

PAFFREL

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024

REPORT ON POSTAL VOTING

15th September 2024

PEOPLE'S ACTION FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS
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1. Background

Postal voting for the Presidential Election 2024 was concluded by the 12th September 2024. Postal voting is a facility available for those employed in the government sector who are unable to cast their vote at their respective polling stations due to the election duties such as armed forces personnel, officers and employees of the Department of Prisons, Sri Lanka Railways, Sri Lanka Post, Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka Transport Board. Likewise, the postal voting facility is allocated for the officers and employees of Local Government, Provincial Public Service, Public Service or Central Bank of Sri Lanka, principals and teachers of government schools who were expected to deploy on election and related duties. Further, the junior public officials who were designated as assistants of Senior Presiding Officers and the applicants who are not allowed to cast their vote at the polling station allotted to them due to candidacy in some other polling area were allowed for the postal voting.

02 representatives for each candidate, 01 observer from PAFFREL, and 01 observer from Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) were allowed to observe the casting of postal votes in each presiding office. Also, District Returning Officers have deployed Areas Returning Officers and assistants to overlook postal voting.

A total of 736,589 applications for postal voting had been submitted, of which 712,318 had been accepted, while 24,268 applications had been rejected for various reasons, such as incomplete information or failure to meet the eligibility criteria. For the 2024 Presidential Election, Kurunegala District recorded the highest number of postal voters, with a total of 79666, while Mullaitivu District had the lowest, with only 3637 postal voters. Postal Voting was carried out in 4,876 centers, covering all 25 administrative districts.

On September 4th, 2024, Postal voting took place with District Secretariats, Election Offices, and the Police While the state employees, including members of the armed forces, had been held on September 5th and 6th, 2024. For individuals who had been unable to cast their vote on these specified dates, an additional opportunity to vote in person had been provided at their respective District Election Offices on September 11th and 12th, 2024.

2. Potential government's influence on postal voters

However, Two days prior to the start of postal voting, the government declared that public sector workers would be receiving pay increases. Suspicion has been aroused that this conduct is an effort to influence postal voters. Notably, two months earlier, public sector employees had staged protests demanding a salary increase. At that time, the government stated that due to Sri Lanka's economic situation, it was unable to accommodate their demands. However, Two Days before postal voting, the government unexpectedly raised salaries by 24% to 50%, effective from next year (2025). The sudden decision to increase salaries right before postal voting has raised suspicions that the government is directly targeting postal voters.

Additionally after that, opposition political parties also announced plans to significantly increase salaries if they come into power. The announcement regarding salary increases from both the government and opposition had a major impact on the election atmosphere. However, it is difficult to quantify the exact influence these announcements had on voters.

3. Complaints received during the postal voting

During the days of the postal voting, the Complaint Reporting and Mitigation Unit of PAFFREL received several complaints. There are some significant instances among the documented cases. During the period of postal voting, a total of 17 complaints were reported, which included 06 incidents of influencing voters preventing the chance to use the ballot, 03 cases of threatening on voters, 04 cases involving the illegal distribution of leaflets of candidates at polling stations, and 03 case of photographing ballots and sharing them on social media, and 01 case regarding violation of election laws. PAFFREL confirmed 09 complaints while there are 06 complaints are unconfirmed.

On 04th September, one of the Northern Province's politicians was implicated in coercing the voters into not casting their votes. An incident was reported on disseminating the images of moments of casting vote at the police station premises in social media. A distribution of campaign leaflets of one of the candidates of the Presidential Election 2024 before commencing the postal voting at District Secretariat, Kurunegala.

On 05th September, 28 employees at Seethawaka Divisional Secretariat did not receive ballot papers and the Election Commission has stated that the ballot papers were issued. A group of teachers who reached the Zonal Education Office, Wariyapola were diverted. It was reported that specific dates are distributed to schools and mistakenly the dates have been changed. There was a miscommunication on notifying the voting dates. However, in the face of objections raised by the teachers, everyone who returned was given the opportunity to vote. Two voters have been diverted who were reached to vote at the polling station located at Medical Officer of Health Office Walapane. An officer was involved in threatening 30 postal voters (cadet officers) of General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University Sri Lanka and delayed the voting.

On the 06th September, the officer threatened cadet officers to cast their votes in a specific time period, and informed them the cadet officers will be punished if they will not use their votes on said time. The Election Commission notified that an investigation will be conducted. On the 07th September, 02 incidents were reported from Mutur and Mulative on photographing ballots and sharing them on social media. In addition to these incidents, there are cases reported in different areas such as, Avissawella, Kalutara, Battaramulla, Walapane, Weeraketiya, Homagama, and Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia.

4. Postal voting observation

900 postal voting observers were deployed by PAFFREL in all politically sensitive centers such as district secretariats, bus depots, educational offices, military camps and in police stations on the postal voting days as part of PAFFREL's efforts to guarantee a free and peaceful election. The information received from the field observers that in general, postal voting was conducted peacefully. These observers conducted extensive monitoring to assess the fairness of the election from various perspectives. Postal voting observers closely monitored blow key aspects of the voting process:

1. Election preparation
2. Accessibility and neutrality
3. Voting process
4. Election law violations
5. Violence

In the election preparation process, the design of polling stations to protect the confidentiality of casting voting was observed. Among the observed postal voting stations, 99% were well designed to protect the confidentiality of casting voting. This shows a strong effort taken by the related entities to ensure in the postal voting election process.

However, on the same day a person who came as the candidate who is an agent of a candidate, used his mobile phone several times during the postal voting at the Tangalle Land Registry Office. He was told not to use the mobile phone. He also took some photographs of observers of other candidates without their permission and left the polling station. Observers of the National People's Power have complained about this to the Senior Presiding Officer.

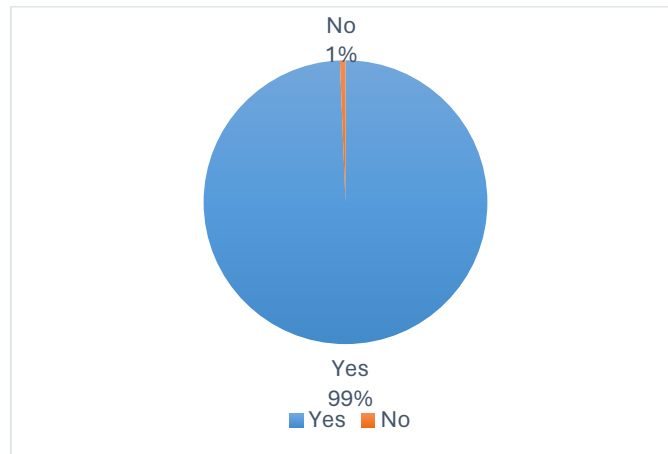


Figure 1 Design of polling stations to protect the confidentiality of casting voting

The right to vote is a fundamental aspect of democracy. The Election Commission, election monitoring organizations and other related authorities together do their best to ensure all-inclusive elections. Especially, the access for the People with Disabilities (PWDs) has been highlighted in this election and observed in polling stations. As observed by PAFFREL, 73% of polling stations have been provided adequate facilities for PWDs disabled individuals while 27% of polling stations lacked such provisions as shown below.

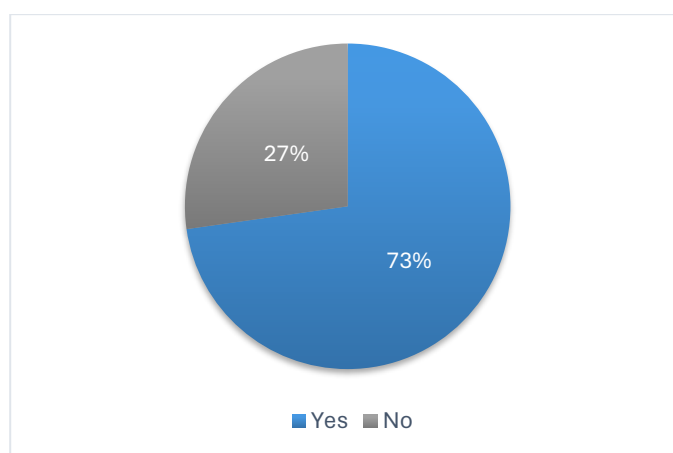


Figure 2 Availability of accessible facilities for voters with disabilities

From the Polling stations where the postal observers deployed by PAFFREL were observed in most of the polling stations, the official presidential candidate list was not displayed. 45% of Polling stations have displayed the official Presidential candidate list.

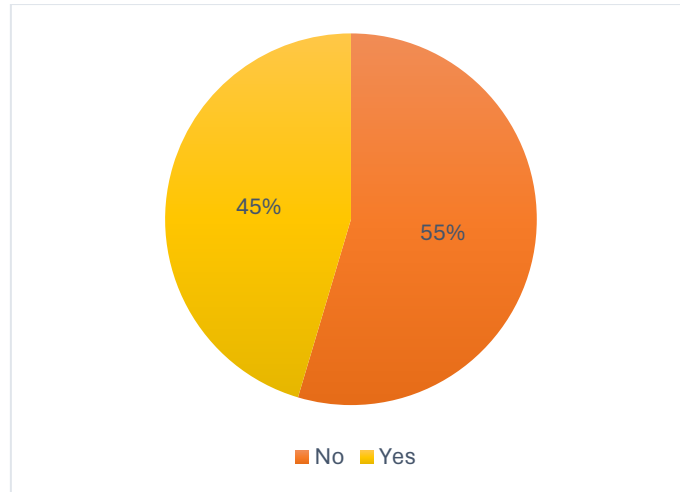


Figure 3 Displaying the list of the Presidential Candidates

The postal voting observers investigated the steps taken to ensure neutrality in polling stations that they visited.

As shown in Figure 4, 99% of the polling stations did not display any photos of politicians. Only 06 incidents have been reported in areas including Batticaloa, Colombo, Gampaha, Matara and Mullaitivu Districts.

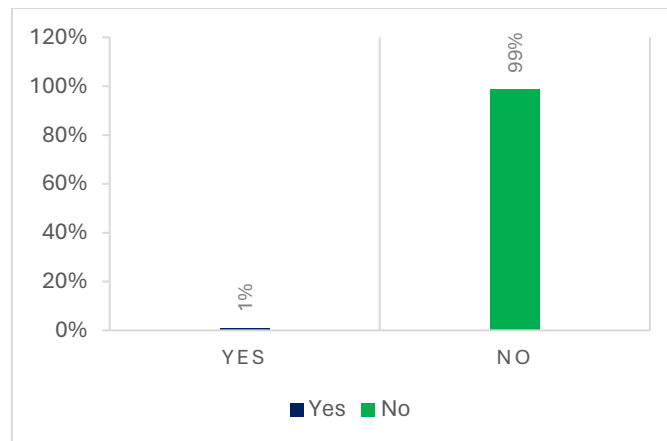


Figure 4 Displaying the photographs of politicians in polling stations

Only 1% of polling stations have displayed photos of politicians near the polling stations reported from the districts such as Batticaloa, Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Matara. 99% of the polling stations were not displaying photos of politicians near the polling stations which is an action has been taken to ensure the neutrality in the election process.

The postal voting observed investigated whether the photographs of Presidential Candidates were exhibited inside and surrounding polling stations they visited. Only 0.6% of polling stations in the districts such as Batticaloa, Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Matara have exhibited the photographs. There were no records from 99.4% of the polling stations in exhibiting the photographs.

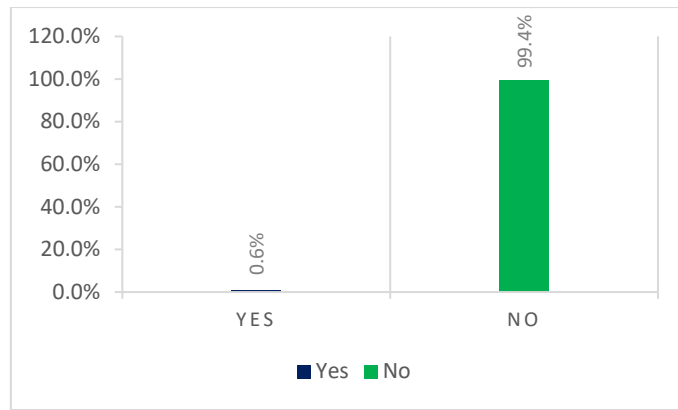


Figure 5 Exhibiting the photographs of Presidential Candidates inside and surrounding polling stations

The postal voting observers looked into the voting process at the polling stations that they visited. They have observed the occasions that the voter’s identity was not verified. Only 1% of polling stations where the identity of voters was not verified. Rest of the 99% of polling stations have properly checked the identity of the voters.

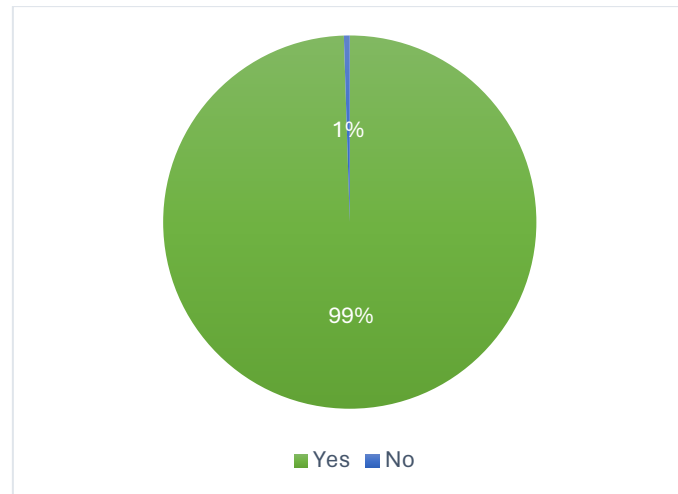


Figure 6 Occasions of not verifying the identity of the voters

Also, the security status of the polling stations of postal voting was also observed. 99% of the polling stations were secured by the armed forces. Only in the polling stations located in the areas including Pelmadulla, Habaraduwa, Tangalle, Thalawa reported that there was no inside or outside protection provided by the security entities. The voting process had several positive points. Observers did not report any more incidents with polling officer’s impartiality. They have maintained a high level of professionalism in polling stations. Only 0.1% of the polling stations in Kandy and Matara reported partial behaviors.

PAFFREL observed the violation of election laws in the postal voting polling stations. As reported by the postal voting almost all the polling stations have managed to secure voters rights in this postal voting. However, only one incident has been reported in a polling station of Jaffna on preventing voting. On the second day of the postal voting, in the Zonal Educational Department of Valikamam, one of the postal voting observers found that the voting list was torn into two pieces when voters received and vote was not processed. Then, they recorded it as voided. This issue was related to how voting materials were handled, which made it difficult for some voters to cast their vote.

The Election Commission emphasized that any photograph, brochure, symbol or signs should not be exhibited at the premises of polling stations in order to promote the candidates and leaflets should not be distributed for this purpose. PAFFREL observed whether such activities were conducted by presidential candidates and supporters in polling stations. Significantly, there were no cases reported as follows:

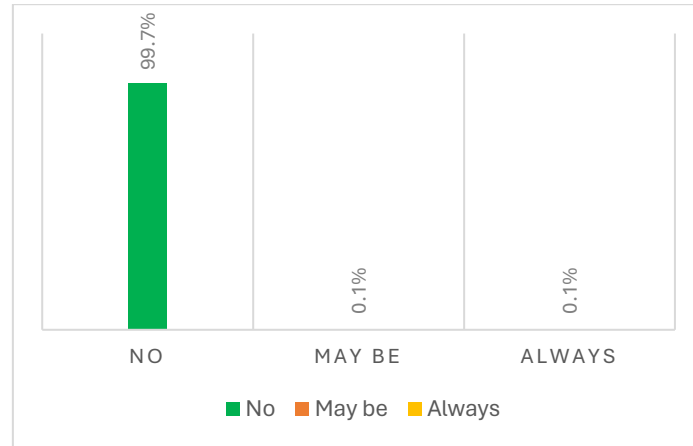


Figure 7 Promoting or bringing promotional materials of presidential candidates

An incident occurred where a voter was taking photographs of their ballot paper. This case was reported by a postal voting observer deployed in Anuradhapura District. Several persons reached the polling station located in Anuradhapura Police Headquarters after commencing the postal voting on 04th September and they started to take photographs of the polling station. It is confirmed that photographs of the polling booths also were taken by them. After a police officer was inquired about this, the persons were told that they have the approval from the presiding officer. However, the persons who were taking photographs were removed from the polling station.

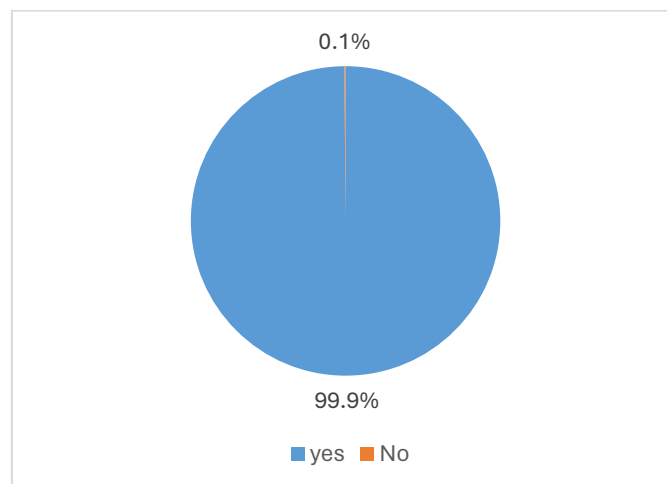


Figure 8 Taking photographs of the ballot papers

Apparently, the Election Commission was taking the right steps to ensure a free and fair election during the allocated days of the postal voting and provided adequate facilities and resources in polling stations. Also, the Department of Police provided adequate security to ensure the proceedings of the polling stations are secured and peaceful. Nevertheless, there haven't been any instances or situations during postal voting that have had a big impact on the election.

Postal voting can be identified as an advanced voting way. Advance voting aimed the people with disabilities and the people who are unable to go to their polling stations due to different religious beliefs and special matters. The postal voting function is exclusively available to government sector officers and employees in Sri Lanka. Many voters who work in the private sector frequently miss out on voting opportunities.

The introduction and implementation of an advance voting system can enable voters who have traditionally been marginalized on Election Day to fully exercise their right to vote. Civil Society Organizations are continuously claimed special polling stations or other advance voting arrangement for the employees of Free Trade Zones, factory workers, migrant citizens, senior citizens, and others with difficulties.

In order to guarantee free and fair elections and establish democracy, PAFFREL recommends to uplift the postal voting system with an advance voting system.

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