

ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The presidential election to elect the 7th Executive President of Sri Lanka was held on November 2019. Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC), a subsidiary of British American Tobacco (BAT), holds the monopoly of manufacturing and selling cigarettes in Sri Lanka, which has a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertisement, promotion and sponsorship under the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) Act.

Objectives:

To explore tobacco industry (TI) engagements of the 2019 presidential election candidates.

Methods:

Investigative research techniques were used. Key informant interviews, news reports, online content, industry reports and community-level documentary evidence were used. A deductive data analysis approach was used based on the themes 'type of engagement', 'TI investment' and 'potential impact'.

Results:

All three top ranked candidates depicted a positive result. Two had a history of direct engagement with the CTC and the other declared support for beedi industry during the election campaign. The engagements of the candidate who was a former Defence Secretary included accepting sponsorships to construct police stations and Army welfare shops. Police are one of the authorized officers of the NATA Act and Sri Lanka Army distributed tax free cigarettes for its soldiers until recent past. The candidate who was a former Agriculture Minister accepted CTC sponsorships for renovation of water reservoirs. CTC cultivates almost all tobacco they need for manufacturing cigarettes and is accused of exploiting the Sri Lankan farmers during the process. One candidate was the guest of honour of the opening ceremony of a pilgrim's rest in a Buddhist shrine constructed with CTC sponsorship (around 70% of Sri Lankans are Buddhists). All TI engagements of these leading politicians received positive media coverage.

Conclusion(s):

TI engaging main political figures in Sri Lanka has potential to cause serious policy implications, thus, highlights the need for a national policy for implementation of the FCTC Article 5.3.