war in 2009, there has been relative safety in the country with a drop in the electoral violence perpetrated by political parties (Höglund 2009: 145). Due to ethnic and religious cleavages, both a cause and an effect of the war, many issues in the country are relatively politicized (Imtiyaz 2010).

Despite the distinction of having had the world's first woman prime minister and a woman president, women's representation in Sri Lankan politics has been low historically (World Economic Forum 2024). This correlates with very low formal workforce participation by women, which is approximately half that of men at 32 per cent (World Economic Forum 2024; Government of Sri Lanka/UNFPA 2020). A 25 per cent women's quota was implemented at the local level in 2018. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of women elected from 89 to 2,300 (Wanigasinghe 2022). The current parliament has an unprecedented 22 women members, or almost 10 per cent (IPU n.d.). It remains to be seen if this will be sustained long term, and if numerical representation can lead to substantive gender equality gains. With the help of international organizations such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the ECSL has undertaken several initiatives since 2015 to

boost the representation of women and other marginalized groups in electoral politics as well as within its own ranks.²

The fact that Sri Lankan politics and elections have historically been characterized by heightened violence has been put forward as one reason for women's low participation (Höglund and Piyaathne 2009). Elections, however, have been notably peaceful over the last decade (Fernandopulle 2024; The Commonwealth 2024). Nonetheless, during both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024, observers cited increased instances of online gender-based harassment of women candidates, indicating a vulnerability that requires redress (Perera 2024). The voting rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs) also require being addressed nearly 17 years after the end of the war in 2009 (Shujaat, Roberts and Erben 2016).

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With climate change and Sri Lanka's geography rendering it highly vulnerable to extreme weather events (UN Sri Lanka 2023), the ECSL is having to consider the adverse implications for elections and is taking proactive measures by collaborating with the Disaster Management Centre (DMC). The DMC is the state agency in charge of disaster management in Sri Lanka with the remit to implement and coordinate measures at the national and subnational levels to address and reduce the risk of disasters with the help of stakeholders. In late 2014, severe floods prompted calls for the postponement of the January 2015 presidential election (EconomyNext 2014; *Sunday Times* 2014). Among those concerned, domestic election observers the Centre for Monitoring Electoral Violence (CMEV) appealed to the ECSL to consider special arrangements for around 400,000 people displaced by the floods (Colombo Page 2014). However, the question of postponement was politicized, with the flood-affected areas mostly populated by ethnic minorities and thought to oppose the incumbent. Elections were held regardless (Onlanka 2014).³ The CMEV's final report on the election cited floods as a limiting factor for voter turnout in the Eastern Province and the district of Mannar. The CMEV also reported that prior to elections, in Anuradhapura and Batticaloa, ruling party politicians were campaigning under the pretext of providing relief to flood victims (CMEV 2015). In terms of their potential to curb turnout and by providing possible avenues for incumbency advantage, floods may thus already be impacting election outcomes in the country.

3. RISK MANAGEMENT

Institutionalization of risk management is a relatively recent development within Sri Lanka's EMB, with operational planning now encompassing natural and human-made hazards.⁴ The ECSL's incremental approach is due to entrenched political polarization which runs counter to implementing a

² Interviewee 2.

³ Flooding had previously caused major disruptions to local elections (*Financial Times* 2011).

⁴ Interviewee 2.

comprehensive risk management system through broad reform (Kadirgamar 2020; Alihodžić et al. 2016: 22).

At the national level, risks to electoral integrity—even when arising out of natural hazards—are generally political, while at the district level the risks are operational.⁵ The ECSL has addressed this picture with various risk prevention approaches. Since 2015 it has published two Participatory Strategic Plans, both of which account for risks to electoral integrity (ECSL 2017, 2022). The 2022–2025 Plan recognizes the following categories of risks: '(i) economic; (ii) political; (iii) environmental; (iv) institutional; (v) (v) market management/ implementation; and most importantly (vii) financial' (ECSL 2022: 35). The EMB also planned for a Risk Register, although it is unclear if this was undertaken.

When elections of any kind are upcoming, the ECSL generates an action plan for each stage, from registering voters to election day. These action plans take into account all stakeholders, outlining what is required of them and when. This systematic approach ensures that all stakeholders are kept abreast of their role, as they work in tandem with other agencies, and risks are prevented or mitigated by performing assigned tasks. Under these action plans, the ECSL holds meetings with the police, the Postal Department, political parties and other related stakeholders to go over the required actions.

Adding to preparedness, for each election the ECSL compiles an operational plan which outlines its responsibilities across all 25 districts taking into account operational risks at the district level.

Separate annual operational plans compiled internally encompass all operations that come under the ECSL's purview during a given year and take into account any possible operational lapses and risks involved, so that they can be mitigated.⁶ Prior to the November 2019 presidential election, the ECSL in collaboration with the DMC and the Ministry of Public Administration, Disaster Management and Livestock Development produced a national planning document titled 'Right to Vote Amidst Disasters: Guidelines and Operations Plan for Election Emergencies' (A-PAD 2019). Further such planning documents were produced for elections that followed in 2020 and 2024 (ECSL 2020a; DMC 2024a; 2024b). Over the years, contingency planning has addressed adverse weather conditions, animal attacks, fires, tsunamis, Covid-19 and Covid-19 detection, among others. The 2024 operational plans for both the presidential and general elections detailed rainfall forecasts and possible flood situations. According to its Director General, the DMC recognizes that 'preventive concepts' rather than a 'responsive strategy' are key to mitigating hazards and creating resilience (ECSL 2020a).

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⁵ Interviewee 2.

⁶ Interviewee 2.

4. RESILIENCE TO STRESSES AND SHOCKS

Resilience can be exhibited by maintaining continuity in the face of shocks, adapting to emerging stressors and/or taking transformative steps to face new realities (Alihodžić 2023: 18). The ECSL has displayed such resilience over the past years.

4.1. Resisting

As a measure to prevent possible terrorist attacks on electoral materials, facilities and actors, and to ensure security, law and order, in 2019 the ECSL deployed 72,808 members of the Sri Lanka Police and the Special Task Force (CMEV 2020a). Terrorism is characterized by the World Health Organization as a human-made hazard (Saulnier et al. 2021: 153). This mobilization was a measure to ensure continuity of the electoral process following the Easter Sunday Bombings that took place on 21 April 2019, seven months before the 2019 presidential election. Presenting a grave security concern (Seale 2023), the attacks targeted several churches and hotels. The relevant constitutional provisions on powers available to the ECSL during elections cover mobilization of the police (article 104C) and requesting mobilization of the armed forces (article 104D).

Security is to be provided by military personnel only in times of crisis such as civil war, internal conflict, or the Covid-19 pandemic (see: IFES 2024). During elections they are on stand-by for contingencies (Rodrigo 2024). However, militarization is a fact of life, especially in the north and north east where the civil war was formerly fought.

4.2. Adapting

The Covid-19 pandemic created unique challenges in the run up to Sri Lanka's parliamentary election of 2020. The complex nature of the pandemic called for a level of initiative that election administrators had not exercised hitherto, requiring the election to be postponed twice. According to the electoral calendar, the general election was scheduled for 25 April 2020 when President Rajapaksa dissolved parliament six months ahead of completion of its term (PAFFREL 2020)—a move he made to translate his landslide presidential victory into a parliamentary majority as soon as possible. However, on 19 March 2020, the ECSL announced the postponement of elections due to the threats posed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Adaderana.lk 2020). Thereafter, 20 June 2020 was set as election day by the ECSL, which date was contested by eight parties at the Supreme Court. After the eventual withdrawal or dismissal of all these petitions, the ECSL declared 5 August 2020 as the fresh date (PAFFREL 2020). The election ultimately concluded without reports of any major uptick in Covid cases (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021).

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The ECSL's resilience in the face of Covid-19 can be attributed to the adaptive measures it took in concert with coordinating agencies and others—such as national health authorities, the national security and disaster management apparatus and election observers such as IFES—to ensure that elections took place fairly and safely. Admittedly, the postponements created uncertainties

because (a) the ECSL's constitutional remit to postpone elections is limited to the district level; and (b) there are inconsistencies in its remit to issue and enforce regulations across the legal framework (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021). However, election observer groups such as the CMEV attest that the ECSL acted in a precedent-setting manner, intervening in an 'optimal' way at a time when, as in many countries, there was no national legal framework to guide elections during a pandemic (CMEV 2020b). Despite the legal limitations, the ECSL was notably diligent to always proceed in consultation with all stakeholders and, upon consulting the Supreme Court, received clarification on its 'authority to reschedule elections in case of an emergency' (CMEV 2020b; Vier et al. 2020).

The postponement ultimately served as a period in which to better prepare and take precautions against electoral risks. With the assistance of IFES—which produced a study titled, 'Electoral Risk Mitigation: Considerations to Ensure the Safety and Integrity of Parliamentary Elections During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka'—the ECSL drew up an election risk mitigation roadmap following a pre-election workshop with its senior officials including those from the districts (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021). That document was presented to health authorities and finalized collaboratively, resulting in the 'Health Guidelines for Conducting the Elections Amidst the Covid-19 Outbreak' issued by the health authorities and implemented by 10,066 deployed health officials (ECSL 2020a). The Disaster Preparedness and Response Division (DPRD) of the Ministry of Health was the focal unit linking health and medical needs in election emergencies with the centre for Joint Election Emergencies Operations (JEEOps—set up during the presidential election and now reactivated) and 25 District Election Emergencies Coordinating Offices (DEECOs).⁷

To enhance preparedness across stakeholder groups, the ECSL produced training videos for officials on Covid-19 risk mitigation, as well as a related safety guidance campaign for the public, among other initiatives (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021). Mock elections were conducted in Batticaloa, Colombo, Jaffna and Kalutara districts to trial polling centres and the new health guidelines (BBC News 2020).

So as not to infringe on people's right to assembly, campaigning prior to elections was allowed within certain parameters (a 100-person limit on meetings and giving prior notice)—however, such in-person gatherings were discouraged in favour of print and online campaigning (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021). It should be noted that the 2020 parliamentary elections had the longest campaign period in Sri Lankan history (CMEV 2020b). Following requests made by election observers advocating for enforceable guidelines, legally binding guidelines were published on 17 July (MoHIMS 2020) albeit with somewhat relaxed restrictions (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021).

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⁷ IFES' case study report of the Covid-affected parliamentary elections (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021) does not mention JEEOps. The same omission occurs in Vier et al. (2020), CMEV (2020b) and PAFFREL (2020) reports. For more on JEEOps and DEECO see below.

At polling stations on election day, as per the guidelines, some of the key health and safety measures that the ECSL took were temperature checks of voters, sanitization of premises, social distancing, hand sanitization, protective cubicles and personal protective equipment (PPE) for poll workers, polythene safety covers on cardboard ballot boxes, and disposable indelible ink applicators (Reid Wijesuriya et al. 2021). Voters were also required to bring their own pens to mark ballots (Macan-Markar 2020).

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Sri Lanka has a limited advance voting or 'postal voting' facility covering government officials and security forces deployed for election duties on election day, and some essential government workers (DRI 2020). Recognizing the vital role played by health officials, the ECSL implemented advance voting for healthcare workers (Gunasekara 2020). While an attempt was made by the ECSL to allow those at quarantine centres to cast their ballots through mobile voting arrangements, the inflexible legal framework was instrumentalized by political parties to disallow this (James, Clark and Asplund 2023). Despite the best efforts of the EMB and coordinating state agencies, voting for some citizens was not possible under pandemic conditions (PAFFREL 2020). However, overall voter turnout in the election was only marginally less than in 2015—declining from 77.7 to 75.9 per cent (IPU 2015, 2020).

Each year the state budget allocates to the EMB the funds necessary for its activities under a line item that is then subject to parliamentary approval. The costs associated with preparations for the 2020 general election in the wake of Covid-19 created challenges regarding the funds allocated. The LKR 5 billion (approximately USD 16.6 million) initially estimated proved to be insufficient and eventually the treasury reportedly allocated LKR 8.5 billion (USD 28.4 million). However, an ECSL report states that only LKR 5.7 billion was ultimately spent in the conduct of the election (ECSL 2020b). Even as parliament was not in session—due to being dissolved prematurely in anticipation of elections that were then postponed—the expenses for the election were still met (Public Finance.lk 2020; Ministry of Finance 2020).

4.3. Transformation

An ad hoc body, the Joint Election Emergencies Operation Unit (JEEOps) was first established in November 2019 to address potential disruptions during Sri Lanka's presidential elections that year. It is not clear if the security situation after the Easter Sunday Bombings precipitated this move, but JEEOps was operative during the first national election following those shocking events and has been operational since. JEEOps is usually operative for a given number of days prior to and following election day.⁸ Covering both natural and human-made hazards, it is a collaborative effort between the ECSL and the DMC, with its objective being the 'real-time monitoring of potential disaster situations and their impact on the election process' so that preparedness is enhanced and the electoral process remains uninterrupted (DMC 2024b). In addition to the ECSL and DMC, representatives from health departments, armed forces,

⁸ For the 16 November 2019 presidential election this period was 14–19 November; for the 5 August 2020 general election it was 3–8 August; for the 21 September 2024 presidential election it was 19–23 September; and for the 14 November 2024 general election it was 12–16 November (Interviewee 3).

police, and assigned ministries and technical organizations also constitute JEEOps (Adaderana.lk 2019). Responses to election emergencies are to be operationalized by relevant ministries, departments and institutions based on the type of hazard.⁹

The Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act, No. 13 (Sri Lanka 2005) calls for the protection of life, property and the environment from disasters (DMC 2024). 'Pre-disaster planning, preparedness and mitigation while sustaining and further improving post-disaster relief, recovery and rehabilitation capabilities' are all within its provisions. Disaster management is generally centrally implemented,¹⁰ but during elections a District Election Emergencies Coordinating Office (DEECO), directly linked with JEEOps in Colombo, functions in all 25 districts under respective District Secretaries along with members from the ECSL and DMC. JEEOps is not operational during local elections when a more informal system is in place to address possible emerging hazards.¹¹ The lower profile of and interest in local elections were cited as reasons for this by an interviewee. For example, turnout in the 6 May 2025 local elections was around 60 per cent reflecting this lower perceived importance, and perhaps election fatigue given it was the third election since late 2024 (Perera 2025).

5. RECOVERY FROM CRISIS

Although the ECSL takes precautionary measures and is adaptable even in uncharted situations, its ability to function is subject to funding by the state. Despite the costs being met even in trying times such as during the pandemic, and with the regular budgeting process generally providing the ECSL with necessary funds for its mandate, in 2023 a crisis arose affecting the already long overdue local government authority (LGA) elections. These were further postponed for 789 days from 9 March 2023 to (as mentioned) 6 May 2025.

After the last LGA elections in 2018, locally elected officials' terms were extended by a year by President Rajapaksa in 2022 citing the economic crisis (Adaderana.lk 2023). In 2022, Sri Lanka's economy went into freefall due to a 'persistent fiscal deficit', 'elevated foreign debt' and a dearth of reserves to service the debt (Samarakoon 2024). Fuel and cooking gas shortages were commonplace, and the country effectively crawled to a standstill. As privations reached every segment of society, a popular uprising termed the *Aragalaya* (or 'struggle' in Sinhala) resulted in the ouster of the incumbent president. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's rule (beginning 2019) was widely believed to be corrupt, inefficient and a major factor in the economic collapse (Dieterich 2022). In the power vacuum that resulted, to see out the rest of the term, veteran United National Party politician Ranil Wickremesinghe was chosen as president in a parliamentary vote on 20 July 2022 by a parliamentary majority consisting of

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⁹ Interviewee 3.

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the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Gotabaya Rajapaksa's party (Mao and Ethirajan 2022). As such, Wickremesinghe was not an overt departure from the politics that people had rejected. He stated as his primary aim the resuscitation of the economy.

With the extended LGA terms ending, the ECSL almost immediately ran into issues in setting up the election for 9 March 2023 with the printing of postal votes stalled due to non-payment of necessary funds (Farzan 2023). Even though funds had been allocated for the LGA elections via the previous budget (Dias 2024), the Wickremesinghe Government insisted that priority must be given instead to revitalizing the economy (Kumarasinghe 2022). Stability was seen as paramount and elections were portrayed as a cost that the nation could not afford (Kumarasinghe 2023). Civil unrest and financial crises are classified as human-induced hazards (Saulnier et al 2021: 153); the government used both as a pretext to jettison the imminent LGA election process. A letter was even issued by the cabinet to district secretaries requiring them to discontinue collecting candidate deposits. This was subsequently recalled, as per the Secretary to the Ministry of Public Administration, Home Affairs and Local Government (*Financial Times* 2023).

By economic coercion, the government was able to put elections on hold indefinitely to achieve political ends.

In the midst of challenges, the ECSL rescheduled the election for 25 April 2023, but it was never held. What came to pass was a situation in which the country's financial crisis was touted as a reason to put its democratic process on hold; what truly came in the way of elections was the non-disbursement of funds by the Treasury for various state agencies' services essential to the conduct of an election—such as ballot printing. Funds for fuel and police protection for polling booths were likewise withheld (*Times of India* 2023). It should be noted that during his tenure as president, Ranil Wickremesinghe was also the Minister of Finance, ultimately in charge of the Treasury. Not even a Supreme Court decree could sway the Treasury to disburse funds, nor were essential services offered to the ECSL (Srinivasan 2023). Thus, by economic coercion, the government was able to put elections on hold indefinitely to achieve political ends (Kuruwita 2023). After the ouster of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, an LGA election would have been crushing for his party, the SLPP, under whom the economic collapse took place.

The ECSL was therefore placed in an unenviable situation wherein their mandate, independence and powers were questioned by the public while simultaneously having to contend with alleged death threats (ANFREL 2023). The only woman commissioner of the ECSL at the time resigned from her position (Parakrama 2023). Moreover, the Supreme Court found the ECSL—along with the Attorney General and the President—have violated fundamental rights in having failed to conduct elections (*Bandara v Siriwardana* 2023; Srinivasan 2024). While the ECSL accepted the court's pronouncement, it repudiated claims that it had caved in to political influence, insisting it had attempted fully to fulfil its duty (Newswire 2024a). Former President Wickremesinghe, meanwhile, has remained defiant about his decisions at the time (Newswire 2024b).

The ECSL, like other election commissions the world over, is only independent to the extent that funds are issued to it by the relevant state authorities (Joseph 2021: 31). It is inconceivable that an EMB can raise its own funds¹² or should always prepare to wrangle with the executive for funding in anticipation of an election. If funds are not disbursed from their source, there is little room for the ECSL to manoeuvre.¹³ In a country context with no history of consensus-building but replete with divisions, electoral timelines can be subjected to political changes and the whims of politicians (Vier et al. 2020) that threaten electoral integrity.

Nevertheless, what happened was unprecedented in Sri Lanka. Political pressure that is exercised in the lead up to elections may be addressed by legislative reforms that entrench an EMB's independence. Short of reform, EMBs can learn from how pressure is exerted by the executive on other agencies, as well, hindering them from cooperating.¹⁴ This is an important avenue through which to pursue better crisis management, given the central issues of interagency collaboration. Prompted by this crisis and with the assistance of IFES, the ECSL launched workshops aimed at strengthening electoral leadership in challenging times.

The IFES Executive Curriculum in Electoral Leadership (iEXCEL) is described as 'a scenario-based electoral leadership curriculum that develops the skills needed to strengthen institutional independence, deliver elections within the context of a crisis, resist manipulation of elections by political actors and foster institutional resilience and capacity' (Ellena and Shein n.d.). Since 2023, the iEXCEL workshops have become a regular part of training for ECSL leadership not just at the national but also the district level. During elections, many different agencies such as the postal service, education departments (teachers are deployed as poll workers), local authorities and the police have roles to play—these professions too have been incorporated into the workshops locally and nationally to foster cooperation. The expectation is that with stronger interagency ties at all levels, political actors may find it more difficult to effect ruptures and crises that threaten electoral integrity. This cooperation also benefits more general preparedness and resilience during times of natural or other human-made hazards.

Since the indefinite local electoral postponement under discussion, Sri Lanka has undergone a political sea-change. Presidential and parliamentary elections were held on 21 September and 14 November 2024 respectively, which garnered the ECSL much goodwill for its effective leadership—these elections were declared the most peaceful in Sri Lankan history (Samarawickrama 2024). While the interagency dynamics in this achievement are difficult to evaluate, the EMB's process of recovery from intense politicization by building electoral and interagency capacity can only have helped. On 6 May 2025, the LGA elections finally took place after having been announced on 20 March

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¹² Interviewee 2.

¹³ Interviewee 1.

¹⁴ Interviewee 2.

2025 by the ECSL. This was nearly two years and two months after they should have taken place, 9 March 2023.

6. CONCLUSION

The ECSL has in recent times incrementally set up a risk management framework that has led to successful elections. While the EMB has no risk management unit as such, this function is fulfilled by taking pre-emptive action where necessary. The ECSL was able to resist any changes to the electoral calendar after the Easter Sunday Bombings of 2019. Covid-19 illustrated the ECSL's capacity for ensuring continuity, and the creation of JEEOps showed initiative to put in place a transformative system to address ongoing risks. By identifying measures it could take to build interagency cooperation following the LGA election postponement, the ECSL worked to rebuild trust, capacity and resilience. The ECSL's limited enforcement mandate and polarized political environment mean that politicization of electoral activities remains an ongoing risk. These risks may be mitigated by advance preparation before crises hit; for instance, political calculations surrounding advance voting during the pandemic could have been avoided with flexibility in relevant legal provisions and consistency in implementation. In any case, legal reform in this regard is much needed as disenfranchisement of different sectors of society—due to natural hazards (as described), mitigation measures or any other factors—is an ongoing concern (DRI 2020).

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Constitutional Council
CMEV	Centre for Monitoring Electoral Violence
DEECO	District Election Emergencies Coordinating Office
DMC	Disaster Management Centre
ECSL	Election Commission of Sri Lanka
EMB	Electoral management body
iEXCEL	International Foundation for Electoral Systems' Executive Curriculum in Electoral Leadership
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
JEEOps	Joint Election Emergencies Operations
LGA	Local government authority
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party

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