

# SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

## WHAT FACEBOOK TELLS US ABOUT SOCIAL COHESION IN SRI LANKA

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has witnessed a year of turbulent political events starting with the Local Government Elections in February 2018, which shifted the political landscape significantly with the newly established Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Sri Lanka People's Front, SLPP), backed by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, securing a landslide victory. The results signalled a loss of popularity of the SLFP-UNP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party – United National Party) coalition government. This was followed in March by outbreaks of sectarian violence against the Muslim population in Ampara and Kandy in the Eastern and Central Provinces. It brought ethno-religious fault-lines in Sri Lankan society to the surface. In October 2018 the unconstitutional dismissal of the Prime Minister and the dissolution of parliament by President Maithripala Sirisena resulted in a constitutional crisis. These major political events demonstrate how fragile Sri Lanka's socio-political cohesion and its democratic transition is 10 years after the end of the civil war. The swing of public opinion against the constitutional machinations, however, suggest a degree of resilience of democratic values in Sri Lankan society.

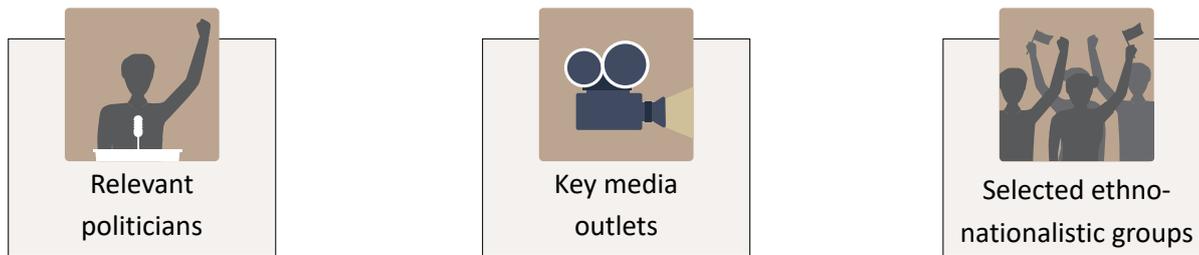
Since its independence, Sri Lanka has seen the rise of various ethno-nationalist factions, often backed by governments, which used ethno-nationalism for political gain. After the end of the war in 2009 the Mahinda Rajapaksa government saw the emergence of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya, which fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments, resulting in violent incidents. The failure of the state to take action against these groups, especially under the Mahinda Rajapaksa government, suggests at a minimum acquiescence by parts of the political elites if not close ties. These groups have also maintained a significant online presence, particularly on Facebook, which is used to mobilize further support through racist, ethno-nationalist messaging. These messages receive significant traction (through likes, shares etc.) particularly among segments of the island's Sinhalese Buddhist majority.

Increasingly, the public discourse and negotiation of what it means to be Sri Lankan and based on which parameters a joint political future shall be created takes place online. Today, about 4.5 million Sri Lankans use Facebook. Twitter has become an important platform for key influencers from government, expert circles, the media and civil society. With the debate increasingly taking place in the virtual space, the spread of misleading information and hate speech has become a significant phenomenon that helps nurture anti-democratic tendencies. This report provides an analysis of both phenomena around three political events which are crystallisation points of public debate and negotiation processes: the local government elections, anti-Muslim violence and the constitutional crisis.

The report provides a baseline to understand misleading information and hate speech in the Sri Lankan virtual space. This baseline will support the development of strategies to counter these phenomena and facilitate Sri Lanka’s democratic transition.

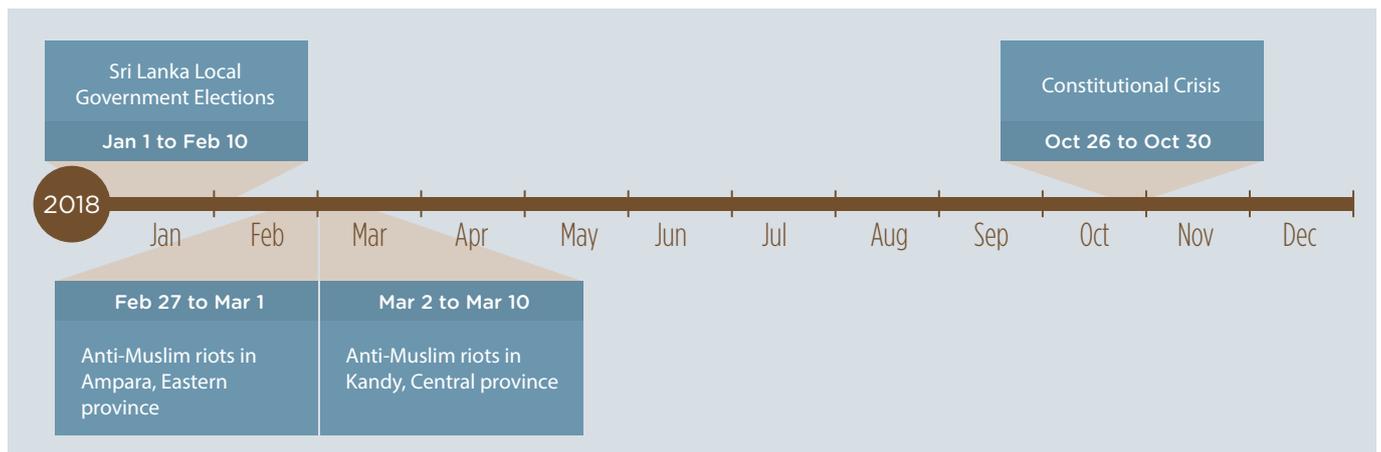
## 2. METHODOLOGY

This report provides data and analysis on the most relevant social media voices in Sri Lanka as captured in the period between 1 January and 31 October 2018 through the Facebook pages of:



The date ranges used to capture the relevant events are the following:

TABLE 1: Events and dates selected to code the comments on politicians’ pages.



The data collected contains i) the posts made by these actors; ii) the comments reacting to them, and iii) the data relative to posts and comments, such as number of likes, shares, reactions. The social media monitoring was done using several approaches including filtering and coding of the data, engagement analysis, sentiment analysis, criticism versus support analysis and hate speech analysis using coding categories.

The original dataset was initially compiled by selecting the 16 most influential politicians’ pages, 32 media pages with more than 10,000 likes on Facebook and 11 pages of ethno-nationalist groups identified to be relevant in previous research.<sup>1</sup>

In an **exploratory analysis** to narrow down the initial dataset, politicians’ pages and the pages of ethno-nationalist groups with a lack of updates were excluded from the dataset as these pages did not provide enough data to be analysed. Using a cut-off number of ten pages both for politicians and ethno-nationalist groups, the initial dataset was determined. In order to narrow down the media pages, those without relevant data were excluded from the analysis as they were beyond the scope of the report, mainly content related to sports, jokes or entertainment.

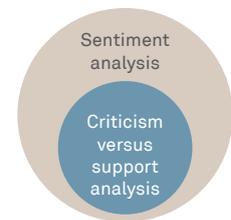
<sup>1</sup> Wijeratne, Y. (2018): “The March 2018 Social Media Block: a 30,000-foot view”, <https://medium.com/@yudhanjaya/sri-lankas-march-2018-social-media-block-analyzed-with-data-b1efd6189009>, viewed 14.02.2019.

Among the remaining media pages, those with at least 10 shares per post were included in the dataset using a ‘share index’. In a second step to further delimit the narrowed down dataset, a filtering process was applied, using key words that relate to the political narratives in Sri Lanka to identify the most relevant comments.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the selected dataset, a more **substantial analysis** of the responses generated by politicians’ and ethno-nationalist groups’ posts (i.e. comments) was conducted using the method of coding. Four Sri Lanka-based coders with knowledge of the political situation and the social media landscape of the country coded 100 comments per politician for each selected political event against pre-determined coding categories for different types of analysis – sentiment analysis, criticism versus support analysis and hate speech and misinformation analysis. The coding was done through an interpretative process based on the coders’ thorough understanding of political, social, ethnic and religious issues in Sri Lanka. These comments formed the sample set used for this report’s analysis.

To provide an analysis of how social media influences Sri Lanka’s political discourse, the report uses sentiment analysis and ‘criticism versus support’ analysis as a method to interpret Facebook users’ comments on politicians’ posts. Furthermore, to analyse the posts of ethno-nationalist groups, the report analyses the level of engagement and whether content is misleading or not. This analysis sheds light on the potential impact of social media usage on Sri Lanka’s social cohesion.

 Facebook users’ comments on politicians’ posts



### 3. ANALYSIS

In the following, this report provides i) an overall summary of online engagement around the pages of relevant politicians, key media outlets and selected ethno-nationalist groups during the three political events, ii) a sentiment analysis regarding users’ perception of key politicians during the political events, iii) a criticism versus support analysis of key politicians during the political events, and iv) an analysis of the spread of hate speech and misleading information online. The report assumes that the final dataset reflects the main narratives on social media in Sri Lanka. The below analysis shows the relevance of the posts and comments to the public debate online.

#### 3.1 HOW MUCH ENGAGEMENT BY USERS DID THE ONLINE ACTIVITY OF KEY POLITICIANS, MAINSTREAM MEDIA, AND ETHNO-NATIONALIST GROUPS GENERATE?

Three things can happen to a Facebook post: it can get shared, liked, and commented. The ternary plot below illustrates the combination of these three actions to measure the social media presence of the top 200 posts from the three groups (politicians in blue, media pages in green and ethno-nationalist pages in orange).

According to figure 1, out of the top 200 posts from the pages of politicians, media outlets and ethno-nationalist groups, the posts towards the top have a higher number of shares, those toward the bottom right have a higher rate of likes, and those toward the bottom left have a higher number of comments. While credible media pages<sup>3</sup> are spread more evenly across all three user reactions, politicians’ posts range between a high number of likes and a moderately high number of comments, whereas ethno-nationalist pages have a much higher number of shares in comparison with the other two categories.

<sup>2</sup> The filtering of comments on politicians’ posts was based on keywords that include slang used against Tamils, Muslims and Islam, words representing nationalist sentiment initiating hate against other communities and words indicating corruption or protests in English, Tamil and Sinhala.

<sup>3</sup> Credible media pages refer to Facebook pages owned by mainstream media organisations that have local presence in Sri Lanka or elsewhere.

Recent studies on how misinformation spreads online have found that low-credibility content is widely shared but generates little conversation around it.<sup>4</sup> Ethno-nationalist pages' posts shared the same characteristics as misleading content since they are widely shared but only little commented on. The other two groups, politicians' and media posts, are less likely to contain misleading information because of a reversed shares-versus-comments pattern.

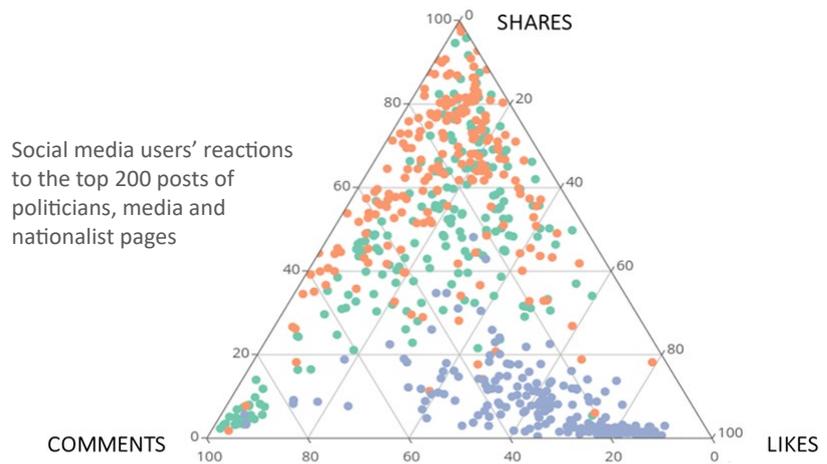


FIGURE 1: Comments vs. Shares vs. Likes – Top 200 politician, media and ethno-nationalist posts.

The graph on the right, showing the number of shares that each post received between 1 January and 31 October 2018 from the top 10 pages of each of the selected groups, indicates clear differences in the extent of **post sharing** across groups. The blue line shows posts from politicians' pages, the grey line refers to posts from credible media pages, and green represents posts from ethno-nationalist pages. Whereas credible media and ethno-nationalist page posts are widely shared throughout the year, politicians' posts are less widely shared and only witness a significant peak around the regional elections in early February 2018.

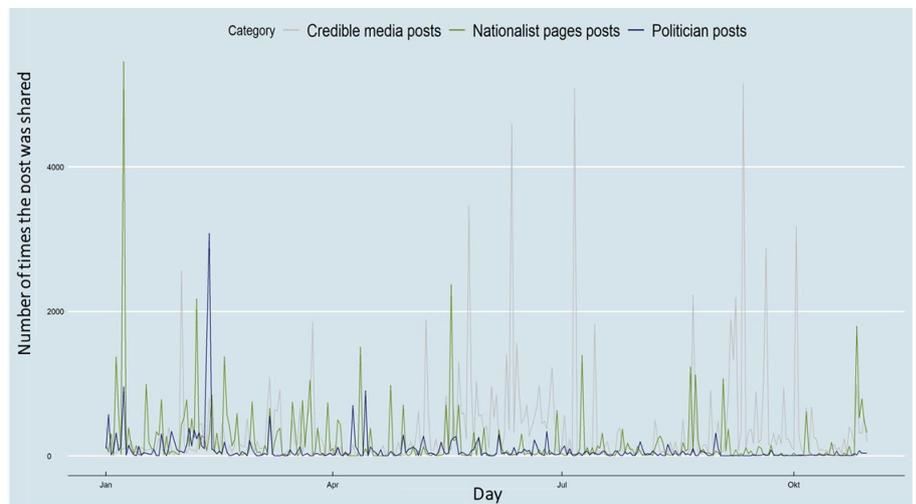


FIGURE 2: Shares of pages, Jan-Oct 2018.

Politicians, however, generate a higher level of **debate** on their pages. The graph below shows the number of comments on the pages of the three respective groups, indicating a higher level of debate by users on politicians and media pages in comparison to ethno-nationalist groups' pages.

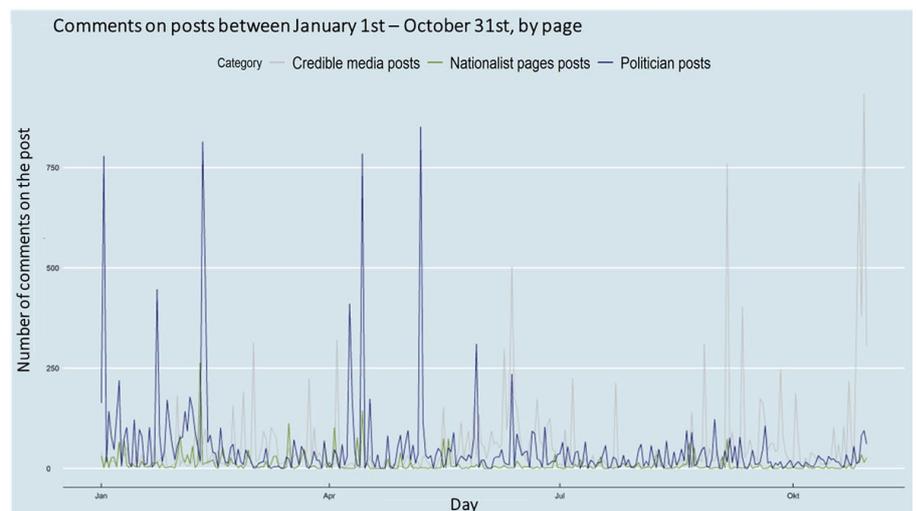


FIGURE 3: Comments on pages, Jan-Oct 2018.

Based on these findings, this report focuses on i) content that is being widely shared by low-credibility pages and ii) narratives of social media users in Sri Lanka with regards to politicians.

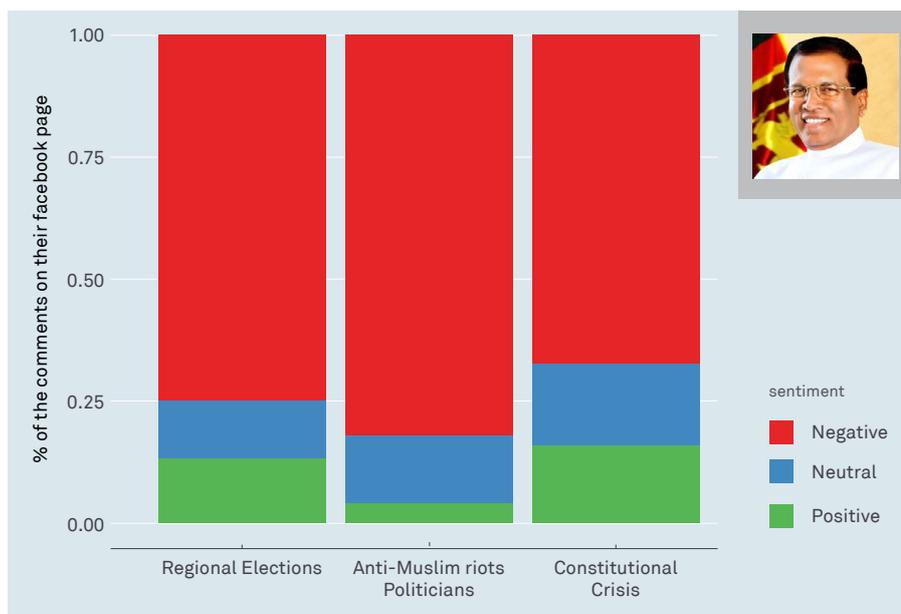
<sup>4</sup> Shao, et. Al (2018) "The spread of low-credibility content by social bots", <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-06930-7>.

## 3.2 WHAT DO USERS DO WITH SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT BY POLITICIANS?

### 3.2.1 HOW DO USERS PERCEIVE POLITICIANS: SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

Sentiment analysis shows whether users' comments are positive, negative or neutral towards politicians' posts across the different political events analysed. Apart from showing the evolution of the perceptions of users towards politicians throughout the year, sentiment analysis provides information about what feelings users associate with a politician at a given event. The consistency of a negative or positive feeling indicates the overall perception or image around a politician. Sentiment analysis is important to understand how users react to politicians' narratives online and thereby gives insights into the overall political climate in Sri Lanka.

This report provides an analysis of posts of and comments on five prominent Sinhala politicians and two active Tamil politicians. The Sinhala politicians include Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, and former President and incumbent opposition leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, as well as the politicians Gotabaya and Namal Rajapaksa who are influential members of the Rajapaksa family. As compared to Sinhala politicians, there are only very few Tamil politicians who are active online. This report includes an analysis of Sivagnanam Shriritharan, member of parliament representing Tamil National Alliance (TNA), and Douglas Devananda, member of parliament representing Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

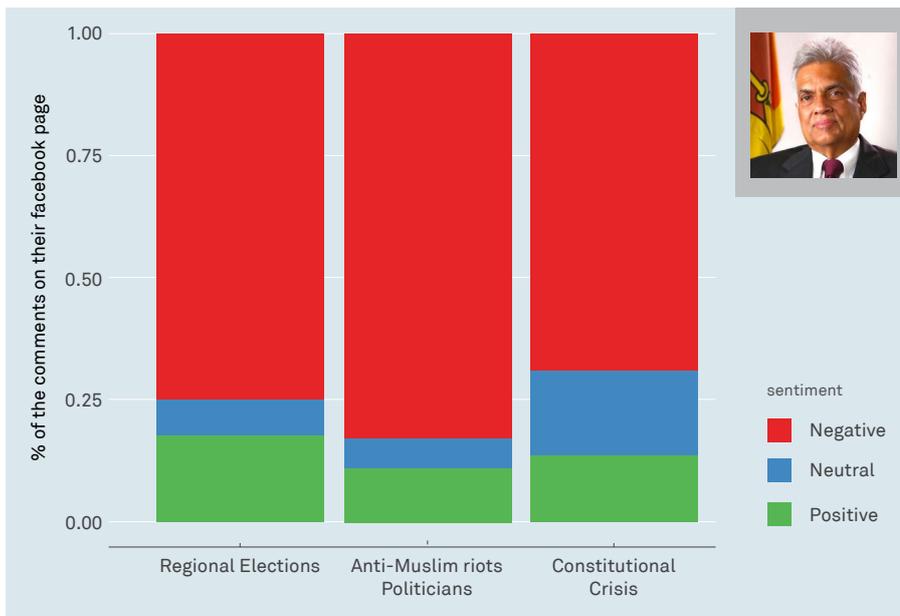


**Maithripala Sirisena** President of Sri Lanka since January 2015. He campaigned on a good governance platform (*yahapalanaya*) and was fielded as a common candidate against then president Mahinda Rajapaksa. Maithripala Sirisena formed the Coalition Government with UNP and has acted as the government leader representing the SLFP. The February 2018 regional elections brought about a defeat of the SLFP and politically weakened him. Maithripala Sirisena has become increasingly unpopular, especially by dismissing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe from duty. This, however, brought him new support from defenders of the Mahinda Rajapaksa camp.

The Supreme Court deemed his actions outside the constitutional framework, which led to a severe political crisis in Sri Lanka.

The overall sentiment expressed by Facebook users against the posts made by President Maithripala Sirisena was predominantly negative across all three events. The negative sentiment was at a peak during the anti-Muslim riots with only 18% of the comments being positive or neutral, while he was more positively perceived at the start of the constitutional crisis<sup>5</sup>. The level of neutral comments towards him increased across the events.

<sup>5</sup> The collected data does not cover the entire period of the constitutional crisis but only includes data until 31 October 2019.

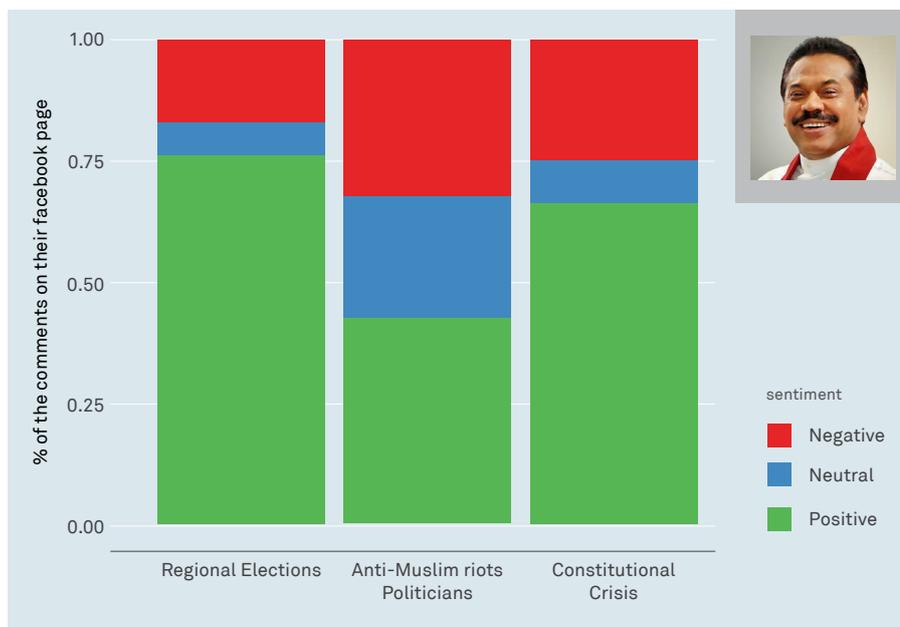


**Ranil Wickremasinghe** leader of the UNP and the Prime Minister of the Coalition Government. He has been highly criticized for his role in the Central Bank bond scam and been under much pressure over his government’s economic policies. Although he was commended for restoring democracy since 2015 and improving the relations with the international community (the West and India), the UNP has suffered major electoral losses under his leadership. He also faces increasing pressure from segments within the UNP to make way for a new leadership as

FIGURE 5: Sentiment analysis across political events: Ranil Wickremasinghe.

he is seen as a weak mobiliser of mass support. Ranil Wickremasinghe was unconstitutionally ousted as Prime Minister on 26 October 2018. He was reappointed as Prime Minister on 16 December 2018 when he was able to show his majority in parliament following the Supreme Court verdict on the illegal dissolution of parliament.

Similar to the sentiment expressed towards President Maithripala Sirisena, Facebook users also predominately commented in a negative way on Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe’s posts during all three events, also including a peak of negative comments during the anti-Muslim riot period. Following his removal as prime minister by President Maithripala Sirisena on 26 October 2018, the level of neutrality towards him increased with reduced negative sentiment. Positive responses to posts of the Prime Minister remained on a rather low level during all three events.



**Mahinda Rajapaksa** the controversial former President led the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and concluded Sri Lanka’s Civil War in 2009. Re-elected with a clear majority in 2010, Mahinda Rajapaksa has enjoyed the strong support of large segments of the Sinhalese majority in the country until he was defeated by his former cabinet member Maithripala Sirisena in the presidential election in January 2015. Sri Lanka’s Tamil and Muslim minorities rejected his leadership due to his hard-line approach in solving minorities’ issues, however, he remains overall popular among the

FIGURE 6: Sentiment analysis across political events: Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Sinhalese majority as a charismatic leader. His newly formed political party SLPP has achieved a landslide victory in the regional elections in February 2018, which has given him renewed political impetus. Mahinda Rajapaksa was unconstitutionally appointed as the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka by Maithripala Sirisena on 26 October 2018. He

‘resigned’ from the position on 15 December 2018 following a Supreme Court Verdict that the President’s conduct was unconstitutional and assumed the role of the opposition leader representing the SLFP. This has been contested by some parties as he had officially announced to be representing SLPP, a party which he had recently founded but which is not represented in parliament.

Mahinda Rajapaksa received a high level of positive sentiments both during the regional elections and only slightly less during the constitutional crisis starting from his unconstitutional appointment as Prime Minister on 26 October 2018. However, the level of positive comments dropped significantly during the anti-Muslim riots where Facebook users showed the biggest percentage of neutral comments and increased negativity towards his posts.

**Gotabaya Rajapaksa** is a younger brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and powerful politico-administrative figure who served as Defence Secretary at the end of the civil war in 2009 and was instrumental in bringing about the military defeat of the LTTE. He has a strong backing in the Buddhist community and from Sinhala nationalists and leads the two civil movements *Eliya* (Light) and *Viyathmaga* (The Professionals for a Better Future), which focus on political and economic reforms. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is widely considered as a leader for change and has expressed ambition to contest the presidential election in 2020, for which he would have to rescind his US citizenship.

Facebook users positively commented on Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s posts consistently during all three events. The positive sentiment expressed in posts has been growing from the regional elections to the constitutional crisis.

**Namal Rajapaksa** is the eldest son of Mahinda Rajapaksa - a young politician who entered parliament in 2010 under the patronage of his father. As a leader of the youth movement *Tharunyata Hetak* (A Tomorrow for Youth), Namal Rajapaksa is very popular among Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese youth, especially on social media. Despite becoming a member of the SLPP in November 2018, he claims that he is

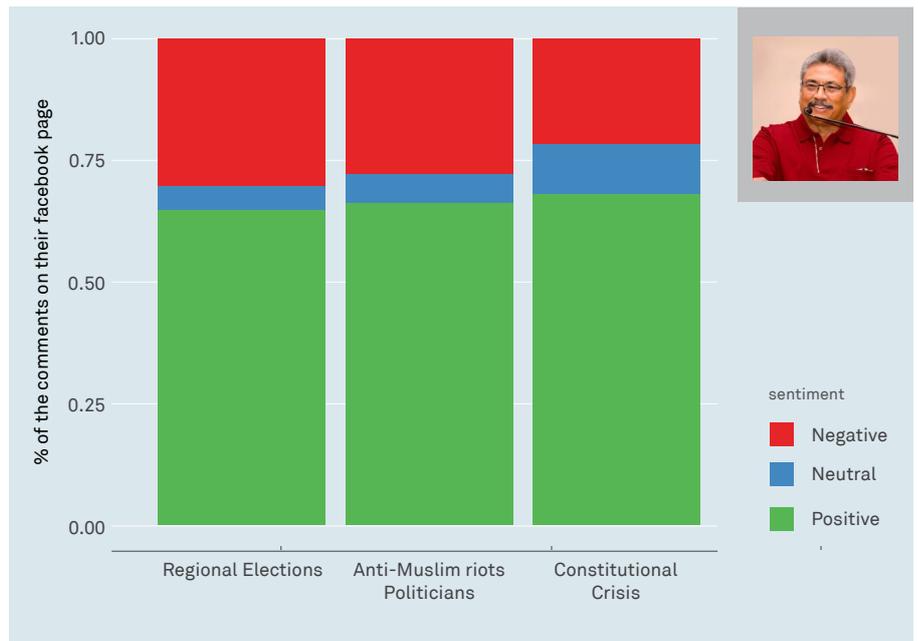


FIGURE 7: Sentiment analysis across political events: Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

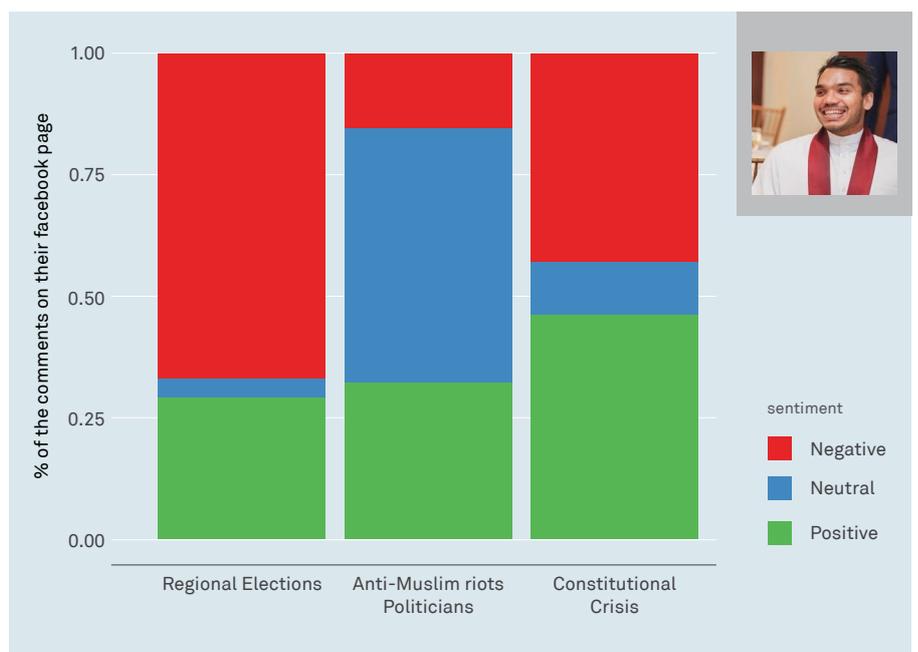


FIGURE 8: Sentiment analysis across political events: Namal Rajapaksa.

not a member of this party as he is at risk of losing his parliamentary seat by obtaining membership of a party not represented in parliament. He is also said to be groomed as a successor of Mahinda Rajapaksa. Namal Rajapaksa is alleged to have committed large-scale financial fraud during the presidency of his father and is currently facing several court cases.

As opposed to both Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Namal Rajapaksa did not receive the same level of positive sentiments towards his posts. Yet, users' positive perception of him has been increasing. During the regional elections, Facebook users mostly commented negatively. This high level of negative comments reduced significantly during the anti-Muslim riots with the majority of comments by Facebook users' being neutral and a slight increase in positive comments. During the constitutional crisis, there is a notable increase in positive sentiments towards Namal Rajapaksa with positive and negative sentiments almost being equal.

**Sivagnanam Shriritharan** is a member of parliament for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) since 2010 representing Jaffna district. Sivagnanam Shriritharan is one of the very few Tamil politicians who are actively engaged in social media. In 2012, Sivagnanam Shriritharan was quoted in the media as saying that a separate Tamil state of Eelam was the TNA's 'final goal'.

Facebook users' comments showed a mixed sentiment to Sivagnanam Shriritharan's posts during the regional elections and anti-Muslim riots. During the constitutional crisis however, negative comments considerably increased.

**Douglas Devananda** is a Tamil politician and the leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) aligned with Mahinda Rajapaksa. He is a former rebel and paramilitary leader in the fight against the LTTE. For the last 15 years, his party only retained one single parliamentary seat in the district of Jaffna. Douglas Devananda is criticized for his affiliation with Mahinda Rajapaksa. In the context of his past paramilitary role with the Sri Lankan military several crimes were committed, including

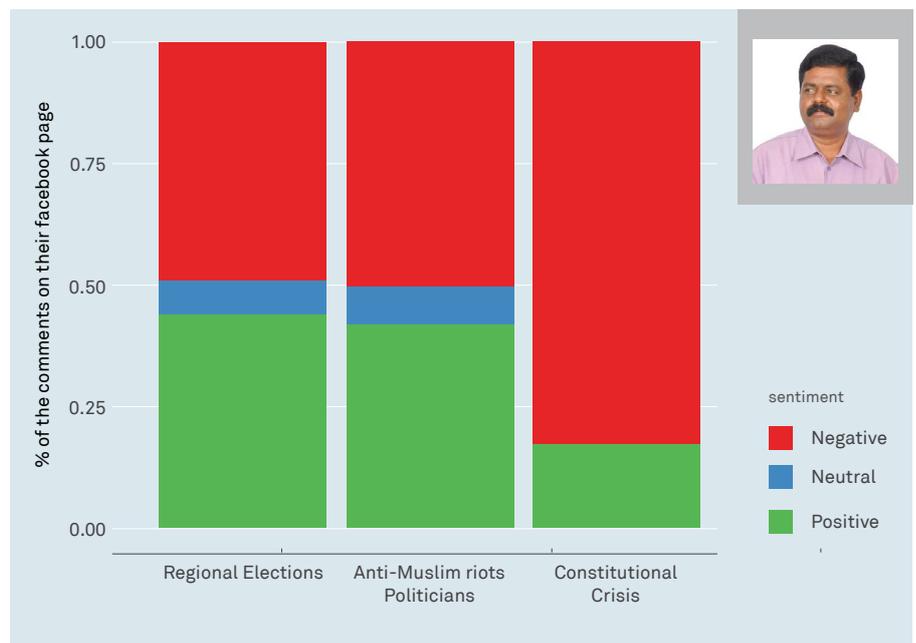


FIGURE 9: Sentiment analysis across political events: Sivagnanam Shriritharan.

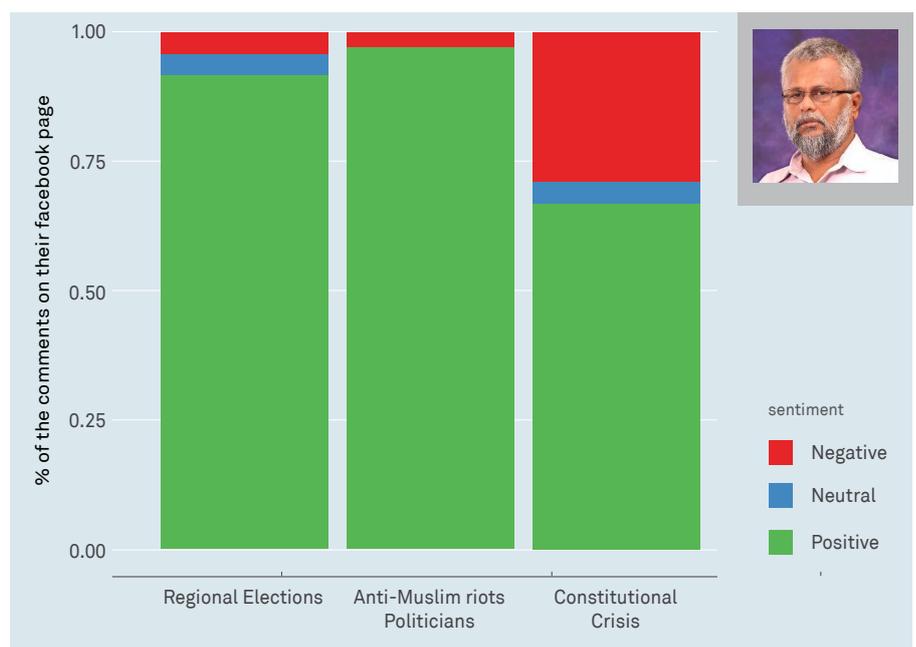


FIGURE 10: Sentiment analysis across political events: Douglas Devananda.

kidnapping and disappearances, in the North and Eastern provinces, leading to public disrespect.

As opposed to all the politicians analysed here, Facebook users have shown a high level of positive sentiments towards Douglas Devananda’s posts across all three events. Positive comments were at a peak during the anti-Muslim riots while the negative sentiments to his posts have been higher during the constitutional crisis during which he was even made a minister in the illegal cabinet.

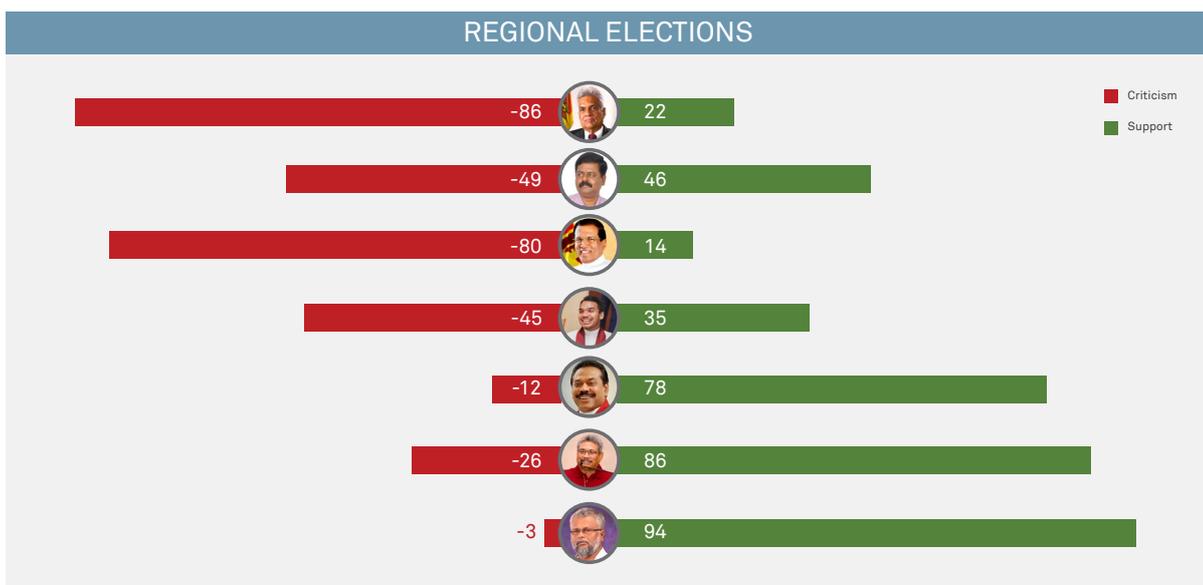
In summary, the sentiment analysis of the comments shows an overall positive pattern of response to the Rajapaksa family members across the three different political events even though this analysis cannot assess if some of these sentiments may have been unauthentic (i.e. posted by paid agents, so called trolls). Going beyond the immediate family members including Mahinda, Gotabaya and Namal Rajapaksa, it is also significant that politicians affiliated with the Rajapaksa political camp, such as Douglas Devananda, are receiving positive sentiments to their posts.

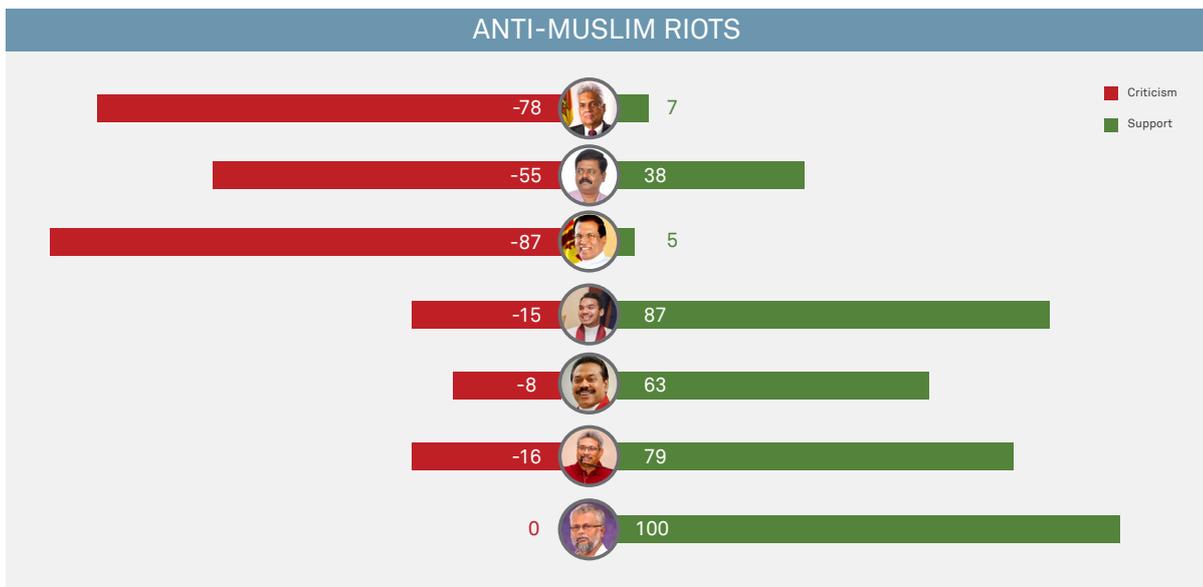
### 3.2.2 WHAT ARE USERS’ VIEWS OF POLITICIANS: CRITICISM VERSUS SUPPORT ANALYSIS

Different from the sentiment analysis, which captures the overall sentiment of a comment to a politician’s post, the criticism versus support analysis shows explicit disapproval or approval of the opinions or actions of a politician. In an electoral context, it is important to understand users’ reactions towards a politician during their campaign. Online support or criticism can be fabricated: if levels of criticism or support are consistent over time, this may be an indication of a coordinated campaign to improve or harm the image of a politician online. Hence, criticism versus support analysis provides another layer that goes beyond the initial sentiment analysis, helping to better understand the reaction of users, i.e. their comments to the politicians’ posts.

The public view of social media users towards politicians is analysed in the form of criticism or support expressed in user comments in reaction to a post by politicians. However, the data cannot indicate whether online reactions by users towards politicians are real or fabricated. The following graph shows the level of direct support or criticism each politician received in the posts analysed across the different events:

FIGURE 11: Direct criticism or support on politician pages, across all three events.





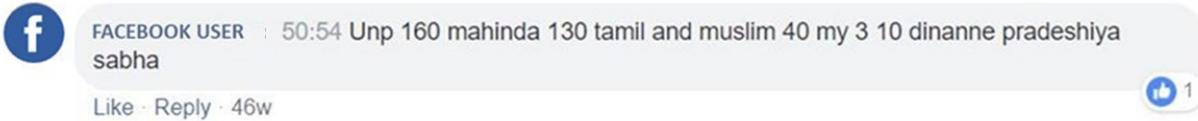
The criticism versus support analysis shows that President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and member of parliament representing TNA, Sivagnanam Shriratharan, have received a very high level of criticism against their posts during all three events. Namal Rajapaksa is the only one from the Rajapaksa camp who received high criticism during both the regional elections and the constitutional crisis. However, Facebook users provided supportive comments to Namal Rajapaksa during the anti-Muslims riots. The rest of the Rajapaksa camp, meaning former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Douglas Devananda, received a high level of Facebook user support on their posts during all three events.

Comments attacking (criticism) or praising (support) a politician can be fabricated by bots or trolls on social media to manipulate the impression that readers have when reading a post from a given page. Groundviews<sup>6</sup>, a Sri Lankan civil society media platform, already found in a study that bots and trolls were associated to the @RajapaksaNamal account on Twitter, and that they were specifically engineered to boost the appearance of his public support in elections – to a lesser extent, all politicians are using strategies to manipulate attention online. However, both the sentiment analysis and the criticism versus support analysis show similar patterns, namely the unpopularity of the

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://groundviews.org/2018/01/24/namal-rajapaksa-bots-and-trolls-new-contours-of-digital-propaganda-and-online-discourse-in-sri-lanka/>

2015 ‘good governance’ coalition around President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and the increasing support of the Rajapaksa camp.

The comments on President Maithripala Sirisena’s posts during the election campaign indicate that most users show only little support to him. This was expressed in a comment on 28 January 2018, in which one user predicted the results of the Local Government Elections, suggesting that the president’s party would get much fewer votes than other parties.

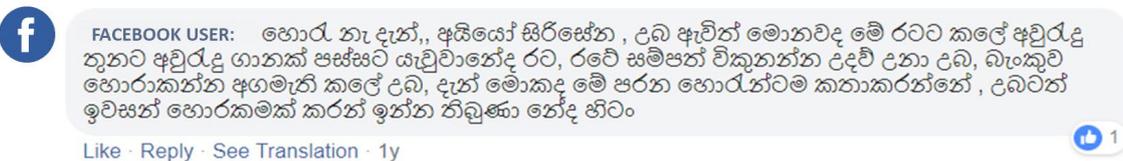


Translation: FACEBOOK USER [28.01.2018]: My3 [an abbreviation used to refer the President Maithripala Sirisena] will win 10 [councils], UNP 160 [councils], Mahinda 130 [councils], Tamil [parties] and Muslim [parties] 40 [councils] in the local government bodies

A lack of support for President Maithripala Sirisena may not automatically mean support for the current opposition. Indeed, users criticize the President for not being sufficiently reform-minded, for failing to deliver on the promises he made during the presidential elections and for not prosecuting alleged corruption of the Rajapaksa family.



Translation: FACEBOOK USER [14.02.2018]: We made you the President not because we wanted to make your party win but because we thought that it’s better for the country. As soon as you became the president, you embraced the Freedom party. Without being trapped in the dark, punish the corrupt thieves irrespective of whether they’re from the government or the opposition. We voted for you believing you are a nonpartisan common candidate. Don’t feed milk to the snakes. If you can’t do it, just give it to a person who can do it; time is passing by; the country is stuck in one place; where are the gold horses you said the princes (the Rajapaksa sons) owned?



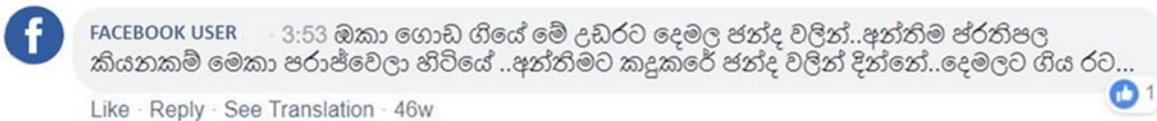
Translation: FACEBOOK USER [28.01.2018]: No more robbers now; Oh Sirisena, what did you do to this country within three years; you only pushed the country back by years; you helped sell the country’s resources; you made the man who robbed the central bank the Prime Minister; why are you now talking back to the old robbers again? You could have silently continued to rob, “hitan” [colloquial language used among Sinhalese to refer to the president Maithripala Sirisena]?

In the sample set analysed, sectarian notions dominate the critical comments to Maithripala Sirisena’s posts, indicating that large segments of the Sinhala majority population consider him as a leader who would only support Sri Lanka’s minority Tamil and Muslim populations rather than the Sinhalese population. Both during the local government elections and the anti-Muslim riots, the critique of Maithripala Sirisena’s posts was framed in a sectarian manner, suggesting that the incidents were conducted by the Muslim population of the country, but the President

was not taking actions against them as he is biased towards Sri Lanka's Muslims. The below comments of Facebook users serve as examples of this.



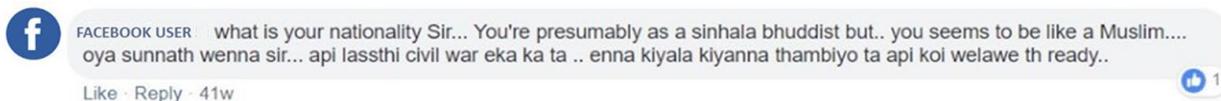
*Translation:* FACEBOOK USER [28.01.2018]: You are an >expletive< giving your >expletive< to sons of Tamil >expletive<. Look what happens this time. See how it happens in the South.



*Translation:* FACEBOOK USER [28.01.2018]: This guy survived because of the upcountry Tamil votes. He was almost defeated when the final results were released. He was able to win at last minute with the votes from upcountry. See, this country has gone to the Tamils.



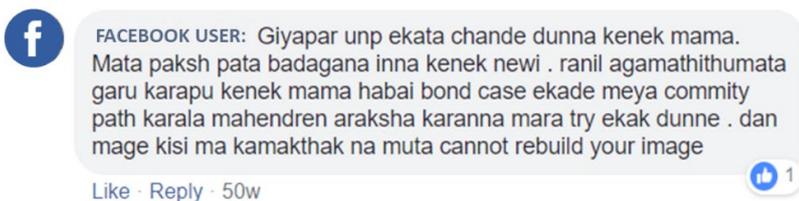
*Translation:* FACEBOOK USER [28.01.2018]: I think *hitan* [colloquial language used among Sinhalese to refer to the president Maithripala Sirisena] loves Tamil people and Vijayakala [female member of parliament representing Jaffna district from UNP] is a Tamil *hitan*.



*Translation:* FACEBOOK USER [07.03.2018]: What is your nationality Sir... You're presumably a Buddhist but... you seem to be like a Muslim... you should get circumcised like a Muslim. We are ready for a civil war. Ask the *thambiyo* [a negative term used among Sinhalese to refer to Muslims] to come; we are ready at any time.

Deviating from the trend of low support observed during the local government elections (14%) and anti-Muslim riots (5%), users' support to Maithripala Sirisena increased to 21% during the time of the constitutional crisis. It would appear that his unconstitutional actions increased his support from the Rajapaksa camp.

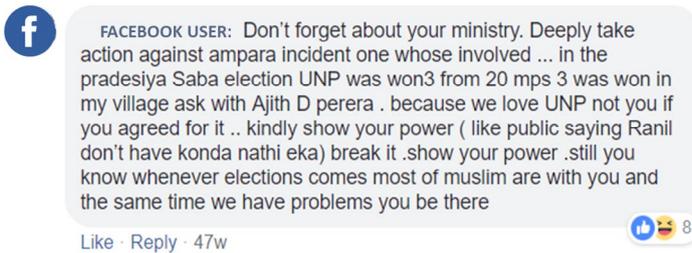
During the time of the local elections, approximately a quarter of user comments in reaction to posts by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe include requests for him to resign from his position as Prime Minister and to stop serving as UNP leader. Many comments also refer to his lack of political assertiveness in the bond scam of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka.



*Translation:* FACEBOOK USER [07.03.2018]: I have voted for the UNP in previous times, though I do not restrict myself to a certain political party. I respected Prime Minister Ranil. Yet, during the investigations on the bond scam, he tried really hard to protect Mahendran by appointing his own investigation committee. I don't like this fellow anymore. You cannot rebuild your image.

Similar to President Maithripala Sirisena, Facebook users' support for Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe was at

the lowest during the anti-Muslim riots, only reaching 5% of all comments. As per the comments to his posts, both the Sinhalese and Muslim populations shared the criticism online.



Translation: "pradesiya Saba" means local council



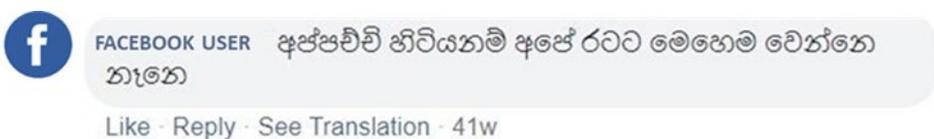
Translation: FACEBOOK USER [28.02.2018]: ...Eliminate the distrust among the Sinhalese people ...there is a distrust among the Sinhalese people that Ranil and Sirisena jointly divide and give the country to Tamils and Muslims.... First, bring all the people together.... search for the reason why the majority Sinhalese people dislike this government.

Interestingly, looking at the sample set covering the initial phase of the constitutional crisis at the end of October 2018, the support to Ranil Wickremasinghe was lower than expected given the threat to the democratic order in Sri Lanka because a considerable amount of comments expressed indifference to him. As was the case in the online discussion and comments during the time of the regional elections, users' criticism of him focused on his perceived inability to end corruption among powerful politicians stemming back from the Rajapaksa regime and to bring old and new culprits to justice.

In summary, President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe have received a consistently high level of criticism across all three political events in 2018. As per figure 11 above, the criticism or support level of Sivagnanam Shriritharan resembles the one of Maithripala Sirisena or Ranil Wickremasinghe. This is likely due to the fact that all of them belonged to the same UNP-led political camp during the timeframe of the events analysed.

In reversal to the overall criticism that the UNP-led camp politicians received across all three events, comments to Mahinda Rajapaksa, the lead figure of the opposition forces, were mostly supporting him, commending his leadership qualities, especially during the Local Government Elections with 82% support. The high positive sentiment during the local government election period was confirmed by the later results of the analysis.

Marking a shift in his popularity, the sample set of Facebook users analysed, expressed less support but also reduced criticism towards Mahinda Rajapaksa, while 29% commented in a neutral manner on his posts. This may be due to the fact that he is perceived as an anti-minority person and members of his party were accused of being instigators of violence. Interestingly, as exemplified below, comments and posts indicate that most users believe that there would not be riots against any ethnic group in the country if Mahinda Rajapaksa was in power and many believe that the government of Ranil Wickremasinghe and Maithripala Sirisena is the cause for the anti-Muslim riots. This could be related to the lack of response by law enforcement in addressing the riots and the ensuing impunity.



Translation: **FACEBOOK USER [08.03.2018]**: This would not happen to our nation if *appachchi* [“father”, colloquial language used among Sinhalese to refer to Mahinda Rajapaksa] was there.



Translation: **FACEBOOK USER [07.03.2018]**: Sir, all we have to tell you is that you should go there and douse the fire; everyone who sees you there will listen to you; we know it for sure; It is a great honour to you.

The Facebook comments analysed by this report in the initial phases of the constitutional crisis until the end of October 2018, show an overwhelming support of 78% towards Mahinda Rajapaksa, also including comments which endorse his appointment as Prime Minister. These comments indicate a strong support among the Sinhalese speaking population that took his appointment as their victory and expect him to be an effective leader.



Overall, comments on the pages of Rajapaksa family members tend to be supportive of them in all the events analysed, though Namal Rajapaksa does not enjoy the same support that his father Mahinda Rajapaksa and uncle Gotabaya Rajapaksa receive.

### 3.3 HATE SPEECH BY USERS ON POLITICIANS’ SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES

Hate speech is a significant phenomenon as it influences the perceptions of social media users about the nature of discourse online. Hate speech appeared during the course of the three political events in user comments on politicians’ pages.

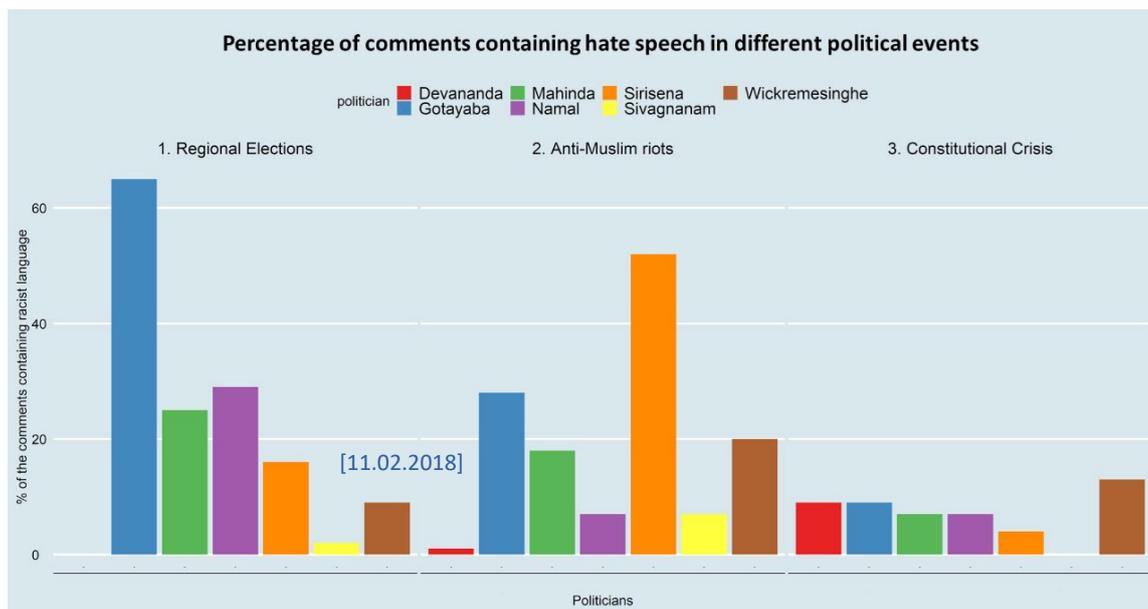


FIGURE 12: Percentage of comments containing hate speech in different political events, by politician

There is no trend of hate speech comments across the three events. However, during the regional elections and the anti-Muslim riots, data from the sample set shows a higher level of language associated with hate speech on the comments addressed to politicians' posts. Notably, there is a peak of hate speech in response to Gotabaya Rajapaksa's posts during the regional elections, supporting his positions. This can be related to his framing as a Sinhala Buddhist politician with alleged links to ethno-nationalist organisations. Hate speech also prevails in comments to President Maithripala Sirisena's posts during the anti-Muslim riots, however, it is directed at him rather than used to support his position.

Previous research shows that comments containing hate speech increase the hostility and decrease the open-mindedness of social media users, negatively affecting people's perceptions about the quality of news articles, increasing their perception about media bias, and further leading to the increase of polarisation<sup>7</sup>.

In response to the riots, the government declared a state of emergency, blocked users' access to internet in Kandy and blocked access to Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram across the country. The government alleged that hate speech messages spreading across these platforms were one of the main causes that incited the riots. The ban appeared to be ineffective as many users continued to access these platforms using virtual private network (VPN) tools. After more than a week the government lifted the ban after a meeting with officials from Facebook. Officials from Facebook also held meetings with representatives from civil society during which concerns regarding the inability of Facebook's algorithms to detect slurs in Sinhala and Tamil languages and the lack of content reviewers conversant in Sinhala language were raised. Facebook has since announced that it recruited several employees conversant in Sinhala, but the effectiveness to detect and respond to hate speech deserves further analysis. It is important to note that the spread of hate speech across the three political events refers to Facebook users' comments in response to politicians' posts only. As other studies<sup>8</sup> have shown that hate speech has played a role in Sri Lanka and is prevalent in private groups and other social media platforms.

Additionally, more than 50% of the language used in the comments against Maithripala Sirisena's posts during the time of the regional elections and anti-Muslim riots, contains nationalist and racist remarks as well as hate speech. However, his alignment with Mahinda Rajapaksa seems to have stopped Facebook users from commenting on him using sectarian notions during the early period of constitutional crisis.

### 3.4 MISLEADING INFORMATION ON ETHNO-NATIONALIST PAGES

Misleading information are posts and comments that often come with images with wrong association of facts, misplaced information, or any information shared without a reliable source.

Posts on ethno-nationalist pages<sup>9</sup> are widely shared by Sri Lankans in social media with posts by five out of the ten analysed groups' pages going viral, particularly those coming from the page "Sinhala Buddhist".

Among the five ethno-nationalist pages, the page "Sinhala Buddhists" generated the highest engagement throughout the period of ten months spanning across the three events analysed. Except for the "Buddhist Information Centre", whose highly shared contents promote Mahinda Rajapaksa, the pages include topics related to Sinhala

<sup>7</sup> Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett (2011); Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig (2014); Searles, Kathleen & Spencer, Sophie & Duru, Adaobi (2018); Fabian Prochazka, Patrick Weber & Wolfgang Schweiger (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Hattotuwa, S; Wijeratne, Y; Serrato, R; (2018) "Weaponising 280 characters: What 200,000 tweets and 4,000 bots tell us about state of Twitter in Sri Lanka", <https://groundviews.org/2018/04/23/weaponising-280-characters-what-200000-tweets-and-4000-bots-tell-us-about-state-of-twitter-in-sri-lanka/>.

<sup>9</sup> The initial mapping of low-credibility content regarding the Sri Lankan public discourse online resulted in the identification of pages, which share political, religious and racial content associated with nationalist discourses.

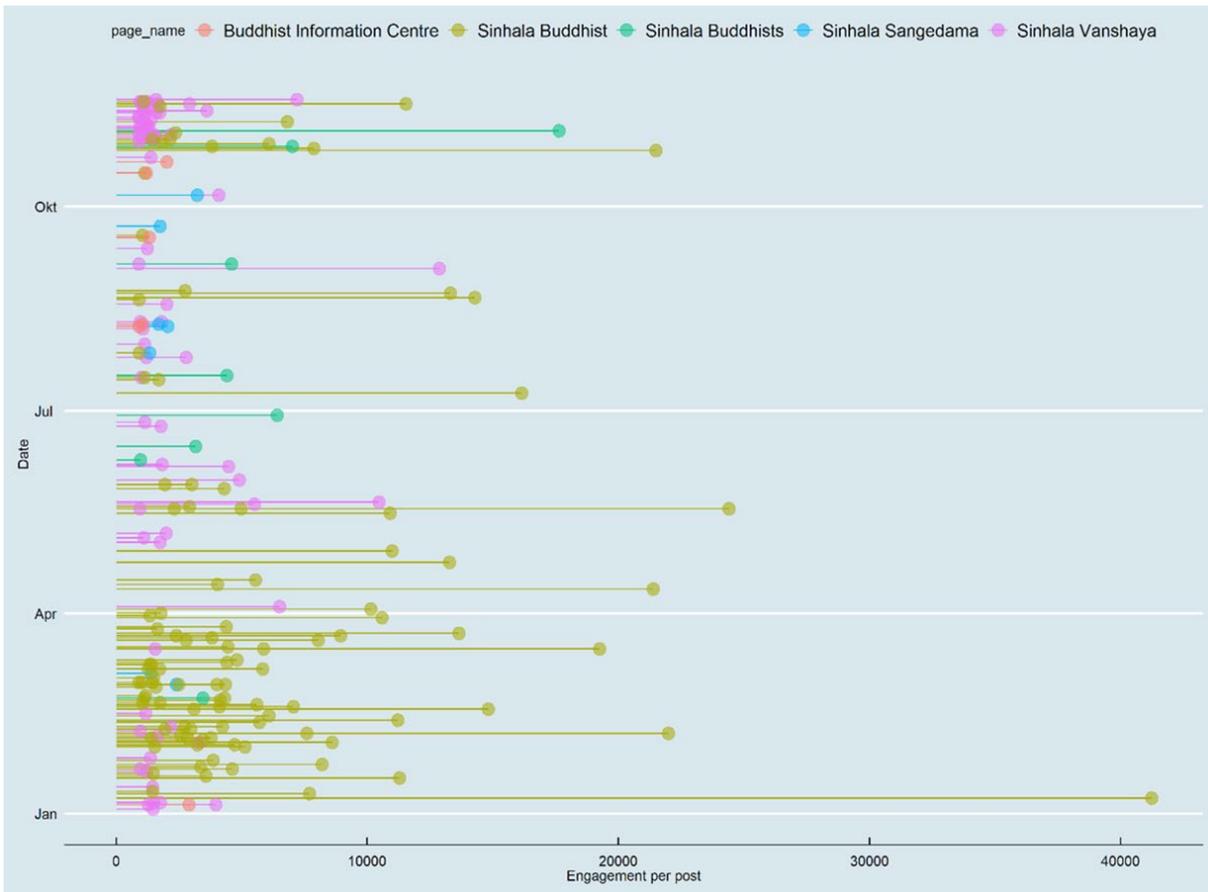


FIGURE 13: Viral posts by ethno-nationalist pages.

nationalism and the protection of army soldiers, and they also promote eminent personalities with Sinhala nationalist views.

A photo posted on the “Sinhala Buddhist” page and presumably showing a young Muslim woman sitting on a Buddha statue generated the highest number of shares exceeding 38,000. The text accompanying the post says “This woman is sitting on the lotus base of the respected Buddha statue. Whether they worship statues or not is irrelevant to us. But disrespecting our teacher is not acceptable”. This post entails misleading content because it does not provide any context (when, where, is it real?) and assumes malicious intentions on the part of the women, while generalising the behaviour of one individual to represent the entire community of Sri Lankan Muslims.



අම්පාර “නිව් කාසිම්” හෝටලය පොලිසියෙන් වටලයි. ආහාර පරික්ෂා කරයි.

Sinhala Buddhist

Like Comment Share 518 29 Comments 480 shares



A video posted by the page “Sinhala Buddhist” alleging that the owner of a Muslim-run local eatery in Ampara had put sterilisation pills into the food served to Sinhalese customers generated 477 shares on the page. It was then posted in a number of other Facebook pages and online platforms<sup>10</sup>, contributing to setting the tone for increased hostility against the Muslim population. The government later declared the content as false.

These two examples serve to underline that content combining Sinhala nationalist messages with Buddhist religious references generated most engagement in Sri Lankan social media. Since posts with ethno-nationalist and religious references generate high engagement and therefore become part of the public discourse on social media, it is important to understand whether the content is misleading or credible.

As shown in Figure 14, more than half of the top 200 posts (59%) in ethno-nationalist pages that were coded and analysed during this analysis include misleading content. The analysis found that misleading content in ethno-nationalist pages was shared 363,925 times, while credible information was only shared 190,146 times. This confirms the recent findings by Shao et al (see above), which suggest that low-credibility content is widely shared but generates little conversation around it.

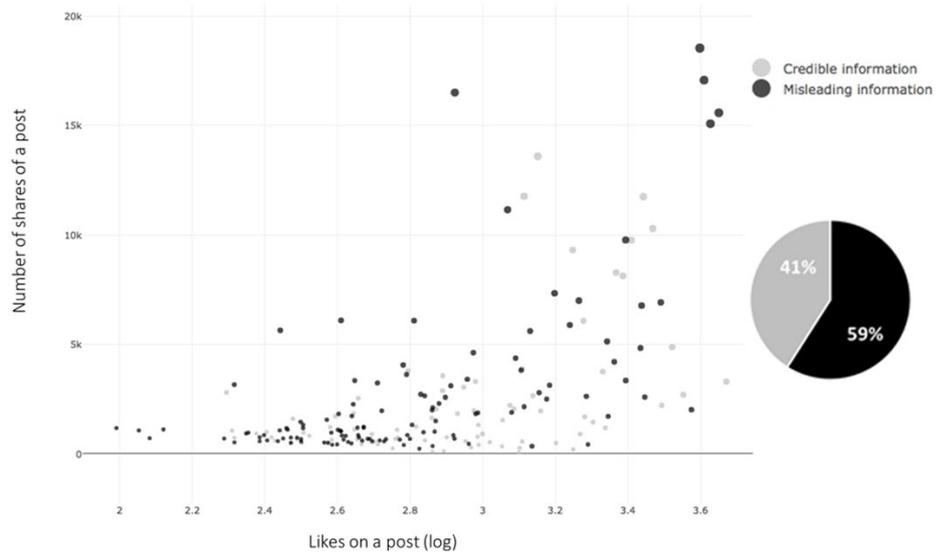


FIGURE 14: Misleading information on nationalist pages (Likes vs. Shares)

### 3.5 HATE SPEECH ON NATIONALIST PAGES

The analysis of 543,572 shares of the top 200 posts in ethno-nationalist groups shows that while credible content is shared, there is a significant level of misleading content and hate speech or a combination thereof. Out of 543,572 shares, 179,647 shares (33%) include credible content and 363,925 shares (67%) misleading content.

Out of the 363,925 shares of misleading content, 32% (115,000 shares) contained hate speech related to political, ethnic or religious questions. From the total number of shares of the top 200 posts in ethno-nationalist groups, 21% feature hate speech as indicated in red in figure 15.

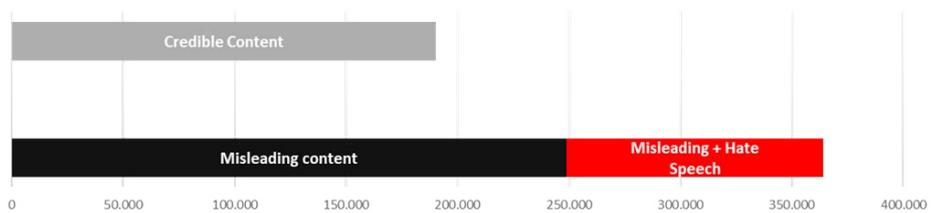


FIGURE 15: Credible vs Misleading content on ethno-nationalist posts

As per figure 16 below, political issues are more widely discussed than ethnic and religious issues in the analysed ethno-nationalist groups on Facebook. With regards to posts with misleading information, content on eth-

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hitnews.lk/you-betrayed-barley-yes-they-are-barren-medicine/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiuEnHBBolc> [http://slviral.blogspot.com/2018/03/blog-post\\_2.html](http://slviral.blogspot.com/2018/03/blog-post_2.html)  
<https://www.gossip.lankahotnews.com/2018/03/ampara-case.html>  
<http://news.tharunaya.us/sinhalanews-sinhala-news-1519705464.html>

nic and religious issues includes a significant level of hate speech towards minorities as opposed to a low level of hate speech against minorities when discussing political issues online.

Research<sup>11</sup> in other contexts shows that, when exposed to a balanced news story which has strongly biased comments in the form of misinformation and/or hate speech attached to it, users tend to see the article as biased. In the absence of such comments, readers perceive the article as neutral.

Hence, the presence of hate speech associated with misleading information is potentially dangerous to the public debate in Sri Lanka, as it could foster ethnic and religious divisions, misguiding public perception on such topics.

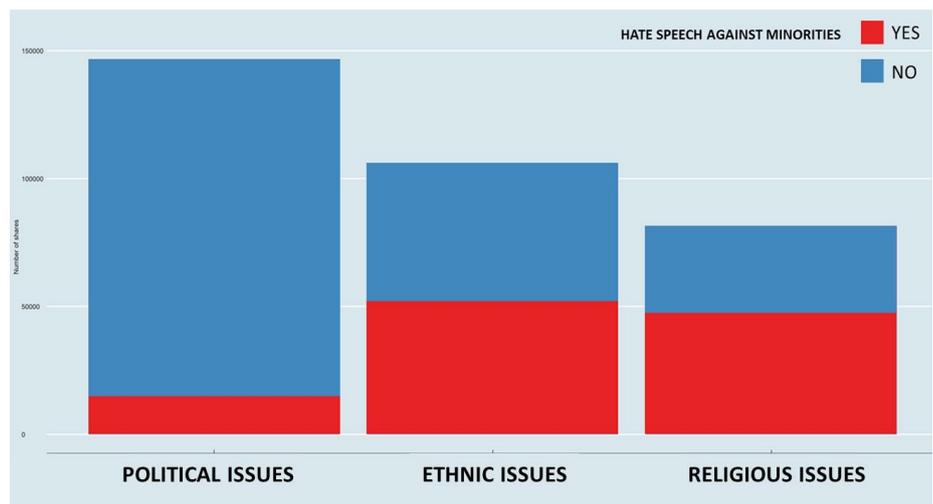


FIGURE 16: Misleading information vs. Hate speech

## 4. CONCLUSION

The study focused on analysing social media data from Facebook to extract evidence and generate narratives on users' general perception and specific support/criticism of politicians as well as on misinformation and hate speech online. Its main findings include:

- Ethno-nationalist pages' posts are widely shared on social media in Sri Lanka but not liked or not commented on a lot.
- Politicians' pages receive more likes and comments if compared to the ethno-nationalist pages indicating that social media users tend to respond to and engage with content posted by politicians, while they share ethno-nationalist pages more.
- The combination of misleading information and hate speech within ethno-nationalist pages and their wide sharing on Facebook deepens social divisions according to political, ethnic and religious fault lines and therefore potentially endangers social cohesion in Sri Lanka.
- There is an overall positive sentiment and support expressed towards the Rajapaksa family members in contrast to negative sentiments and criticism voiced towards President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe as well as politicians aligned with the UNP-led government. As can be seen during the constitutional crisis, a disassociation with the UNP and/or rapprochement with Mahinda Rajapaksa has made users support these politicians more and led to them being viewed more positively. This study does not determine how much of the support or rejection of politicians online may be inauthentic, i.e. boosted by social bots or paid trolls.
- Sectarian and divisive speech is more frequent during the elections period and in the context of the anti-Muslim riots in comparison to the debates around the constitutional crisis, which are more fact-based rather than drawing on hate speech.

<sup>11</sup> Houston et al. (2011)

Based on the findings of the social media analysis, the following is recommended.

- In the context of elections, it is relevant to
  - analyse the posts of politicians in order to assess if they as candidates function as instigators of misleading information and hate speech and therefore also if they are in violation of the election law regulating candidates' conduct during an election. Analysing twitter is also suited for this, since some key politicians frequently use it.
  - analyse the social media users' comments to politicians' posts to understand the social uptake of potentially divisive discourses.
- Social media literacy should be increased to combat misleading information and hate speech particularly in order to sensitize voters on biased information on Facebook and increase their capacity of critically assessing the political situation despite falsification and misleading information online.
- The main platforms, Facebook in particular, should step up their capacity of understanding political discourse on their services in Sri Lanka and open offices in Sri Lanka that can constantly address concerns and explain the companies' policies.

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