



ELECTION COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

**ANNUAL RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM
2025**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



ELECTION COMMISSION OF SRI LANKA

Annual Research Symposium 2025

**“Empowering Democratic Processes: Strategies for
Enhancing Voter Participation and Electoral Integrity”**

PROCEEDINGS

© Annual Research Symposium 2025

Empowering Democratic Processes: Strategies for Enhancing Voter Participation and Electoral Integrity

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Election Commission of Sri Lanka



Vision

“A nation that safeguards universal franchise”

Mission

“Raise critical consciousness among all stakeholders, ensuring the protection of people’s rights and conduct free, fair and credible elections efficiently and effectively that safeguard the people’s sovereignty and universal franchise based on democratic principles”

Messages From the Election Commission



Mr. R.M.A.L. Rathnayake
Chairman



Mr. M.A.P.C. Perera
Member



Mr. Ameer Faaiz
(Attorney at Law)
Member



**Ms. Anusuya
Shanmuganathan**
(Attorney at Law)
Member



**Prof. Lakshman
Dissanayake**
Member

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka is pleased to extend its message on the occasion of the Annual Research Symposium 2025. The Commission takes great pride in advancing a culture of informed participation, transparency, and accountability within our democratic framework. Over the years, it has remained steadfast in safeguarding the integrity of elections, while striving to strengthen its independence, enhance institutional efficiency, and foster public confidence in the electoral process.

The Annual Research Symposium 2025 marks another significant milestone in this continuing journey. It serves as a valuable platform for scholars, practitioners, politicians, policymakers and other stakeholders to share research, exchange ideas, and reflect on emerging challenges and innovations in electoral governance. The diversity of perspectives represented here underscores a collective commitment to deepening democracy and reinforcing the principles that sustain free and fair elections. The Commission, in its endeavours, stays committed to making the electoral process as inclusive as possible, by ensuring that every eligible citizen is afforded the opportunity to take part meaningfully in shaping the country's democratic future.

In an era of rapid transformation shaped by technological change, shifting social dynamics, and evolving voter expectations, the Commission recognises the growing importance of research-based insights and dialogue. Initiatives such as this Symposium play a vital role in reflecting on and strengthening institutional capacity, improving the efficiency and transparency of electoral processes, and ensuring the continued integrity and inclusiveness of Sri Lanka's democratic system. By enabling wider participation and accessibility, the Commission looks to further deepen and strengthen the foundations of democracy.

The Commission extends its appreciation to all contributors, researchers, and organisers whose dedication and vision have made this event possible. It is our sincere belief that the knowledge and reflections generated through this initiative will guide evidence-based policy, inspire innovation, and contribute meaningfully to the consolidation of democratic governance in Sri Lanka.

We convey our best wishes for the success of the Symposium and for all future endeavours aimed at nurturing a resilient, inclusive, and participatory democracy.

Message From the Commissioner General of Elections



Mr. Saman Sri Rathnayake
Commissioner General of Elections

The Annual Research Symposium 2025 stands as a beacon for advancing knowledge, innovation, and collaboration in the field of elections and democratic governance. By bringing together scholars, electoral practitioners, and policymakers, the Symposium has created a vibrant platform for exchanging ideas, exploring challenges, and developing solutions that strengthen the democratic fabric of Sri Lanka. Over the years, this Symposium has evolved into more than an academic gathering; it has become a forum where rigorous research meets practical policy, guiding the evolution of our electoral systems and democratic institutions.

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka recognizes that research is not merely an academic exercise it is the foundation for building trust, transparency, and accountability in every election. The insights and recommendations captured in these Proceedings provide valuable guidance for shaping policy, refining electoral processes, and ensuring that all citizens can participate confidently and meaningfully in the democratic process. By bridging the gap between evidence and practice, the Symposium reinforces our commitment to a system that is fair, inclusive, and credible.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all contributors, the organizers, presenters, and participants whose dedication and creativity have made this Symposium a success. Your efforts ensure that the ideas generated here extend beyond the pages of this volume, inspiring ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and action across government institutions, civil society, and academia. It is through such collective engagement that we can continue to nurture a democracy that is informed, resilient, and participatory, upholding the principles of integrity, inclusivity, and public trust in every election.

Message from the Secretary, Election Commission of Sri Lanka



Mr. H.M.T.D. Herath
Secretary

Democracy is sustained not only by constitutional principles but by the integrity and credibility of its electoral processes. In Sri Lanka, our democratic progress depends on safeguarding free and fair elections, upholding the rule of law, and continuously strengthening public confidence in electoral institutions

The success of any democratic institution depends not only on laws and structures, but on the dedication, insight, and collaboration of the people who sustain it. Within the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, every election, every reform, and every new initiative is built upon the shared commitment of officers, researchers, and other stakeholders who work tirelessly to uphold the credibility of our democratic process.

The Annual Research Symposium 2025 “Empowering Democratic Processes: Strategies for Enhancing Voter Participation & Electoral Integrity in Sri Lanka” celebrates that spirit of collective effort and learning. It offers a moment to pause, reflect, and exchange experiences that often arise from the ground realities of election management. These experiences, when studied and shared, form the foundation for innovation and long-term institutional growth. I believe that the strength of the Commission lies in its ability to adapt — to listen, to question, and to evolve through knowledge and dialogue. This Symposium embodies that ethos, providing a space where practice meets research, and ideas turn into pathways for practical improvement.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to making this event a reality. May this gathering continue to inspire dedication, unity, and professionalism among all who serve in the cause of democracy.

Address by the Keynote Speaker



Dr. Nelum Deepika Udagama
Chair Professor of Law (retd)
University of Peradeniya

Dr. Nelum Deepika Udagama is a legal academic and a dedicated human rights advocate. Until recently she was Chair Professor of Law of the University Peradeniya. She previously served as the Head, Department of Law, University of Peradeniya, and also as Head of the Department of Law, Faculty of Law, University of Colombo.

She is an academic specialized in International Human Rights Law, earning LL.B. (Hons.) and LL.M. Degrees from the University of Colombo and LL.M. and Doctor of Juridical Science (JSD) Degrees in international human rights law from the School of Law, University of California at Berkeley, USA.

She has a career spanning four decades in the public university system, contributing to the promotion of human rights education and in modernizing legal education through institution building. Her work is animated by the firm belief that academic efforts must be consistently combined with advocacy for the public good.

In 1991 she founded the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR) at the University of Colombo and served as its Founding Director (1991-97) and engaged in pioneering work on human rights education within the public university system and through schools and community organizations. These efforts included the introduction for the first time of a course on Human Rights Law to the LLB curriculum of the Faculty of Law, University of Colombo way back in 1991. Today, human rights education is a critically important element in legal curricula. Similarly, she played a key role in the establishment of the Department of Law at the University of Peradeniya (2009) and in the formulation of a unique inter-disciplinary curriculum for its LL.B. Degree Program with a focus on social justice. The inter-disciplinary curriculum has garnered much attention in legal education circles for its novel approach and is inspiring reform elsewhere.

She is the recipient of several academic awards including a Senior Fulbright Scholar Award with a placement at the Harvard Human Rights Center (1997-98) and the Ingram Fellowship awarded by the University of New South Wales, Australia(2007). She has taught at the UN University in Tokyo; Faculty of Law, Hong Kong University; and the National Law University Delhi. She has also served on editorial boards of international and national

academic law journals including the prestigious Netherlands Quarterly on Human Rights and currently serves on the Editorial Board of the Asia-Pacific Journal on International Humanitarian Law.

The main focus of her research is the intersection between international and constitutional protection of human rights. Her work has been published in academic journals such as the Harvard Human Rights Journal and as chapters in edited volumes published by the Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press.

She served as the Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (October, 2015 – August, 2020). Under her stewardship the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka was promoted to 'A' status accreditation by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) in 2018. Previously, she served as a member of the Human Rights Commission (2003-2006) and the Law Commission of Sri Lanka (2004-2009).

Her human rights advocacy work has seen her actively involved in local and regional civil society organizations as well as appointments to UN human rights bodies. She was appointed as member (2008-2013) and Chair (2012) of the Board of Trustees of the UN Voluntary Fund for Technical Cooperation in the field of human rights (VFTC) and was also elected as Alternate Member of Sri Lanka to the UN Sub-Commission on the Protection of Human Rights (1998-2001). She was elected by the UN Sub-Commission as Co-Special Rapporteur (with Prof. Joe Oloka-Onyango of Uganda) on the theme 'Globalization and its Impact on the Full Enjoyment of Human Rights', resulting in an often-cited pioneering study on the theme (1999-2001).

Dr. Udagama has served as a election monitor for several decades with PAFFREL and MFFE.

Substantive or Procedural Democracy? The Dilemma Facing the Sri Lankan Voter

I am deeply honoured by the invitation extended to me to deliver the keynote address at the 2025 Annual Research Symposium of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka and to contribute a brief article encapsulating my thoughts on this year's theme and related matters.

First, I wish to congratulate the Commission on the initiative taken to conduct annual research symposia on themes of significance to the mandate of the Commission. Providing a public forum to articulate and deliberate on novel thoughts and ideas on the various features of the electoral process surely contributes to the further strengthening of political discourse in the country. I believe that the contributing researchers of the symposium will be offering multi-dimensional viewpoints based on different disciplines and are not limited to the usually anticipated contributions from legal and political science standpoints. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives are absolutely essential to meaningfully enrich any field of activity. I hope there are contributions from scientists as well given that modern electoral processes around the world are interconnected especially with digital technology. I note that the prescribed tracks for the symposium cover a wide range of fields including technological dimensions. I wholeheartedly agree with that approach. However, fundamental ideas and principles on democracy must inform all efforts.

At a popular level we recognize that democratic government is of the people, by the people and for the people echoing the sentiments expressed by President Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address in 1863. The nature of the electoral system whether it ensures fair representation and is free and fair-- determines whether a system of governance is 'of the people'. Enhancing voter participation and ensuring integrity of the electoral process in Sri Lanka, this year's theme, lies at the heart of the Commission's work and indeed are foundational to sustaining democracy in Sri Lanka and, for that matter, any country. Why does one say that? It is because, as we know, a sound electoral system is critically important to forge the all-important social contracts through which we establish representative government. When the very establishment of the social contract between the people and their political representatives is skewed due to corruption, special interest groups, violence and discriminatory policies etc., political stability in a country cannot be anticipated as we in Sri Lanka know all too well. A social contract entered into through violence will only beget more violence.

However, due to efforts of the Election Commission and especially of election monitors and other civil society groups over the past several decades, there now appears to be consensus on ensuring inclusive electoral processes that would provide opportunities to groups such as migrant workers and other citizens who live overseas, remand prisoners and persons with disabilities and the elderly who were excluded from the right to participate in elections. What is left is to decide how such improvements are to be implemented. Similarly, electoral violence has abated considerably over the decades with travesties such as political killings, snatching of ballot boxes and post-election violence becoming rare occurrences. The last presidential election and the General Election in 2025 are testimony to that remarkable achievement. Those who were at the forefront of the anti-election violence campaigns over the years deserve citizen accolades.

It is also the case that despite the challenges posed by electoral violence and other transgressions in the past, Sri Lankans have consistently been keen voters. The voter turnout in Sri Lanka on average is considered to be approximately 75%. We have certainly been good voters.

However, as I have always maintained, the major political challenge Sri Lanka has faced, and continues to face, is to transform the good Sri Lankan voter into an equally good citizen. We vote enthusiastically, but the issue remains whether we have a strong sense of citizenship, civic consciousness and political sensibilities to engage with governance and make wise political choices to re-democratize a broken political system. Given that we have been voting in governments since 1931(i.e. for 94 years !) could we be satisfied with the political choices we have made? Over the decades, we have experienced authoritarian governance coupled with massive levels of corruption, nepotism and abuse of authority, all perpetrated by elected representatives. Those whose toxic authoritarian, corrupt and divisive tendencies were well known to the voters were also voted in with great enthusiasm. Sri Lanka has paid a massive price for such voter follies. Perhaps that reality finally dawned on the citizenry in 2022 as the economy and a known way of secure life crashed around us due to inept and undemocratic governance. The Aragalaya which sprang up in response, in my opinion, was the most authentic moment of democracy in Sri Lanka in recent memory and remains a turning point in the struggle to re-democratize governance in the country.

What is critically important now is to adopt robust educational interventions to mould the younger generations into strong citizens with a good understanding of the system of governance, mainly its foundational democratic value base, principles and required skills rather than technicalities. Contrary to popular belief, it is that sort of liberal education that will also contribute to a strong economic system and a confident workforce. That effort must be made by the educational authorities of the country and should lay the groundwork for voter education that the Election Commission engages in. Civic education is broader than voter education and must be considered a critically important dimension of formal education from primary school onward. That should be considered as an investment in democracy as a political system and a way of life. Our struggle, as most post-colonial societies experience, is to grapple with the seeming contradictions between inherited neo-feudalistic social and political values and our desire on the other hand for a political system that offers choice, political equality and guarantees human rights and liberties. Thus far, we have clung on to the procedural and structural props of democracy rather than absorb substantive democracy. As new education reforms are in the offing this is an important discussion that Sri Lanka must engage in.

While efforts to democratize the citizenry must be given priority, there are structural issues of importance to achieve electoral justice. They range from reforms to electoral systems (whether FPP or PR or mixed system) equitable delimitation efforts, providing the NOTA option in ballot papers and, more importantly, strengthening internal democracy within political parties. There is much to be discussed and debated and I thank the Election Commission for offering an important platform for citizens to engage in such dialogue. I wish the Annual Research Symposium 2025 all success.

Dr. Nelum Deepika Udagama

Chair Professor of Law (retd)

University of Peradeniya

Promoting Gender Equity in Elections: A Comparative Analysis of Strategies and Impacts on The Population Attitudes in Sri Lanka

Fareena Ruzaik¹, Nuskiya M.H.F²

Sri Lankan women hold only 5.3% of parliamentary seats despite comprising over half of the electorate, highlighting persistent gender inequities in political representation. This study investigates the effectiveness of a 25% statutory quota for women in local government elections, complemented by leadership training programs and media campaigns, in promoting gender equity. The objectives are: (a) to assess the impact of quotas and interventions on increasing women's electoral representation, and (b) to examine shifts in public attitudes toward female political leadership. A quasiexperimental mixedmethods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 200 respondents, stratified by gender, age, and urban/rural location across three districts, with pre and post quota attitudes analyzed using paired t-tests, chisquared tests, and effect size calculations. Qualitative insights were obtained from 20 semistructured interviews with women councillors, party leaders, and advocacy organizations. Official election records were analyzed to document changes in women's representation, providing robust triangulation of results. Findings reveal that women's representation in local councils increased from 2% to 29% ($p < 0.001$, Cohen's d 1.5), public support for women's political participation rose from 45% to 65% ($p = 0.002$, Cramer's V 0.30), and perceptions of women's leadership competence improved from 2.8 to 3.6 on a 5-point scale ($p = 0.0005$, Cohen's d 0.63). Qualitative interviews highlighted persistent barriers, including limited access to key decision making and entrenched gender norms, indicating that numerical gains alone do not ensure substantive empowerment. The study concludes that statutory quotas combined with capacity building and media engagement can significantly improve women's representation and societal attitudes, but structural reforms are needed to translate descriptive representation into meaningful political influence. Recommendations include extending quotas to national elections, embedding gender sensitivity training within political parties, promoting women to leadership positions, and monitoring qualitative participation outcomes. This research is original in providing an evidence based, statistically validated evaluation of gender quota impacts in Sri Lanka, integrating both quantitative and qualitative perspectives to inform policymakers, electoral commissions, and civil society organizations in comparable sociopolitical contexts.

Keywords: Gender equity, Electoral quotas, Women's political representation, Public attitudes, Sri Lanka

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Elections Commission

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