

JUNE 2020

[info@democracy-reporting.org](mailto:info@democracy-reporting.org)  
[www.democracy-reporting.org](http://www.democracy-reporting.org)

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# SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE ON FACEBOOK BEFORE AND AFTER SRI LANKA'S 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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# Social Media Monitoring Analysis of the Discourse on Facebook Before and After Sri Lanka's 2019 Presidential Election<sup>1</sup>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To understand the role of disinformation and hate speech on Facebook during the Sri Lankan presidential election on 16 November 2019, DRI analysed 3,362 posts on pages and groups which were posted between 18 September 2019 and 29 November 2019. The posts were analysed two months after the election, from 17 January 2020 to 30 March 2020. These are the main findings:

- Based on the 3,362 posts used for coding, activity on Facebook pages and groups increased by 310% and 226% respectively, between September and November 2019, beginning from when the dates for candidate nomination and the election were announced.
- The pages and groups attracting most attention during this time were groups affiliated with or supporting the two leading candidates, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa.
- Gossip link domains, posting gossip and celebrity news, were widely embedded into posts of groups and pages and often also contained political content which was misleading or false.

- Pages and groups posting during the pre-election silence period included those posting political content in favour of or against candidates, and in some instances violating election regulations.
- Posts with negative sentiments closely interlinked with topics relating to religious and ethnic issues, reconciliation, and governance; this further reflected on posts with negative sentiments directed at protected characteristics<sup>2</sup> including ethnicity, religion and race.
- Discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority were used in support of and against religious communities, mainly in support of the Buddhist community and against the Hindu and Muslim communities.

## 1. BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious country which has a highly competitive and pluralistic political system. It is important to note that the concepts of ethnicity, race and religion often tend to be intertwined and used interchangeably in the context of Sri Lanka.

The country has a robust tradition of electoral democ-

<sup>1</sup> This publication is authored by Ashfath Ifham and Rafael Goldzweig, the publication is part of DRI's project "Preventing electoral violence in Sri Lanka by advancing core electoral reform issues and strengthening the integrity of the public discourse", funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

<sup>2</sup> Protected characteristics include race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability. See here for details: [https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/recentupdates/hate\\_speech/](https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/recentupdates/hate_speech/)

racy that continued to function through three decades of internal armed conflict, which is unusual in conflict afflicted democracies. Following a power struggle which resulted in the October 2018 constitutional crisis and the lethal terrorist attacks which took place on 21 April 2019, Sri Lanka continues to face key challenges to its democratic development.

Events that have caused and exacerbated conflict between communities since the 1950s have often been in the context of electoral politics. Correspondingly, Sri Lanka's 2019 presidential election and its upcoming 2020 parliamentary and provincial council elections bear the risk of electoral violence and renewed conflict and human rights violations. This is a result of social polarisation and a lack of policy and institutional reforms which address citizens' calls for participatory and rights-based governance. In an interim report of the 2019 presidential election, the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) reported 68 incidents of violation of law pertaining to violent incidents of serious nature, 199 incidents of violation of law pertaining to use of state power, property and government offices, and 405 violations of law pertaining to non-violent incidents.<sup>3</sup>

The main fault line since independence has been between the majority Sinhala community and minority communities, particularly the Tamil community in the North and East. Following the end of the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, nationalist and religious extremist groups have shifted their focus to target the Muslim community. Some of the dominating themes in the 2019 presidential election included the island's faltering economy, weakened national security, prevalence of corruption, polarised ethnic and religious discourses, and the notion of a Sinhala Buddhist nation.

Sri Lanka, which is home to a population of 21.3 million people<sup>4</sup>, has 7.13 million active internet users, of which 6.2 million are active social media users and 6 million are

active Facebook users.<sup>5</sup> Exploring usage of other social media platforms, Sri Lanka has 1.1 million Instagram users and 182,500 Twitter users.<sup>6</sup> The gender disparity between male and female Facebook users are stark as 68% of Facebook users in Sri Lanka are male and 32% are female.<sup>7</sup> Considering that Sri Lanka has a significant amount of social media penetration, it is evident that debates surrounding issues concerning civil society are taking place on these platforms. As social media platforms keep evolving, more and more of the public discourse takes place in these spaces. This has subsequently led to the spread of misleading information and hate speech on social media which puts strains on a democracy.

With Facebook being the most widely used social media platform in Sri Lanka, this report focuses on monitoring posts on Facebook pages and groups during the Sri Lankan presidential election period in 2019.

Facebook pages can be of candidates and parties, news media pages, and can also include false pages and other political influencers.<sup>8</sup> Facebook groups on the other hand are spaces for communication between smaller groups of people to share their common interests and express their opinions.<sup>9</sup> Although groups and pages are used for similar purposes, groups take up a more discussion-oriented design while pages resemble more of a news or a campaign outlet.

Pages spreading disinformation through the entire electoral period, including the silence period, are a threat to democratic processes. False information and hate speech on Facebook during this period can result in ten-

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-sri-lanka-january-2019-v01>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-sri-lanka-january-2019-v01>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-sri-lanka-january-2019-v01>

<sup>8</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.7, August 2019, <https://democracy-reporting.org/dri-publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-tips-whats-the-difference-between-a-facebook-page-and-group/324706977130/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.paffrel.com/posters/191227131223Interim%20report%20of%20Presidential%20Election%202019.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sri-lanka-population/>

sions and election law violations on the ground.

An instance of when content on Facebook led to violence in Sri Lanka was during the deadly anti-Muslim riots in March and April 2018 following the local government election held in February 2018, in which Facebook failed to act on content containing hate speech.<sup>10</sup> In reference to its role in helping stoke violence in 2018, on 13 May 2020 Facebook stated “we recognize, and apologize for, the very real human rights impacts that resulted” from the misuse of the platform.<sup>11</sup>

This report examines the trends and discourses on both pages and groups and investigates the main issues which were discussed during the 2019 presidential election period.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) used Crowd-Tangle<sup>12</sup>, a social media monitoring platform owned by Facebook, to extract data and monitor posts by pages and groups between 18 September and 29 November 2019. This timeline comprises the candidate nomination period, campaign period, silence period, election day and the post-election period. CrowdTangle provides data on pages and public groups and does not make available the data of private users or their comments on posts. The data collected for this analysis includes the page or group name, the type of content posted, post URL, the number of reactions, comments and shares a post has received, and the message or link embedded in a post.

### DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH AREA

At a social media monitoring capacity building workshop hosted by DRI, its partners, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) and the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), 10 key issues were identified

as being prevalently discussed on social media during the presidential election period. The issues identified were:

1. Corruption
2. Economy
3. Environment
4. Governance
5. Human rights
6. Media freedom
7. National security
8. Reconciliation and peace
9. Reform
10. Religious and ethnic issues

DRI's searches on CrowdTangle led us to identify another key issue, international involvement, which was also part of the discourse on social media during this time especially in relation to the Millennium Challenge Corporation<sup>13</sup> (MCC) grant and the misleading information surrounding it.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the initial 10 key issues identified, DRI built a lexicon by listing the key words associated with these issues in three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English. The keywords were then used on CrowdTangle for data extraction. Using these keywords DRI was able to recognise the top posts in different issue areas.

### DISTINGUISHING ACTORS

Applying the keywords on CrowdTangle, DRI was also able to map out the categories of actors using the different issues for political advantage. These actors included political actors, traditional and contemporary media platforms, and influencers. Within each of these categories, there were actors with official pages, pages with

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-12/facebook-apologizes-for-role-in-sri-lankan-violence>

<sup>12</sup> CrowdTangle Team (2020), CrowdTangle, Facebook, Menlo Park, California, United States

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/columns/The-Millennium-Challenge-Corporation-grant-to-Sri-Lanka/4-689534>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ceylontoday.lk/news-more/8841>

unclear affiliation and false pages.<sup>15</sup> Campaign pages with no clear affiliation to candidates and false pages are often actors which capitalize on political events, such as the 2019 presidential election for example.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that pages with unclear affiliation and false pages tend to be deleted and recreated. With the 2019 presidential election being an event of great significance, it is very likely that some of the false and other pages which were active during this period were already taken down by the time DRI analysed the information from social media monitoring for this report in January 2020.

## DATA CLEANING AND MANUAL CODING

Upon extracting the data using CrowdTangle, DRI cleaned the data manually and chose posts for coding based on the number of total interactions on each post. For each of the issues monitored, DRI cleaned and filtered the data to include the 250 posts with the highest number of total interactions for pages, and the top 100 posts for groups. DRI coded and analysed less posts for groups because the data extracted from CrowdTangle contained lower amounts of total interactions for posts on groups in comparison to posts by pages. Overall, DRI coded 2,362 posts for pages and 1,000 posts for groups after cleaning and filtering through an original set of 19,591 posts extracted from CrowdTangle for pages and 38,389 posts for groups.

The process of manual coding (non-programming) included a team of six coders who read the qualitative data on posts and manually assigned them a code

against different categories.<sup>17</sup> Manual coders analysed the content according to variables such as the type of message, sentiment towards the candidate and the overall sentiment of a post.

The manual coding showed that the posts on pages and groups mainly discussed the topic of governance, with national security and religious and ethnic issues also being widely discussed (figure 1).

Figure 1: coded data of topics most discussed in posts on pages and groups



## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF ANALYSIS

For this study, 3,362 posts from pages and groups were coded and analysed.

The posts were analysed to identify the following issues:

- Which topics dominated the public discourse during the presidential election in the time period monitored and how are different actors framing these topics?
- Which actors dominated the public discourse during this time and what type of messaging did they use?
- Which posts had mostly negative sentiments and what topics did they associate most with? Which protected characteristics did posts with negative sentiments target?
- Were discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority used for campaigning?

<sup>15</sup> Pages with unclear affiliation include pages which are not verified and lack transparency information, they tend to be highly biased but also display authentic behaviour. False pages include pages which have constant name changes, date of creation close to elections, coordinated and/ or inauthentic behaviour, Read more at: Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 2019, Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections, p.36, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)

<sup>16</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.32, August 2019, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)

<sup>17</sup> Refer to codebook in annex 3 for details on the different categories

DRI conducted two analyses of the data. The first analysis identified trends and patterns of different pages and groups during the entire monitoring period. This included identifying posting frequencies, junk domains (gossip domains) which share misleading information, and pages and groups posting during the silence period (14 and 15 November 2019).

The second data analysis was of the coded data. Using the coded data set DRI was able to calculate the total posts classified according to the categories and evaluate how different categories interrelate with each other to present hate speech.

The following sections will discuss the analysed data. More methodological notes can be found in Annex 1.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 KEY FINDINGS FROM INITIAL EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

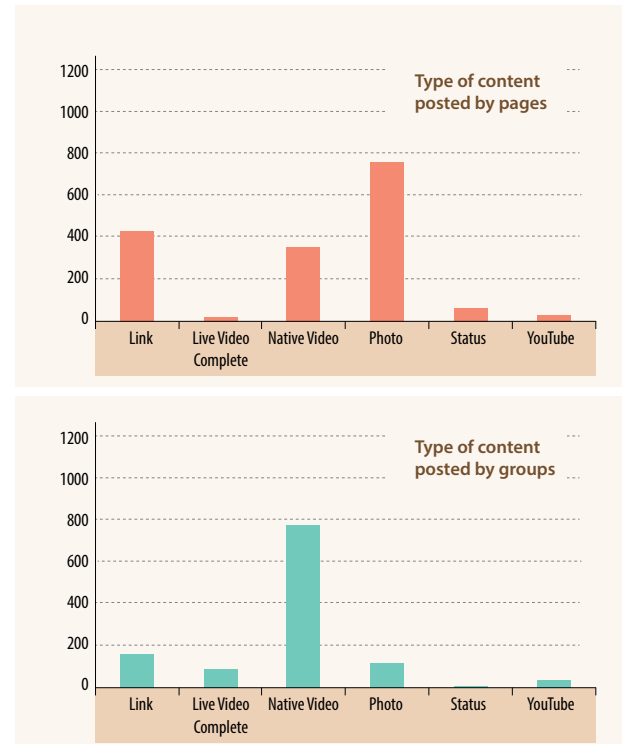
The purpose of monitoring pages and groups for this analysis is to highlight the similarities and the differences between both ways of transmitting information on Facebook. While CrowdTangle only picks up posts shared by the page itself for pages, for groups CrowdTangle picks up posts posted by individual members of the group (which is essentially the function of a group). Monitoring pages and groups gives an understanding of the differences in discourses and the type of disinformation and hate speech shared between them.

#### Type of content posted: a prevalence of visual content in posts

An initial analysis of the data used for coding shows that the type of content posted by groups and pages are predominantly posts with photos, links and videos. Visual methods of transmitting information on Facebook requires special attention because information production in the present day is very different from the past

and users tend to consume it with less depth and understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 2: type of content most posted by pages and groups



Visual methods of transmitting information are popular for sharing misinformation and disinformation because it is more complex to monitor them as they manifest in different formats.<sup>19</sup> Despite well-known constraints in monitoring the information embedded in photos and videos, CrowdTangle released an image search tool, based on optical character recognition (OCR), on 24 March 2020 in the wake of false information campaigns during the novel COVID-19 crisis.

#### Increase in number of posts following the announcement of the election date

The exploratory analysis identified that the number of posts discussing electoral related matters posted by

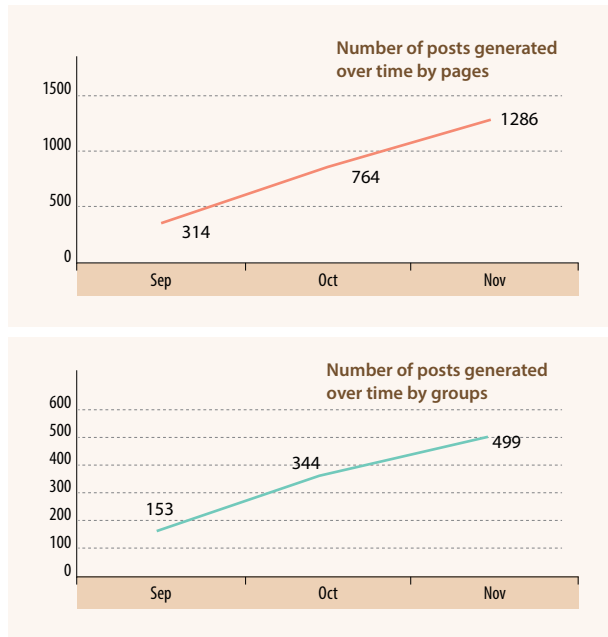
<sup>18</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.10, August 2019, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)

<sup>19</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.43, August 2019, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)



pages and on groups constantly increased between September and November 2019.

Figure 3: Increase in the number of posts on pages and groups between September and November 2019



On 18 September 2019, the Department of Government Printing in Sri Lanka, in consultation with the election commission of Sri Lanka, released a special gazette which set 7 October 2019 as the date of nominations for presidential candidates and 16 November 2019 as the presidential election date.<sup>20</sup> This announcement increased the number of posts on pages and groups at a constant rate, as indicated in figure 3.

The increase in the number of posts following the declaration of the nomination and election date is not a new phenomenon; announcements such as these prompt the creation of new pages and groups and increases the intensity of content shared.<sup>21</sup>

### Pages and groups shaping the discourse

From the 3,362 posts of the data set used for coding we identified pages and groups dominating the discussion on Facebook by posting most frequently during the period monitor

<sup>20</sup> [http://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2019/9/2141-25\\_E.pdf](http://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2019/9/2141-25_E.pdf) , <http://documents.gov.lk/en/exgazette.php>

<sup>21</sup> Goldzweig et al., 'Social Media Monitoring During Elections: Cases and Best Practice to Inform Electoral Observation Missions', p.38, May 2019, <https://democracy-reporting.org/social-media-monitoring-elections/>

Figure 4: posting frequency of pages and groups (listing the top 20)

Posting frequency of the PAGES posting the top posts for the 10 monitored topics, between 18.09.2019 and 29.11.2019	
Group Name	Posting frequency
Ada Derana Sinhala	73
Newsfirst.lk	57
Colombo Today - අද කොළඹ	53
Azzam Ameen	50
Neth FM	44
Ranjan Ramanayake	41
Sampath Athukorala Official Page - සම්පත් අතුකෝරල	37
virakesari.lk	36
Hiru News	34
Protect Wilpattu - විල්පත්තුව සුරකිමු	30
Madawala News	29
Newshub.lk	28
SPG 2020 Media Unit	26
ජන සිංහ රාජ්‍ය පොලිසි - Jana Satanata Pana Powamu	24
තම්බපණ්ණි - Thambapanni	22
Port City Colombo	22
Back to Mahinda	22
Anura Kumara Disnayake	22
Green Blood (UNP) [Official]	22
Wimal weerawansa	21
Rauff Hakeem	21

Posting frequency of the GROUPS posting the top posts for the 10 monitored topics, between 18.09.2019 and 29.11.2019	
Group Name	Posting frequency
ශ්‍රී ලංකා පොදුජන පෙරමුණේ අපි - Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna Members	43
නෙළුම් පොහොට්ටුව	34
සජිත් සමග SPLANKA	32
Lanka facebook	27
Mahinda Samaga Rata Dinawamu මහින්ද සමග රට දිනවිමු Group	26
මහින්ද ගෝඨා සමග රට පෙරට(mahinda+gota)27	20
Madawala News	20
Gotabaya Rajapaksa - Vision ගෝඨාභය රාජපක්ෂ - දැක්ම	19
ඒකාබද්ධ විපක්ෂය	16
රට ඉල්ලන සැබෑ වෙනස - rata illana sebe wenasa	16
Gotabaya Rajapaksa	14
ගෝඨාභය වෙනුවෙන් සන්සුරුෂ පාර්ලි-මේන්තුවක් හඳුමු	14
අපේ රැහේ APE REHE ( OUR GANG)27	12
Protect Wilpattu - විල්පත්තුව සුරකිමු	12
♥හිරු මන්දාකිණි♥	12
Namal Rajapaksa - The Next Leader	12
සමාජවාදී විකතුව	11
ජනපති කියන්න පොදු ජන පෙරමුණ "මාවනැල්ල" (#SLPPMawanelle)	11
24 Tamil breaking news	11
අලුත් යාලුවෝ (Aluth Yaluwo)27OFFICIAL27	10
Jathika Chinthanaya - ජාතික චින්තනය	10



Figure 4 illustrates the top 20 pages and groups posting most frequently based on the data used for coding. The pages and groups listed are different in nature and function. For example, pages including Ada Derana, Newsfirst.lk and Hiru News are traditional media outlets which are also present on social media, whereas Madawala News is only present on social media. Pages such as Azzam Ameen, Ranjan Ramanayake and Anura Kumara Disanayake are official pages, as they are run by the journalist or politicians themselves.

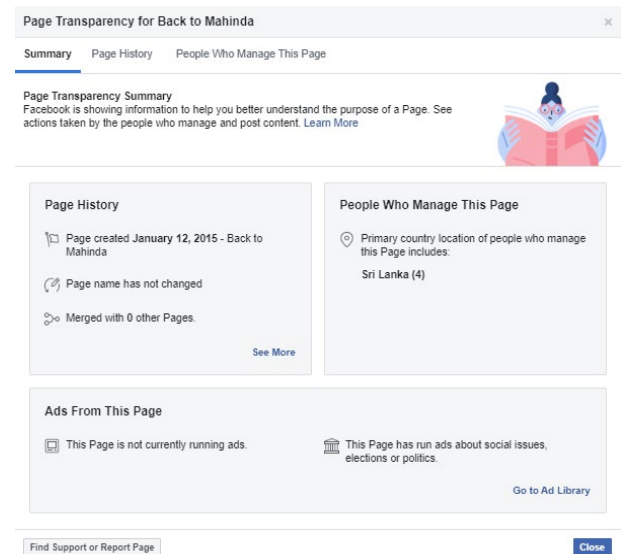
It is evident that pages of traditional media outlets such as Ada Derana and Newsfirst.lk, amongst others, are on top of the list of posting most frequently during this time period. It is important to note that several of these media pages are divided along partisan lines. Some traditional media outlets are funded either by particular politicians in parties or their affiliates, which leads to increased bias in reporting.<sup>22</sup> PAFFREL's interim report revealed that a majority of electronic and print media outlets used their media institutions to promote a chosen candidate during the presidential election.<sup>23</sup>

In figure 4, the groups posting most frequently, with a few exceptions, support either Gotabaya Rajapaksa or Sajith Premadasa (the two leading candidates) and their parties.

### Identifying planned campaigns and pages operated from overseas

Campaign pages such as 'Back to Mahinda', 'Green Blood (UNP) [Official]', 'SPG 2020 Media Unit' can be classified as *fan pages* with unclear affiliation because it is not clear who exactly is behind these pages.

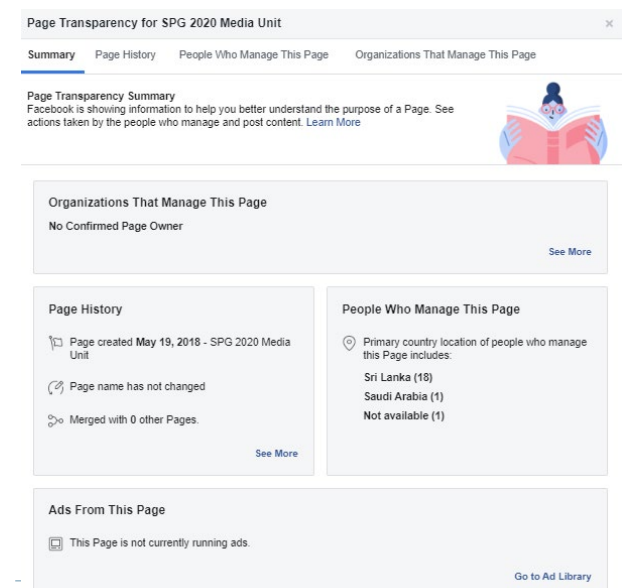
Figure 5: page transparency for the Facebook page 'Back to Mahinda'



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For instance, for the Facebook page 'Back to Mahinda', Facebook's page transparency states that it was created on 12 January 2015, days after Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the 2015 presidential election in which he was seeking a third term. It can be deduced that this page's agenda was to propagate content favourable to Mahinda Rajapaksa and his party following his defeat in the 2015 election.

Figure 6: page transparency for the Facebook page 'SPG 2020 Media Unit'



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<sup>22</sup> <http://sri-lanka.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/> , <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1183958055383252993>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.paffrel.com/posters/191227131223Interim%20report%20of%20Presidential%20Election%202019.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/BacktoMahinda/?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=kC-R&eid=ARCaJuaEsOD40ivCOFwJXXjmrCunnsIGjU-Jn3vb1\\_OgtzyrTszWeuxefcXKU4CbOQTfeZ0tvlaDIWv&hc\\_ref=ARR1xdeoPZ7YLabUzeO8W9gmcBZCic5x4dWDbDIUi-hbV7Wr8JlYUuN0PONDITa5I&fref=nf](https://www.facebook.com/BacktoMahinda/?__tn__=kC-R&eid=ARCaJuaEsOD40ivCOFwJXXjmrCunnsIGjU-Jn3vb1_OgtzyrTszWeuxefcXKU4CbOQTfeZ0tvlaDIWv&hc_ref=ARR1xdeoPZ7YLabUzeO8W9gmcBZCic5x4dWDbDIUi-hbV7Wr8JlYUuN0PONDITa5I&fref=nf)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/spgmediaunit/>

In another page with unclear affiliation, 'SPG 2020 Media Unit' operating since 2018, there are Facebook users managing this page from Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia and an unspecified location. This is concerning because it leaves room for external interference in election campaigning. Facebook's page transparency feature can be used as a tool to understand foreign interference. When a page is run by accounts from multiple locations it is difficult to attribute which location each of the posts originated from.

The examples in figure 5 and 6 present how social media is being used as a tool to shape long term political perceptions.<sup>26</sup> Both pages share political memes, news from junk domains, and misleading and manipulated content for campaigning purposes. Operating for more than a year before the 2019 presidential election, the pages can work towards framing people's judgements for a longer period of time whilst becoming more active during election periods.

### Pages and groups attracting the most attention

From the data used for coding we also looked at pages which received the most traction. This helped inform which actors were most popular during the period monitored.

Figure 7: total interactions for pages and groups (listing the top 20)

Total interactions of the <b>PAGES</b> posting the top posts for the 10 monitored topics, between 18.09.2019 and 29.11.2019	
Page Name	Sum of Total Interactions
Gotabaya Rajapaksa	194223
Ratta - රැට්ටා	111860
තම්බපණ්ණි - Thambapanni	109594
Ada Derana Sinhala	103490
SPG 2020 Media Unit	79240
Azzam Ameen	78809
Sajith Premadasa	74294
Sri Lankan Politics - තිත්ත ඇත්ත	73617
Hiru News	69141
Colombo Today - අද කොළඹ	68127
Anura Kumara Disanayake	58725
Newsfirst.lk	58634

රට වෙනුවෙන් අප	56469
Ranjan Ramanayake	54676
King & Queen	54093
මීරි කලින් දැකල හෑ තමයි	53417
1000 Talk "තවසන් ටෝක්"	52464
Green Blood (UNP) [Official]	52310
ජන සිංහරා පණ පොවුමු-Jana Satanata Pana Powamu	51036
Newshub.lk	46234
ඉරාජී වීරරත්න	45922

Total interactions of the <b>GROUPS</b> posting the top posts for the 10 monitored topics, between 18.09.2019 and 29.11.2019	
Group Name	Sum of Total Interactions
නෙළුම් පොහොට්ටුව	52066
ශ්‍රී ලංකා පොදුජන පෙරමුණේ අපි - Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna Members	44233
ඒකාබද්ධ විපක්ෂය	31305
මහින්ද ගෝඨා සමග රට පෙරට (mahinda+gotabaya)	25939
මහින්ද ගෝඨා සමග රට පෙරට SPLANKA	25404
♥හිරු මන්දාකිණි♥	22995
Gotabaya Rajapaksa - Vision ගෝඨාභය රාජ-පක්ෂ - දැක්ම	21222
Mahinda Samaga Rata Dinawamu මහින්ද සමග රට දිනවුමු Group	19489
Protect Wilpattu - විල්පත්තුව සුරකිමු	18682
Lanka facebook	17279
හිසඳැස් කවි ගී අරණ	15593
Lanka Hints	14724
IRAJ	13418
Ladies Only	10050
Gotabaya Rajapaksa	10033
විශේෂ බලකාය	8861
පොදුජන පෙරමුණ කැගල්ල	8430
රට ඉල්ලන සැබෑ වෙනස - rata illana sebe wenasa	8413
හිතට වදින වැඩ	8236
Namal Rajapaksa - The Next Leader	7246
අපේ රැහේ APE REHE (OUR GANG)	7237

The total interactions of a page or group are the cumulative numbers of likes, comments and shares the posts on each page and group have received based on the data used for this analysis. The total interactions for posts on different pages and groups provide insight as to which actors Facebook users engage with most.

The official page of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the candidate who won the 2019 presidential election, has the highest interaction rate in comparison to the official pages of the two other leading candidates – Sajith Premadasa who is 6<sup>th</sup> on the list and Anura Kumara Disanayake who ranks 11<sup>th</sup>. Deriving from this analysis, the ranks of the three leading candidates in terms of total interactions received on their Facebook posts are reflective of the magnitude

<sup>26</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.32, August 2019, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)

of their social media campaigns.

It is interesting to note that Azzam Ameen, BBC journalist at the time, received a higher number of total interactions than candidates Sajith Premadasa and Anura Kumara Disanayake, and official traditional media pages including Hiru News and Newsfirst.lk.

Figure 8: "This is the worst election in terms of media behaviour" Election Commission Chairman #PresPollSL", post by Azzam Ameen



Figure 8 presents a post by Azzam Ameen which received a high number of interactions according to the data collected from CrowdTangle. The pie charts in the sheet of paper held by the Chairperson of the National Election Commission present traditional media bias during the presidential election.<sup>28</sup> This post had 2,638 likes, 406 'haha' reactions, 93 'wow' reactions, 49 'sad' reactions, 37 'angry' reactions, 31 'love' reactions and 1,854 shares at the time of analysis. The quality and type interactions

on this post suggest considerable support for actions and statements issued by the election commission condemning the breach of election laws and practices.

Figure 9: "The most beautiful call in the world #Mako Mahinda Deshapriya", post by Ratta



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This trend is also evident in the interactions and the rate of engagement for the page 'Ratta'. The page is used to promote apolitical comedy skits produced on YouTube. Nevertheless, the page also has a few posts relating to the election. The posts are mostly in support of the National Election Commission Chairperson and they project his personality, views and bold statements in a favourable light, as presented in figure 9. The posts received positive feedback among users, indicating an overall favourable attitude towards democratic practices, institutions and personalities which influence them.

### Link domains most frequently shared

Another interesting finding from the exploratory analysis are the link domains which were most frequently shared on pages and groups, presented in figure 10. The link domains which were most widely shared allow us to understand what type of information and news helped shape the discourse during the 2019 presidential election. The tables below show that internal content within Facebook was shared most widely on both pages and groups, followed by links from YouTube and colombotoday.com.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/AzzamAmeenSL/posts/2141002542873060>

<sup>28</sup> <http://sri-lanka.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/StudioRatta/posts/2544905078927320>

When monitoring link domains, it is important to discern the quality of these links in terms of credibility and reliability because links containing false information and videos are widely shared on Facebook.<sup>30</sup> In figure 10, domains including [sinhala.lankahitgossip.com](http://sinhala.lankahitgossip.com), [gossip.hirufm.lk](http://gossip.hirufm.lk), [lankamag.com](http://lankamag.com), [tamilcnn.lk](http://tamilcnn.lk), [dadibidiya.com](http://dadibidiya.com), [lankaleadnews.com](http://lankaleadnews.com), [nethnews.lk](http://nethnews.lk) and [mawurata.com](http://mawurata.com), amongst others, post unreliable news items and have sections dedicated for 'gossip' news. Moreover, the domains [hirunews.lk](http://hirunews.lk) and [nethnews.lk](http://nethnews.lk) associate with the broadcasting stations HIRU FM and NETH FM, respectively, and post unverified content. This is illustrated in figures 11 and 12 showing that content from the domains [nethgossip.lk](http://nethgossip.lk) and [gossip.hirufm.lk](http://gossip.hirufm.lk) is widely shared. Except a few domains, including [sinhala.adaderana.lk](http://sinhala.adaderana.lk) and [virasekari.lk](http://virasekari.lk), most news domains presented in figure 10 circulate unreliable information.

Figure 10: link domains which were most frequently shared on pages and groups (listing the top 20)

LINK DOMAINS WHICH WERE MOST FREQUENTLY SHARED BY PAGES	
Domain	Number of time posted
<a href="http://www.facebook.com">www.facebook.com</a>	1606
<a href="http://www.youtube.com">www.youtube.com</a>	55
<a href="http://www.colombotoday.com">www.colombotoday.com</a>	46
<a href="http://nethnews.lk">nethnews.lk</a>	29
<a href="http://newshub.lk">newshub.lk</a>	25
<a href="http://www.virakesari.lk">www.virakesari.lk</a>	23
<a href="http://gossip.hirufm.lk">gossip.hirufm.lk</a>	21
<a href="http://sinhala.adaderana.lk">sinhala.adaderana.lk</a>	21
<a href="http://dlvr.it">dlvr.it</a>	19
<a href="http://nethgossip.lk">nethgossip.lk</a>	19
<a href="http://www.infosrilankanews.info">www.infosrilankanews.info</a>	17
<a href="http://www.tamilcnn.lk">www.tamilcnn.lk</a>	16
<a href="http://www.newsfirst.lk">www.newsfirst.lk</a>	15
<a href="http://sinhala.lankahitgossip.com">sinhala.lankahitgossip.com</a>	15
<a href="http://www.hirunews.lk">www.hirunews.lk</a>	14
<a href="http://wp.me">wp.me</a>	13
<a href="http://bit.ly">bit.ly</a>	12
<a href="http://newstube.lk">newstube.lk</a>	12
<a href="http://www.themorning.lk">www.themorning.lk</a>	12
<a href="http://thecolomboexpress.com">thecolomboexpress.com</a>	11

LINK DOMAINS WHICH WERE MOST FREQUENTLY SHARED BY GROUPS	
Domain	Number of time posted
<a href="http://www.facebook.com">www.facebook.com</a>	745
<a href="http://www.youtube.com">www.youtube.com</a>	38
<a href="http://www.colombotoday.com">www.colombotoday.com</a>	17
<a href="http://dlvr.it">dlvr.it</a>	11
<a href="http://thinaseithy.com">thinaseithy.com</a>	7
<a href="http://www.hirunews.lk">www.hirunews.lk</a>	5
<a href="http://mawurata.com">mawurata.com</a>	4
<a href="http://newshub.lk">newshub.lk</a>	4
<a href="http://www.dadibidiya.com">www.dadibidiya.com</a>	3
<a href="http://www.lankaleadnews.com">www.lankaleadnews.com</a>	3
<a href="http://lankamag.com">lankamag.com</a>	3
<a href="http://www.ceylonnews.lk">www.ceylonnews.lk</a>	3
<a href="http://aanduwa.lk">aanduwa.lk</a>	3
<a href="http://www.slstory.com">www.slstory.com</a>	2
<a href="http://lankasudar.com">lankasudar.com</a>	2
<a href="http://www.vanakkamlondon.com">www.vanakkamlondon.com</a>	2
<a href="http://gossip.hirufm.lk">gossip.hirufm.lk</a>	2
<a href="http://nethnews.lk">nethnews.lk</a>	2
<a href="http://sinhala.adaderana.lk">sinhala.adaderana.lk</a>	2
<a href="http://www.thaarakam.com">www.thaarakam.com</a>	2

### Gossip domains and its association with false information

Links from 'gossip' websites were frequently shared across pages and groups. It was noted by Sanjana Hattotuwa, a senior researcher for the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), that some gossip sites were divided along partisan lines.<sup>31</sup> Hattotuwa noted that prior to Sri Lanka's constitutional crisis in 2018, engagement with Sinhala gossip sites surpassed that of Sinhala news sites by hundreds and thousands of interactions between 19 October 2018 and 26 October 2018.<sup>32</sup>

The post in figure 11 presents content which is shared on the gossip domain 'Hiru Gossip'. The page 'HIRU FM', a popular radio station, has shared content from its associated gossip domain during the campaign period. This post has been re-shared numerous times. On the top left of the image, it is written in red bold Sinhala text "video included".

Linking with the topic of national security, propaganda material around the 2019 Easter bombings were used

<sup>30</sup> Goldzweig & Meyer-Resende, 'Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections', p.42, August 2019, [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/guide-for-civil-society-on-monitoring-social-media-during-elections/)

<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1184344203104407553>

<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1056000796393762816>, <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1056000796393762816>



to deepen the divide between communities and win the support of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists. Public opinion was polarised by using religious and ethnic issues to manipulate discussions. Figure 11 illustrates an example of associating the Easter attacks with political leaders within the Muslim community, who supported the candidate Sajith Premadasa during the election.

Figure 11: post on the page Hiru FM, captioned “සහරාන් හමිමගේ සොහොයුරා බලන්න ගිය ඇමති හකිමි ගැන අදත් හෙළිදරව්වක් - Video - Hiru Gossip”, “A revelation of when Rauff Hakeem visited Zahran Hashim’s relative – Video – Hiru Gossip”



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The headline affiliates Rauff Hakeem, a former Member of Parliament, with Zahran Hashim, a radical cleric, who played a key role in Sri Lanka’s Easter bombings.<sup>34</sup> Rauff Hakeem was among the 10 Muslim government ministers who resigned from their positions in June 2019 following protests by hardline Buddhist monks demanding their removal.<sup>35</sup> It can be argued that this video has been taken out of context by using misleading content to frame the politician’s association with the perpetrator of the Easter attacks.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/HiruFMSriLanka/posts/2987233901290309>

<sup>34</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/26/asia/sri-lanka-suicide-bomber-intl/index.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/03/every-muslim-minister-sri-lanka-resigns-following-crackdown/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.srilankamirror.com/news/16029-hakeem-explains-controversial-video-clip-with-zahran-hashim>

Figure 12: post on the page Neth FM, captioned “‘හෙක්ටයාර් 12ක ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ඉඩම් විදේශිකයන්ට’ MCC ගිවිසුමට එරෙහිව රියර් අද්මිරාල් සරත් විරසේකර නාතිමවරුන් හමුවීමට යයි.!” “Over 12 hectares of Sri Lankan land to foreigners” Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera meets Buddhist monks to speak against the MCC agreement”



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The post in figure 12 indicates another example of how gossip links sensationalise topical issues such as the MCC agreement with the use of false information.<sup>38</sup> During election campaigning, the MCC agreement, which included a transport and a land project, was portrayed as a threat to the island’s sovereignty<sup>39</sup> and national security despite Sri Lanka’s negotiations with the MCC having begun in 2014. Prior to the presidential election, the Information Technology Society of Sri Lanka (ITSSL) informed the National Election Commission Chairperson that they observed an increase in false information relating to the MCC.<sup>40</sup> This included false claims such as American legislation becoming applicable in the proposed economic corridor, the creation of an electric border wall dividing the North and the South, people requiring passes or passports to travel across this elec-

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/nethfm/posts/3060984350586616>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/MCC-Deal-Truth-false-and-opinions/131-177498>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/SLPP-says-GR-will-revisit-MCC-pact/44-688738>

<sup>40</sup> <https://ceylontoday.lk/news-more/8841>

tric border wall, and Sri Lanka becoming a U.S. colony.<sup>41</sup> The ITSSL urged the Election Commission and Facebook's representative for Sri Lanka to investigate this issue as the false information campaign targeting the presidential election was creating panic among the public.

### Pages and groups posting during silence period

Within the data sets used for coding, DRI investigated content which was posted during the campaign silence period on 14 and 15 November 2019. Based on our data of posts during the silence period, 37% of posts on pages and 45% of posts on groups contained political content. For pages and groups, 18 posts supported the candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa, while 7 supported Sajith Premadasa and none supported Anura Kumara Dissanayake. The candidates themselves did not post anything during the silence period. However, the present media environment makes it easy and accessible to have campaign pages working for different candidates whilst not being officially affiliated to them.

Figure 13: pages and groups which were posting during the silence period according to analysed data, (listing the top 20)

PAGES posting during cooling period and the no. of times its posts was shared		
Page Name	Sum of Shares	Posting frequency
Sri Lankan Politics - තිත්ත ඇත්ත	3880	1
UPFA - A Brighter Future	2125	9
Hiru News	1955	2
Ape Media Social Media	1206	4
Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka	936	3
ඉරාජී විරරත්න	896	1
Rishad Bathiudeen	737	2
Mahinda Rajapaksa Information Center	627	1
Live at 7	595	2
Azzam Ameen	579	2
Newsfirst.lk	426	3
Ada Derana Sinhala	391	2
Lol Express - ලොල් එක්ස්ප්‍රස්	378	1
Change for Change	317	1
Buwa ඩු	237	1
Protect Wilpattu - විල්පත්තුව සුරකිමු	188	1
யாழ்ப்பாணம்	144	1
රට වෙනුවෙන් අපි	124	1
Campus Set Eka/කැම්පස් අපේ පිටුව	124	2
Lella Hutan	69	1
Newshub.lk	66	1

Groups posting during cooling period and the no. of times it was shared		
Group Name	Sum of Shares	Posting frequency
Lanka facebook	680	2
නාඩිය	71	2
බබරා / Babara	48	1
සද්‍ය	183	1
රට වෙනුවෙන් අපි	124	1
Mahinda Samaga Rata Dinawamu මහින්ද සමග රට දිනවමු Group	82	1
සිංහල ජෝක් (sinhala joke post)	34	1
Protect Wilpattu - විල්පත්තුව සුරකිමු	187	1
බුකියෙ දකින දේ	18	1
United National Party - The Team UNP	41	1
සජිත් සමග SPLANKA	93	1
එකේ මත් එක රටක්	190	1
සහෝදර සමාගම - Sahodaraya fan base	40	1
ලෙස්බියන් අම්බලම/Facebook Ambalama	296	1
Damith Asanka	56	1
හිතට වදින වැඩි	220	1
Api UNP	460	1
නෙළුම් පොහොට්ටුව	209	1

On 11 November 2019, PAFFREL wrote to Facebook requesting the platform to help control and mitigate campaigning on Facebook during the election silence period so that the public can cast their vote without external influence and propaganda shaping their views.<sup>42</sup> In addition to this, the National Election Commission Chairperson, Mahinda Deshapriya, stated that he was “not satisfied with action taken by the Facebook management” as Facebook had previously agreed with the election commission that it would remove “questionable” content on its platform.<sup>43</sup>

Posting political content on social media during the silence period is a violation of the election regulations in Sri Lanka, and although the Sri Lankan police stated they would be monitoring social media for election propaganda activities during the silence period, no one has been apprehended.<sup>44</sup> Figure 14 illustrates that pages were more active than groups in posting political content during the silence period. This shows that those

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/11/facebook-sri-lanka-election-fake-news>

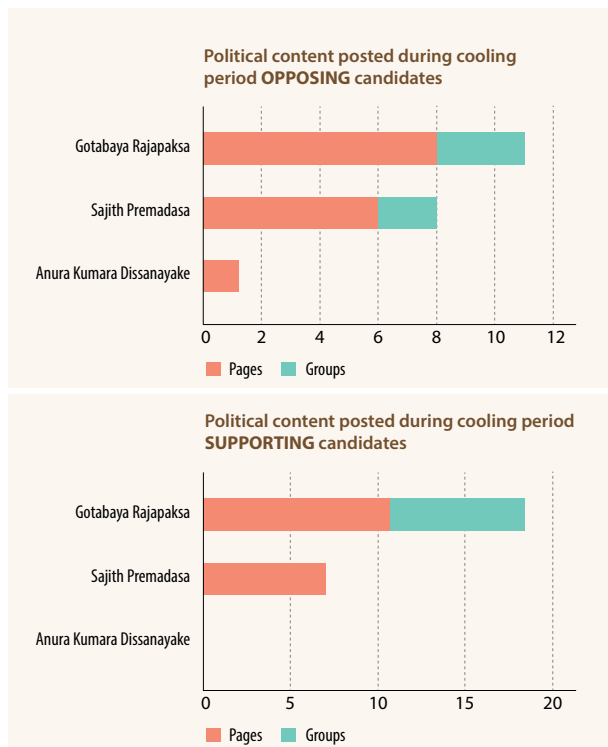
<sup>43</sup> <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/191110/news/cyber-war-hits-campaign-for-presidential-poll-377467.html>

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front\\_page/Police-to-go-tough-on-cooling-period-election-campaigns/238-177794](http://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front_page/Police-to-go-tough-on-cooling-period-election-campaigns/238-177794)

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.sinhalanet.net/mcc-or-foreigners-cannot-be-given-sri-lankas-land-without-rule-of-law-laid-down-by-sri-lankas-supreme-court>

managing the pages were actively campaigning during the time.

Figure 14: Posts published on pages and groups during the silence period containing political content and its political affiliations

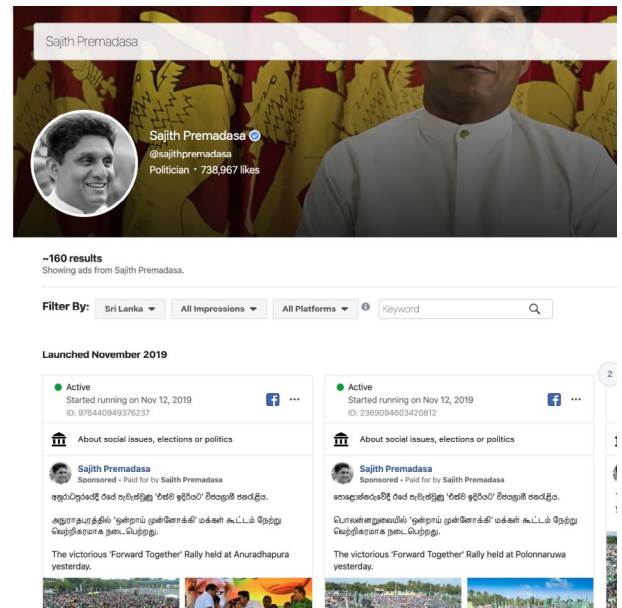


### Advertisements running during the silence period

Sanjana Hattotuwa, who is also a doctoral researcher studying social media in Sri Lanka post-2015, noted that the official page for the candidate Sajith Premadasa was running ads on Facebook and Instagram as of the morning of 14 November 2019.<sup>45</sup> The other two leading candidates, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Anura Kumara Dissanayake stopped running ads on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Figure 15 presents active ads running on the official Facebook page of the candidate Sajith Premadasa during the beginning of the silence period.

Figure 15: screen shot of active ads running on candidate Sajith Premadasa's official page on the morning of 14 November 2019.<sup>46</sup>



### 3.2 KEY FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS OF CODED DATA

In a second analysis, the qualitative data from posts was manually coded against several categories (Annex 3) to capture the spread of hate speech and false information on Facebook. The criteria followed to decide on the coding of the data sets included filtering the data to identify posts which received the most traction on pages and groups during the monitoring period. The manual coding exercise helped understand the type of content which received most interaction on Facebook and the type of engagement these posts received.

#### Sentiment analysis

Evaluating how social media influenced Sri Lanka's political discourse during the presidential election period, this study explores sentiment analysis as a method to understand the nature and inclination of Facebook posts during this time.<sup>47</sup> This sentiment analysis shows whether a post's message is very positive, positive, neutral, negative or very negative in the context of the timeline of events monitored.

<sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1194867998978297857/photo/1>

<sup>47</sup> Please refer to code book attached in the annex 3 to understand how the sentiments were defined for coding

<sup>45</sup> <https://twitter.com/sanjanah/status/1194867998978297857>



Figure 16 presents the overall sentiments of all posts coded across pages and groups.

The sentiment analysis identified that there were a greater number of posts which were negative or very negative in comparison to posts which were positive or very positive. Of all posts coded, 26% were negative, 13.5% very negative, 17.5% positive, 5.5% very positive and 22.5% were coded neutral. Taking a closer look at figure 17, it can be deduced that posts with positive sen-

timents incline towards having received more likes (reactions) whereas posts with negative sentiments received more re-shares. Posts with negative sentiments being widely shared poses a dilemma because it could be that the posts contain hate speech and false information. When shared in multitudes, it makes it difficult to weigh the true extent of the dissemination of hate speech or false news.

Figure 16: sentiments of all posts on pages and groups

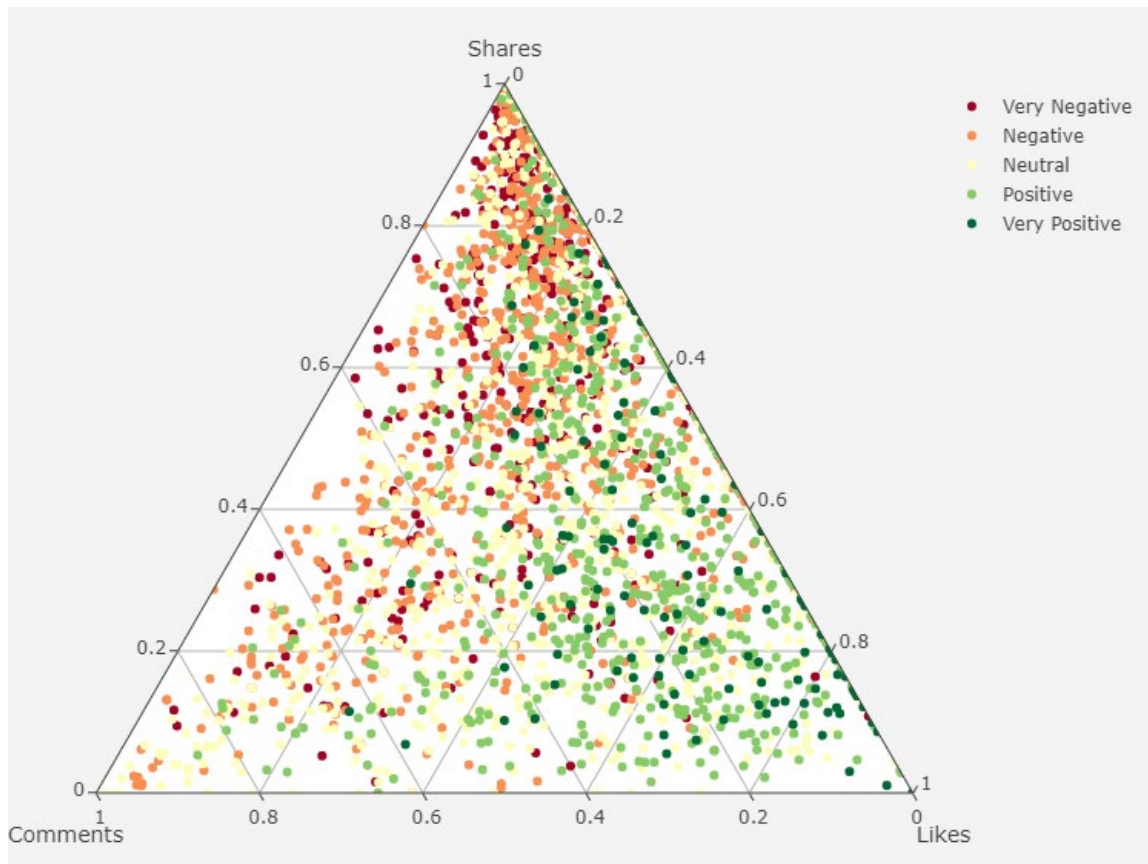
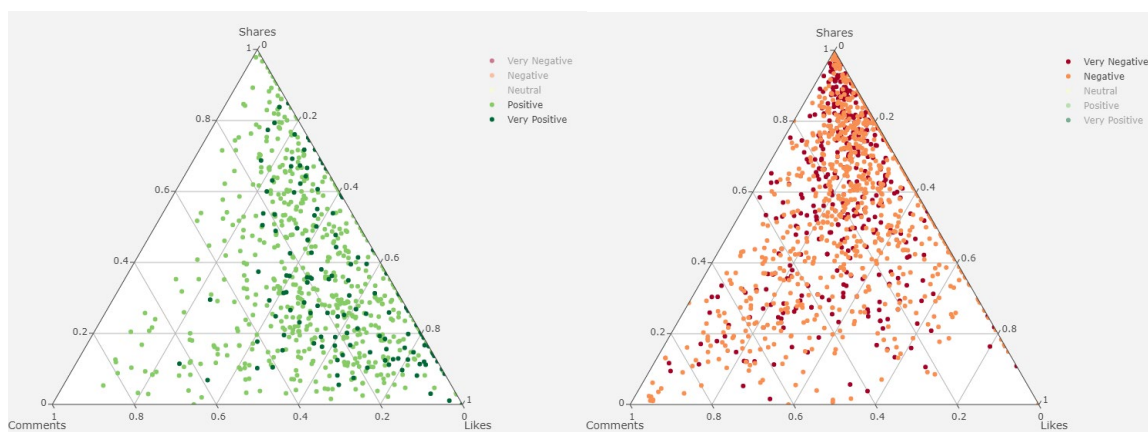


Figure 17: comparison of posts with positive and very positive and negative and very negative sentiments across all posts on pages and groups



Keeping in mind that more posts from pages were coded than from groups, figures 18 and 19 compare posts coded for positive and negative sentiments between pages and groups. The general trend followed by posts with positive and negative sentiments between pages

and groups remain the same; posts with negative sentiments are populated mainly towards the 'shares' and the 'comments' sections in the ternary graph whereas the posts with positive sentiments cluster towards the 'likes' section.

Figure 18: comparison of posts with negative and very negative sentiments between pages and groups

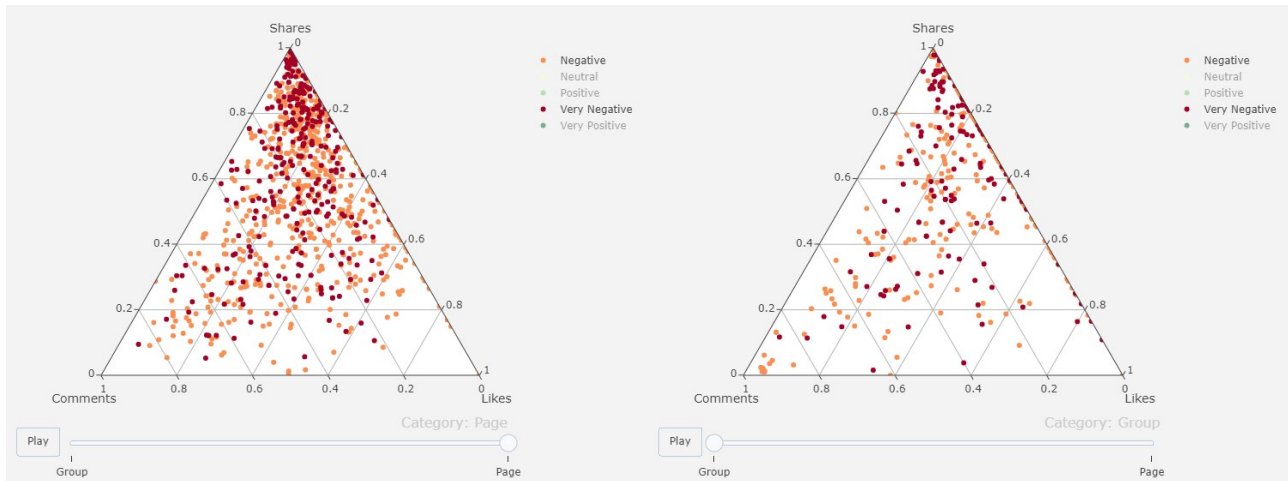
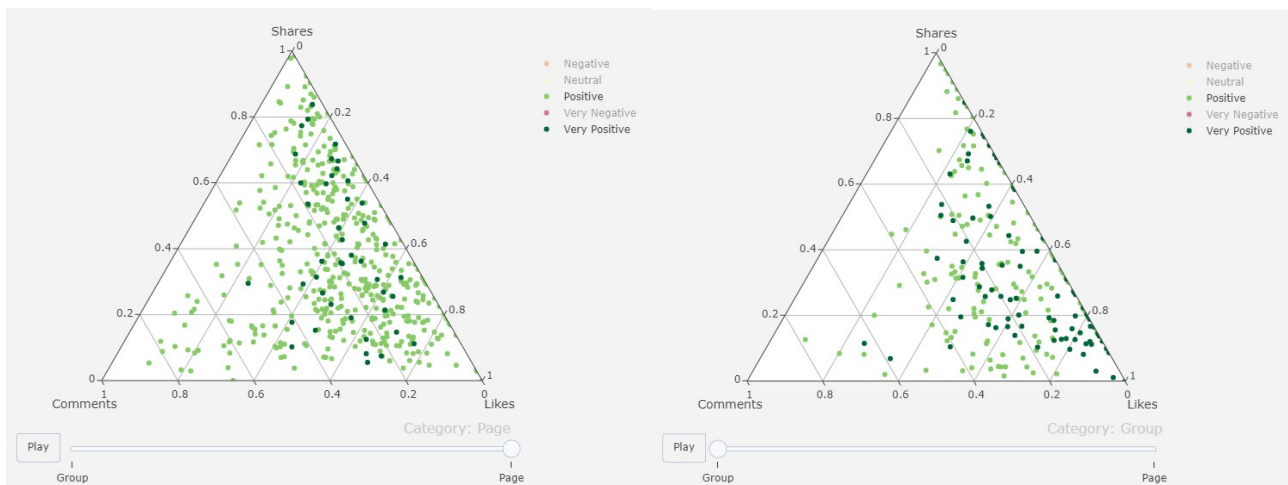


Figure 19: comparison of posts with positive and very positive sentiments between pages and groups



## Negative sentiments associated with posts discussing the topics: governance, reconciliation, and religious and ethnic issues

Posts with negative sentiments tended to use sensitive issues such as reconciliation and peace coupled with issues such as governance to misinform and deepen the divide between communities. Figure 20 is an example of this.

Figure 20: post with negative sentiments which is close to 1 on shares in figure 16. Post by the page The Colombo Express, titled “උතුරු නැගෙනහිර කොපමණ සිංහලයන් පදිංචි වුවත් අයිතියක් නෑ - අයිතිය දෙමළ ජනතාවට පමණයි”, “No matter how many Sinhalese are residing in the North and East, the right is only for the Tamil people”



Presented on the left of the image in figure 20 is the former northern province Governor C.V. Vigneswaran. Vigneswaran endorsed Sajith Premadasa's candidacy in the 2019 election,<sup>49</sup> and was vocal on the rights of the Tamil people in the North and East during the election period. In an interview conducted by DailyFT following the presidential election, Vigneswaran states, “The Tamils in the north and east are after self-dignity and self-preservation. They want self-government. They want to be self-dependent and would like to make themselves self-sufficient. Hope His Excellency would realise

these matters as time goes”.<sup>50</sup> Some presidential candidates used the statements made by Vigneswaran in their campaign to win votes from communities opposing the notion of self-governance in the North and East of Sri Lanka. This rhetoric further divides communities working towards reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka.

The sentiment analysis also identified posts with negative sentiments polarising the public debate by using images, links and captions with false connections and false context. Figure 21 is an example of this.

Figure 21: post with very negative sentiments which is close to 1 on shares in figure 16. Posted by the page Colombo Today - අද කොළඹ, titled “අල්ලගන්න වගේ තුන් ගුණයක් ආයුධ හිස්වුල්ලා ළඟ හිංදු සම්මේලනය හෙළිකරයි”, “Hizbullah has three times as many weapons than what was seized. Hindu Conference reveals”



M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, former Governor of the eastern province, was an independent candidate in the 2019 presidential election. The statement in figure 21 was disseminated by the All Ceylon Hindu Federation, a close ally of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Senawa (BBS),<sup>52</sup> which together have instigated campaigns against Christian and Muslim groups. Allegations which were neither proven nor substantiated, were presented against the presidential candidate Hizbullah for having weapons. Relating to the Easter Attacks, the

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/thecolomboexpress/posts/2580134345380008>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/09/28/c-v-vigneswarans-take-on-unp-presidential-candidate/>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.ft.lk/opinion/Wigneswaran-on-the-Rajapaksas-return-Tamil-rights-and-more/14-692482>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/colombotodayofficial/posts/2462907157312086>

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.dailymirror.lk/51580/bbs-ties-up-with-hindu-congress-for-reconciliation>

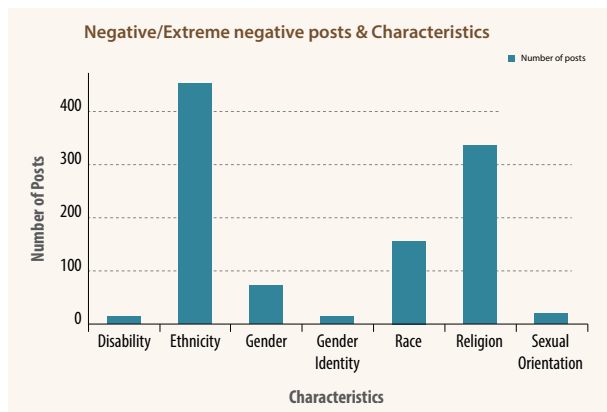
above messaging was used to gain momentum among segments of Sinhala and Tamil communities to place Muslim communities as their common enemy. The negative messaging gained wide traction despite the lack of evidence to substantiate the claim.

### Manifestation of hate speech: posts with negative sentiments targeting Facebook's protected characteristics

Honing on the prevalence of issues associated with reconciliation and peace being used to manipulate public discourse, figures 22 and 23 present how posts which were coded for negative and very negative sentiments were also coded against several protected characteristics.

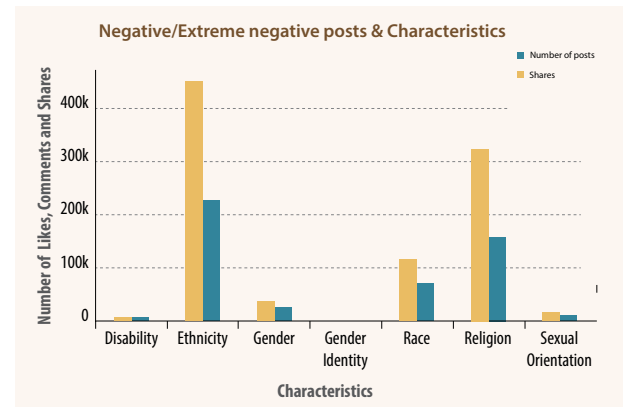
Facebook's community standards define hate speech as a "direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability".<sup>53</sup>

Figure 22: number of posts with negative/very negative sentiments targeting protected characteristics



Posts with negative and very negative content associated most with protected characteristics of ethnicity, religion and race. It is important to note that the three characteristics — ethnicity, religion and race — closely intertwine and correlate to each other in the Sri Lankan political and social context. Negative content discussing these characteristics can manipulate the public opinion of different communities, as illustrated in various examples in this analysis.

Figure 23: number of shares and likes of posts with negative/very negative sentiments targeting protected characteristics



The number of posts with negative/very negative sentiments coded for the protected characteristics is high. Figure 23 presents how negative/very negative posts targeting protected characteristics were shared more often than the number of likes/reactions it received. This is concerning because the more shares such content receive, the greater number of users would be exposed to them.

An example of how both protected characteristics of religion and ethnicity were used in posts with negative sentiments is presented in figure 24. The statement made in the post is an active call for action, calling for the removal of temples in Vavuniya, the northern province, which is mostly populated by Tamil speaking and Hindu communities.

<sup>53</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/recentupdates/hate\\_speech/](https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/recentupdates/hate_speech/)



Figure 24: post with negative sentiments focusing on the protected characteristics of religion and race. Post on the group ඉතිරි මන්දාකි, captioned “උතුරේ පන්සල් ඉවත් කරනවානම් වවුනියාවෙන් මෙහාට ඇති සියලුම කෝවිල් වහාම ඉවත් කර යුතුය මේ සිංහල බෞද්ධ රටේ අපි නිවටයන් නොවෙමු”, “If Buddhist temples are to be removed from the North, all Hindu temples down to Vavuniya should be removed immediately. We are not fools in this Sinhala Buddhist country”



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The call for the removal of Hindu or Buddhist temples in the North and the East of Sri Lanka is not new. They are part of systemic campaigning to further deepen the divide between communities within these regions and between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. One specific dispute about Buddhist temples in the North, which was dominating the news cycle in the run up to the presidential election, was the one about the Hindu Neeraavi Pillaiyar Temple in Chemmalai, Mullaitivu, which had become a site of controversy.<sup>55</sup> The leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) stated that a Buddhist temple named Gurukande Viharaya had been illegally constructed on the Neeraavi Pillaiyar Temple site when no civilian was permitted to enter the area between 2004 and 2009 (prior to the end of the civil war).<sup>56</sup> In late September 2019, the body of the chief priest of the Buddhist temple was cremated in these premises despite a court order prohibiting the cremation in these premises.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/652395014954463/permalink/1215451991982093>

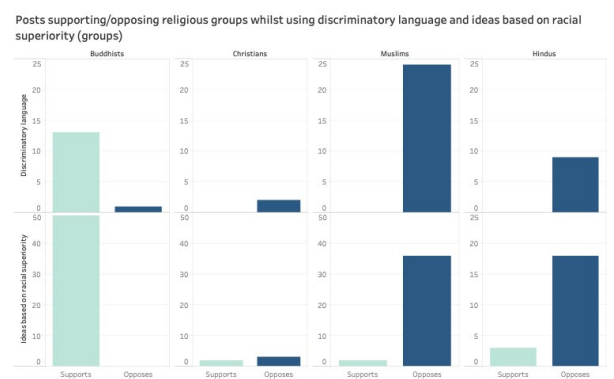
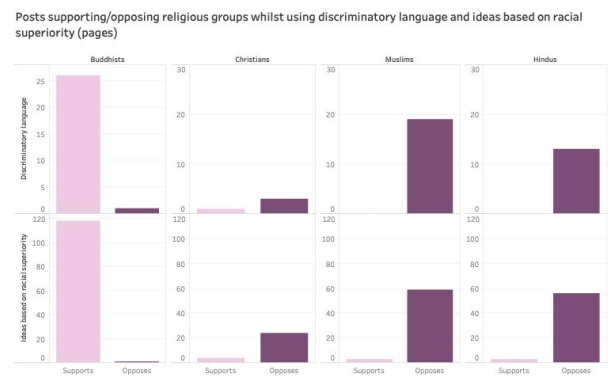
<sup>55</sup> [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=211830](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=211830)

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.dailynews.lk/2019/10/09/political/199341/parliament>

## The role of discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority<sup>57</sup> in posts supporting or opposing religious groups

The coded data also revealed how posts with discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority were used for and against different religious groups during the election period. The findings in figure 25 reveal how posts are used to further split up Sri Lanka's religious communities. The main takeaways from figure 25 are that discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority were used in support of the Buddhist community, while being used in opposition to other religious communities, mainly Muslim and Hindu communities. The example in figure 24 shows how such ideas are disseminated.

Figure 25: posts supporting or opposing religious groups on Facebook pages and groups whilst utilising discriminatory language and idea based on racial superiority



<sup>57</sup> The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), Article 4(a) prohibits dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or racial hatred. Sri Lanka has signed and ratified the convention. However, this specific article is not reflected in Sri Lanka's legislation; the Sri Lankan parliament needs to pass new legislation for it to be binding.

Figure 26 presents discriminatory language used against certain segments of Sri Lanka's Tamil community. The word 'Kallathoni' means 'Tamil illegal immigrants by boat' and is a derogatory term used to discriminate and encourage discrimination against a group of people based on their ethnicity and national origin.

Figure 26: post in the group නෙළුම් පොතොට්ටුව, captioned "ඉල්ලීම් 13ට යට වෙලා දෙමළ චන්ද්‍ර ටික ගන්නම් ඒකටත් රතික්කු දාල හුරේ දාන කල්ලතෝනි unip සිංහලයෝ ඉන්නෙ අපේ ගමේ විතරද", "Is it only in our village that you find Kallathoni UNP Sinhalese who light firecrackers and celebrate Tamil votes having given in to their 13 demands?"



## 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified a range of concerning issues present before and after the 2019 presidential election. It focused on analysing social media data from Facebook to extract evidence of hate speech and disinformation. Although the analysis is limited by the lexicon of keywords used, it captures the prevalence of hate speech and misleading information and the manipulation of key topics during this time. Its main conclusions include:

- The topic of governance was widely associated with majority communities espousing majoritarianism, whereas narratives relating to national security, reconciliation and peace and religious and ethnic issues were predominantly discussed in the context of the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

- Traditional media outlets (often divided along partisan lines) and other news outlets posted frequently and received a high number of interactions during the timeline monitored; some notable pages include Ada Derana Sinhala, Newsfirst.lk, Colombo Today, Hiru News and Newshub.lk.
- Although traditional media plays a significant role in shaping discourse, this paper has identified that gossip domains play an influential role in spreading politically manipulated narratives disregarding facts on a range of topics, including national security and religious and ethnic issues.
- With gossip domains and pages campaigning during the election period, there is no clear understanding as to who exactly the domains and pages are affiliated with.
- Political content posted on pages affiliated with the top three candidates during the silence period, although the candidates did not post campaign content themselves, was not taken down by moderators up to the time of the analysis.
- Groups and pages posting most frequently and receiving most traction were mainly supporting the two frontrunners in the election: Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa.
- There is a greater proportion of posts coded for negative sentiments (39.5%) in comparison to positive sentiments (23%). Posts with negative sentiments were shared more widely than posts with positive sentiments.
- Protected characteristics, religion and ethnicity, were targeted and widely discussed in posts on pages and groups, possibly leading to further polarisation and estrangement amongst communities.
- Religious and ethnic groups, the Hindu and Muslim communities in particular, were referred to in posts using discriminatory language and ideas based on racial superiority.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this analysis, we offer the following recommendations:

### To the Election Commission:

- » Revise electoral regulations to better account for significant amounts of political campaigning now taking place on social media
- » Develop guidelines on the usage of social media for election campaigning
- » Liaise with Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL), Sri Lanka Police and Facebook to act on existing laws and condemn perpetrators of hate speech leading to communal violence, in line with human rights principles

### To election monitors, including Sri Lanka's Election Commission:

- » Developing capacity for an internal social media tracking team with a robust methodology for tracking well ahead of election periods, and paying a specific focus on the silence period, to ensure disinformation and hate speech are not dominating the discourse on social media-
- » Work alongside fact checking and social media monitoring organisations well ahead of election day to identify pages and groups posting problematic content, and reporting this to Facebook ahead of key election dates

### To Facebook:

- » Recognise and act upon the concerns and findings outlined in this paper
- » Take effective measures to tackle the continuous violations of its community standards by posts targeting protected characteristics and using them to spread dangerous rhetoric and hate speech against communities
- » Hire a tri-lingual team to monitor posts and work with local stakeholders to identify and swiftly take down posts with false information and hate speech rather than relying on auto-

mated translations which miss out on important nuances

- » Provide more transparency tools, specifically in relation to political content being posted during silence periods
- » Share access to publicly available data with researchers and election observation missions to better understand social media discourse during electoral periods

### To Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):

- » Conduct programmes aimed at improving social media literacy (focused on fake news and the importance of verification of information while recognising freedom of speech) for CSO representatives, media personnel, youth, women groups, political candidates, and other groups
- » Using research and analysis, conduct further studies to investigate:
  - The link between unethical reporting by mainstream media outlets and the prevalence of hate speech and disinformation on social media
  - The degree to which online activity reflects real-life tensions and biases, or actively contributes to their proliferation and intensity
- » Strengthen capacity to engage in fact-checking, social media monitoring and analysis through funding, provision of access to digital tools and developing links with social media platforms

### To political parties:

- » Introduce a detailed internal code of conduct on the party's approach to social media conduct (the do's and don'ts), including a disciplinary mechanism for those who breach the code of conduct
- » Conduct mandatory training programmes for party members, particularly candidates, on the consequences of hate speech and disinformation, and the legal obligations associated with it
- » Ensure public statements made by members



online and offline are always verified and accurate

- » Engage with in countering the misperceptions that contribute to hate speech online

#### To media organisations:

- » Adhere to high standards of reporting that meet recognised professional and ethical standards, for instance, the code of ethics adopted by the Sri Lankan Press Institute (SLPI) and Social Media Declaration initiated by Vikalpa Journalism for Citizens
- » Pay specific attention to non-discrimination in reporting in relation to protected characteristics including race, ethnicity, religion and gender
- » Take responsibility to respect society, including women, minorities, and people from all parts of the community and all walks of life, by not contributing to polarising rhetoric

## 6. ANNEXES

### ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

DRI has previously worked on social media monitoring in Sri Lanka (report 1)<sup>58</sup>, Tunisia, Myanmar, Ukraine, Libya and other countries. The methodology developed for this analysis builds on DRI's experience.

Platform studied	Facebook
Timeframe of study	18/09/2019-29/11/2019
Data collected	19,591 posts from pages, 38,389 posts from groups
Criteria used to choose the sample	CrowdTangle's Historical Data function, keywords to identify posts, filtering posts for the country Sri Lanka
Data manually coded	2,362 posts from pages, 1,000 posts from groups
Criteria used to choose coding sample	The 250 posts with the highest number of total interactions for pages, and the top 100 posts for groups were chosen from each of the issues monitored
Software used	CrowdTangle, R

### ANNEX 2: KEYWORDS USED FOR EACH TOPIC

<https://bit.ly/Annex2DRIA1>

### ANNEX 3: CODING CATEGORIES AND CODE BOOK

<https://bit.ly/Annex3DRIA1>

<sup>58</sup> [https://democracy-reporting.org/dri\\_publications/bp-97-social-media-analysis-what-facebook-tells-us-about-social-cohesion-in-sri-lanka/](https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/bp-97-social-media-analysis-what-facebook-tells-us-about-social-cohesion-in-sri-lanka/)

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