

SRI LANKA

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND THE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Civil society in Sri Lanka was active promoting an EU EOM recommendation proposing the introduction of regulations on campaign finance. The law adopted in 2023 represented a major step forward in ensuring electoral transparency, accountability and the level playing field.

The European Union (EU) has been supporting democracy observing elections in Sri Lanka for over two decades. In 2024, the EU deployed an Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) for the presidential elections, which stressed the role of the civil society and of the citizen observers in enhancing transparency and public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

Citizen election observers have a crucial role providing an independent scrutiny of voting and counting on election day. Similarly, to the EU observers' methodology, they contribute with analysis of the legal framework, as well as monitoring of campaign events, the media, campaign finance, and impartiality of the public administration. In addition, and significantly, citizen observers play a key advocacy role in promoting election reforms, often on the basis of previous EU EOM recommendations.

That's what happened in Sri Lanka. Local organisations were instrumental in drafting Sri Lanka's first regulation on campaign finance adopted in 2023, as recommended by previous EU EOMs. The new legislation on election expenditure introduced spending ceilings for presidential elections, a major step to ensure a level playing field and greater electoral accountability.

Observing elections and assessing whether
they are inclusive, credible and transparent, as

well as providing recommendations for improvement of future electoral processes “*is a matter of fundamental rights*” stressed Professor Arjuna Parakrama, Chief Operating Officer at the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV).

Election observers, both national and international, have been recognised as human right defenders for their role in safeguarding fundamental rights.

The EU EOM 2024 considered that with the introduction of regulation of campaign finance, the country had fulfilled the priority recommendation from the previous EU EOM, which advocated such a framework.

However, the EU EOM stressed that gaps in the legislation remained and therefore the proposed reforms were not realised in full. As a result, the EU EOM included new recommendations in its 2024 final report, aiming at strengthening the transparency in political finance and improving the campaign finance oversight.

The previous EU EOMs also called for stronger legal recognition and protection of citizen observers to ensure inclusive and transparent elections. The EU EOM in 2024 noted that the electoral legal framework remained silent on the citizen observers’ rights and duties and recommended to “introduce provisions on election observation into the electoral legal framework.”

Local civil society organisations have worked for decades to bridge this gap, training thousands of election observers, advocating for reforms, and increasing electoral transparency.

Despite the challenges, Sri Lanka’s citizen observer organisations continue their critical work, organising nationwide training sessions, recruiting thousands of volunteers, and covering the country’s most remote districts. Rohana Hettiarachchie, Executive Director of

PAFFREL, Sri Lanka's largest domestic observation group recognised that, "it is not easy, but with experience, we somehow manage every election".