

Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey

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Increasing Numbers of Sri Lankans Want to Migrate, especially Youth and Disenchanted Government Voters

*Drivers linked to dissatisfaction with COVID strategy
and economic prospects, but opposition failing to benefit*

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FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES

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About the IHP Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker

The IHP Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) was launched to track public experience and opinion during the recovery from COVID-19. It is run by the Institute for Health Policy (IHP), which is an independent, non-partisan research centre based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The SLOTS lead investigator is Dr Ravi Rannan-Eliya of IHP, who was trained in public opinion polling at Harvard University, and who has conducted numerous opinion surveys over three decades.

SLOTS interviews representative samples of Sri Lankan adults each month by telephone to gather their current views and situation. All interviews include a core set of common questions, with additional rotating sets of other questions that examine issues of topical importance. The survey is made possible by the generous funding support of the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust and others. The survey has an omnibus design, and the Institute welcomes sponsorship to continue the survey, to add new questions, or to undertake tailored analyses of the data. Potential sponsors should contact the Institute for further details.

SLOTS respondents consist of a mix of respondents reached by random digit dialing of mobile numbers, and others coming from a national panel of respondents who have agreed to be re-interviewed, and who were previously recruited using random selection. As with any survey, bias can arise from the sampling design and non-response, which means that respondents are not representative of the underlying population. To adjust for this, unless otherwise noted, all reported estimates and analyses use data that have been weighted to ensure that they are representative of the national adult population. This weighting process uses propensity weighting and iterative proportional fitting (raking) to match the national population according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic ranking, education, sector, and geographical location.

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Increasing Numbers of Sri Lankans Want to Migrate, especially Youth and Disenchanted Government Voters

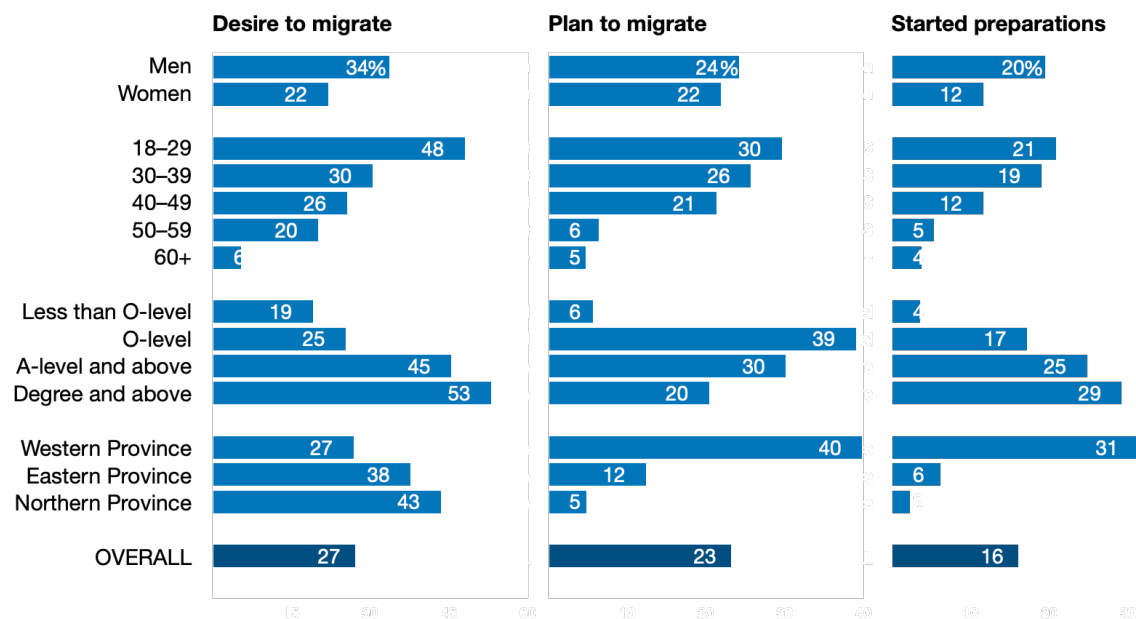
Drivers linked to dissatisfaction with COVID strategy and economic prospects, but opposition failing to benefit

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa recently observed that youth who had voted for the government are now queuing up to obtain passports to go abroad.¹ Sri Lanka has a culture of emigration with millions of Sri Lankan emigrating permanently or leaving temporarily for work in past decades, so the desire to emigrate isn't new, but has the desire to leave grown?

Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) data indicate that 27% of Sri Lankans would like to emigrate if they had the chance, with the young and the educated wanting to migrate the most. Of those who would like to emigrate, 1 in 4 have plans to do so, or 1 in 16 Sri Lankans.

Many Sri Lankans would like to emigrate, and have plans to

% who say they would like to emigrate if they had the chance, and % of those who would like to emigrate who plan to or have started making preparations to



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Survey of 746 adults during Sept. 21–Nov. 14, 2021—a subset of whom indicated a desire to migrate—with margins of error of +/-4% and +/-6% respectively. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Excludes non-responses which were 2% for the initial migration question.

Comparisons with earlier years is difficult as the SLOTS survey is new, but comparison with earlier surveys, which used the same questions,² implies that the number of Sri Lankans who want to migrate has likely doubled since 3–5 years ago, and this can be taken as a reasonable indicator of potential emigration, both legal and undocumented, from Sri Lanka once global travel restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19 are lifted.

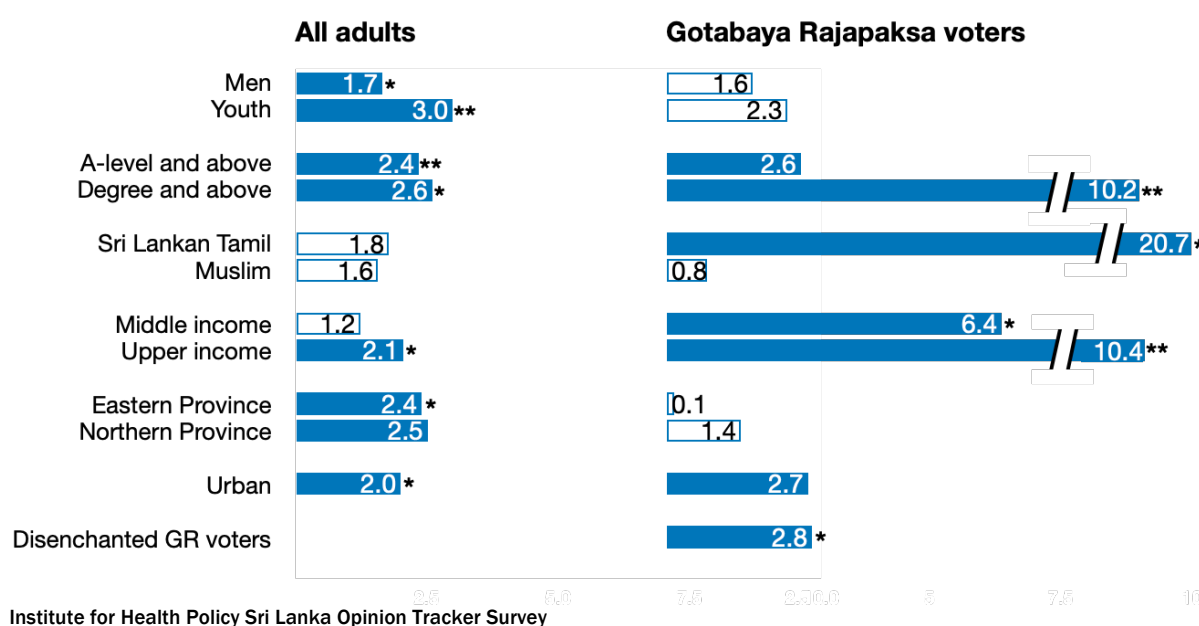
Men are more likely than women to want to emigrate if given the chance, but the groups expressing the greatest desire to emigrate are the youth (ages 18–29 years) and university graduates, around 1

in 2 of whom would like to emigrate if given the chance, and those in the Northern and Eastern provinces, around 2 in 5 of whom would like to emigrate if given the chance. However, it should be noted that in terms of translating the desire to migrate into actual plans, the better-off and more educated are far more likely to have started preparations, demonstrating that personal resources are also a key factor enabling Sri Lankans to migrate.

Since the youth are far more likely to want to emigrate, Prime Minister Rajapaksa’s point that it’s the youth who most want to emigrate does seem to be correct, but it doesn’t follow that this is because of disenchantment with the government. But voters’ disenchantment with how they voted in 2019 and 2020 is sizeable. Of respondents who said that they voted for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019 (or the SLPP and SLFP in 2020), 1 in 3—referred to here as “*disenchanted Gotabaya Rajapaksa voters*”—did not choose President Rajapaksa when asked how they would vote if there was an election today. Some indicated other individuals, but most responded they would not vote or refused to answer, suggesting that much of the disenchantment with the government does not translate yet into support for the opposition. It also suggests that the increased desire to migrate may reflect wider despair about the ability of the political system to offer change for the better.

Better educated and disenchanted Gotabaya Rajapaksa voters more likely to want to migrate

Relative influence of factors on desire to migrate in all adults and those who report voting for Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the 2019 Presidential Election



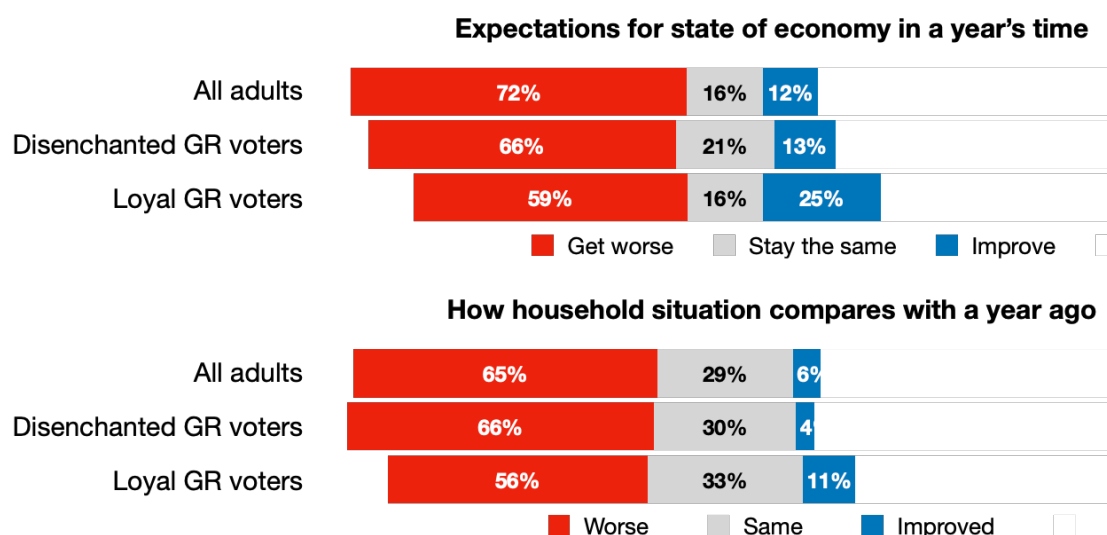
Bars indicate relative likelihood of wanting to migrate compared to everyone else. Estimated effects are derived from a model that controls for gender, age, education, ethnicity, economic level, province, and sector of residence, and so represents the independent influence of each factor. For example, those living in urban areas are 2.0 times as likely as rural people (or 100% more likely) to desire to emigrate after accounting for the other factors. Filled bars are statistically significant at 10%, and hollow bars are not statistically significant, with * indicating significance at 5%, and ** at 1%. Survey of 746 adults during Sept. 21–Nov. 14, 2021, and a subset of 220 who said they voted for Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the 2019 Presidential Election and who answered the migration questions.

When accounting for all factors in combination, only some have sizeable independent influence on the desire to emigrate.³ These include being youth, male, more educated, living in Northern and Eastern provinces and in urban areas, and being economically better-off. But amongst adults who voted for President Rajapaksa, the desire to emigrate is even more strongly influenced by being degree educated and being higher income, whilst disenchanted Rajapaksa voters are three times as

likely as other Rajapaksa voters—referred here as “loyal Gotabaya Rajapaksa voters” — to desire to emigrate. This would confirm Prime Minister Rajapaksa’s second point that disenchantment with the government is pushing former supporters to migrate, but it is the best educated and better-off Rajapaksa voters who are being pushed the most to migrate.

Pessimism about the economy and dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 response appear to be key drivers of disenchantment. Disenchanted Rajapaksa voters assess their own household economic situation not that differently to loyal Rajapaksa voters, with 66% reporting their household situation is worse than a year ago compared with 56% of loyal voters, which is little different to all adults (65%). However, disenchanted Rajapaksa voters are more pessimistic about prospects for the economy, with 66% saying they expect the economy to be worse in a year’s time,⁴ compared with only 59% of loyal voters, although they are less pessimistic than the overall public (72%). And this represents a complete collapse in public optimism from just prior to the 2019 Presidential Election, when 56% of Sri Lankans said that they expected the economy to be better in a year’s time.⁵

Disenchanted Rajapaksa voters more pessimistic about economy than loyal ones



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Excludes non-responses, which were 19% and 3% respectively for the two questions. Survey of 746 adults during Sept. 21–Nov. 14, 2021, and subsets of these who said they voted for Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the 2019 Presidential Election and who answered questions about the economy. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

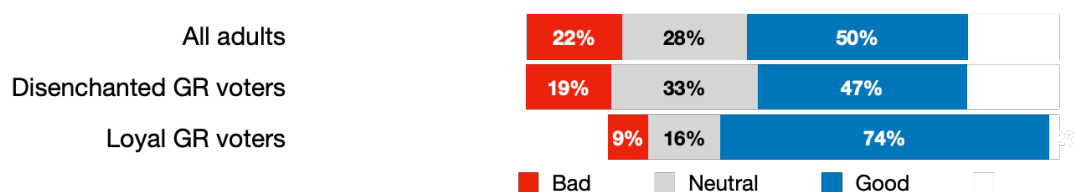
Disenchanted Rajapaksa voters are also less satisfied than loyal voters with the government’s COVID-19 response. When asked how they assess the government’s response, only 47% assess it as good, much less than loyal voters (74%). They also favour much stronger control of COVID-19 in future. When asked how many COVID-19 deaths would be acceptable as the country lifts restrictions, almost half of disenchanted voters (46%) say that less than 100 deaths a year would be acceptable, compared with 77% of loyal voters who are willing to accept more deaths and two-thirds of whom consider 1,000 deaths a year or more to be acceptable.

This preference of disenchanted Rajapaksa voters for greater control of the virus is reflected in other views. A composite index of preference for greater control of the virus, which combines responses to several other questions,⁶ shows that disenchanted voters favour much more control of the virus than loyal voters. On the issue of COVID-19 control, their views are in practice the same as those of the

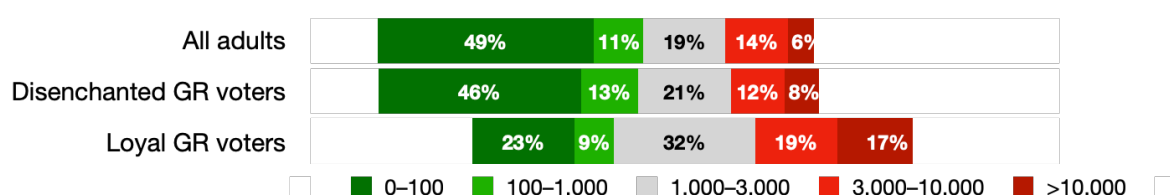
overall public and those who did not vote for President Rajapaksa, implying that the greater official tolerance of COVID-19 spread since early 2021 has cost the government significant support.

Disenchanted Gotabaya Rajapaksa voters more pessimistic about economy, rate the government’s COVID-19 response worse, and are willing to accept fewer COVID-19 deaths than loyal Rajapaksa voters

How they rate government’s COVID-19 response



How many COVID-19 deaths would be acceptable in coming year



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Excludes non-responses, which were 5% and 28% for the two questions respectively. Survey of 746 adults during Sept. 21–Nov. 14, 2021, and subsets of these who said they voted for Gotabaya Rajapaksa at the 2019 Presidential Election and who answered questions about the COVID-19 response. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

In summary, responses in the Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey corroborate Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa’s claim that there is a surge in Sri Lankans, especially the youth, trying to migrate, and they confirm that much of this is driven by disenchantment of voters with the government. They also indicate that much of this dissatisfaction is driven by pessimism about economic prospects and dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 response, in particular a preference for stronger control of COVID-19 versus just “living with the virus”. The only positive aspect of this for the government might be that many disenchanted Rajapaksa voters do not appear to have switched their support to other parties, but this might only be a matter of time. However, from a national perspective the increased pressures to emigrate by the youth and the most educated and affluent in society bodes badly for the country’s future economic and social prospects as global travel restrictions are lifted.

Technical notes

- Remarks at the fifth Anniversary of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), November 2, 2021.
- The SLOTS migration questions are taken from the Gallup World Poll which has been conducted in more than 100 countries, including Sri Lanka, and whose data correspond well with actual migration flows.
- Estimates of the independent influence of different factors on the desire to migrate are derived from logistic regression analysis, with the different factors and demographics included as variables. The likelihood ratio chi-squares for the two models reported are $\chi^2=72.3$, $p<.0001$ and $\chi^2=53.3$, $p<.0001$ respectively.
- Incorporates responses to question that asked about expectations for the economy in five years time if no response available for expectations about next 12 months.
- Findings from the Sri Lanka Health and Ageing Study (SLHAS) Wave 1 survey during Oct.–Nov. 2019.
- Composite index combines responses to questions that ask about: (i) current preferences over controlling the virus versus letting businesses and people work as normal; (ii) whether the August 2021 lockdown should have been started earlier or later; (iii) the trade-off between suppressing the virus or living with it in the next year; and (iv) number of COVID-19 deaths respondents think acceptable in coming year.