

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: DID YOUTH VOTE AND SOCIAL MEDIA MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN COLOMBO 2011?

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SUMMARY

The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) is the local government body that administers Sri Lanka's largest city and its commercial capital. Its last election, held in October 2011, saw the nation's ruling coalition losing this key municipality while winning all other municipalities as well as many of the smaller local government bodies.

What made the CMC election outcome different? This election saw some apolitical activists and researchers engaging the mayoral candidates on social media, questioning and critiquing their election manifestos and trying to hold them accountable. Did these online activities influence voter behaviour? What lesson does this hold for other elections and the overall political landscape in Sri Lanka?

INTRODUCTION

CMC is the oldest and largest local government body in Sri Lanka. It manages Colombo, a modest sized city (by South Asian standards) covering 37 square km and home to 550,000 residents. It has a floating population of another 400,000 who enter daily for work, trade or schooling. Although the administrative capital was moved to nearby Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte in the 1980s, Colombo firmly remains the hub for business, international trade, diplomacy and media.

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The British made Colombo their capital in 1815, and set up the CMC in 1865 for local self governance.³ Colombo's mayor and the council of 53 members are elected through local government elections held once in four years. It manages a budget of LKR 9 billion (approximately USD 70.5 million at mid 2013 exchange rate) and a staff of 12,000.

For over half a century since 1956, the CMC had been ruled by the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka's conservative party that is currently in Parliamentary opposition.⁴ During this time, there have been many changes of government at national level. The executive presidency has been held by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) since 1994, which has formed governments with coalition partners for much of that period (excepting 2001-2004). The SLFP-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the general election in 2004 and was re-elected in 2010.⁵

CMC ELECTION 2011

The last election for CMC, held on 8 October 2011, was contested by several political parties, alliances and independent groups. While the UPFA won most other local bodies, the UNP secured the largest number of votes and seats in the CMC and formed an administration headed by their mayoral candidate, A. J. M. Muzammil.

The official election result was as follows⁶:

Local Authorities Elections: 8 October, 2011: Colombo District; Colombo Municipal Council

PARTY NAME	VOTES OBTAINED	PERCENTAGE	SEATS
United National Party (UNP)	101,920	43.01%	24
United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA)	77,089	32.53%	16
Democratic Peoples Front (DPF)	26,229	11.07%	6

3 CMC official website, http://www.cmc.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84&Itemid=70

4 CMC official website: http://www.cmc.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182&Itemid=147

5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Sri_Lanka

6 Source: *Department of Elections, Sri Lanka* http://www.slelections.gov.lk/3local_authorities2011_3/Colombo_MC.html

PARTY NAME	VOTES OBTAINED	PERCENTAGE	SEATS
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)	9,979	4.21%	2
Democratic Unity Alliance	7,830	3.30%	2
Independent Group 2	4,085	1.72%	1
People's Liberation Front	3,162	1.33%	1
Independent Group 1	2,962	1.25%	1
Independent Group 9	1,968	0.83%	-
Independent Group 8	1,133	0.48%	
Jana Setha Peramuna	384	0.16%	
Independent Group 10	46	0.02%	
Patriotic National Front	42	0.02%	
Independent Group 4	33	0.01%	
Ceylon Democratic Unity Alliance	32	0.01%	
Independent Group 7	27	0.01%	
Independent Group 6	22	0.01%	
Independent Group 3	17	0.01%	
Independent Group 5	16	0.01%	

Valid Votes	236,976	95.85%
Rejected Votes	10,270	4.15%
Total Polled	247,246	%
Registered Electors	393,085	

The CMC election result was significant, because the national level opposition retained control over this important local government body while the nationally ruling coalition swept most others. For this reason, the electoral campaigns, as well as the outcome, have been the subject of much commentary.

As an analyst on *World Socialist* website noted: "The UPFA's defeat is a distorted expression of the widespread opposition to the Rajapakse government's policies. The pro-business, right-wing UNP has no fundamental differences with the government, but capitalized on a protest vote. The central issue in the election campaign was the Government's

plan to evict more than 70,000 families from shanties in Colombo as part of its program to transform the city into a major commercial hub for South Asia.”⁷

Dr Dayan Jayatileka, a leading political analyst and one time diplomat, interpreted the result very differently — as evidence of democracy in action. “The results of the local authorities election proves that Sri Lankan society will not allow itself to be straitjacketed into conformity,” he wrote.

He added: “It is widely known that almost 60% of Colombo consists of ethno-linguistic minorities, and while this does not mean that the winning candidate must be from one of the minorities, it does mean that in order to win, a candidate from a majority community must have a multi-ethnic base and appeal, or his/her party must have such a profile. (UPFA mayoral candidate) Milinda Moragoda probably failed because the governing coalition has been unable to cultivate a multi-ethnic image. The visible tendency, or drive, towards cultural homogenization and conformity, if not domination, was bound to be rejected by a multicultural, cosmopolitan Colombo citizenry.”⁸

Besides the more obvious factors of party politics and demographics, did any other considerations play a significant part in the CMC election outcome? For example, how did the youth vote and new media factors influence the process?

These questions are briefly explored here, underlining the need for further study.

SRI LANKA: RISING INCOMES, GROWING CONNECTIVITY

The CMC election took place 2.5 years after Sri Lanka’s long drawn out civil war ended in May 2009, and when the economy was resurging. In 2010, the IMF recognized Sri Lanka as a middle income, emerging market, signifying a transformation taking place in the country.⁹

7 “Sri Lankan Ruling Party Defeated in Colombo Local Election. *World Socialist* website. 11 October, 2011. <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2011/10/sril-o12.html>

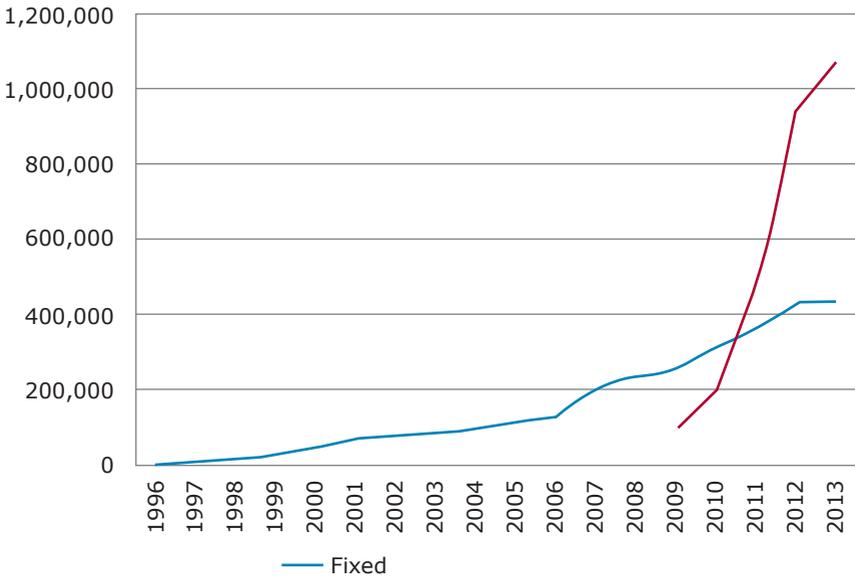
8 “Reading the Results of the Municipal Elections in Sri Lanka,” Groundviews.org, 10 October, 2011 <http://groundviews.org/2011/10/10/reading-the-results-of-the-municipal-elections-in-sri-lanka/>

9 <http://www.centralbanking.com/central-banking/news/1588110/imf-upgrades-sri-lanka-emerging-market>

Colombo is at the epicenter of this change. Metropolitan Colombo, which covers the city of Colombo as well as its more populous suburbs, is economically more advantaged than the rest of the island. Colombo is in the Western Province, which occupies only 5.7% of the land, but accounts for around 44% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Its per capita income ratio was 1.6 times the national per capita income in 2011.¹⁰

Residents of metro Colombo have better access to media and telecommunication services. Probably recognizing this, CMC election candidates from major parties made extensive use of broadcast and web-based media, alongside the more traditional outdoor political rallies and door-to-door campaigning, to reach out to voters.

While this is not the first Lankan election where new media was used, it marks a turning point in how main candidates used web-based platforms and social media. They encountered both support and dissent in that process.



Growth in Internet subscriptions in Sri Lanka: 1996-2013
 TRCSL, March 2013: <http://www.trc.gov.lk/information/statistics.html>

10 <http://www.ft.lk/2012/08/10/city-folks-got-richer-in-2011-north-gdp-grew-fastest/>

According to the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL), the official collector of telecom industry data, Sri Lanka had a total of 2,832,464 fixed phones (39% in the Western Province), and 19,335,733 mobile phone subscriptions by March 2013. Thus, when fixed and mobile are taken together, there are now more phone connections than people (total population was 20,277,597 in the last national census of March 2012).

The number of Internet users is harder to ascertain. In March 2013, TRCSL reported a total of 435,758 fixed Internet subscriptions and 1,068,482 mobile Internet subscriptions (the latter used via mobile devices such as laptops, smart phones and iPads, etc).¹¹ When added together, this came to slightly over 1.5 million Internet subscriptions.

Determining the number of Internet users is open to interpretation: many fixed subscriptions - in offices, homes and cybercafés - have multiple users while mobile Internet accounts are less widely shared. Assuming an average two users per subscription, whether fixed or mobile, the number of Internet users could be in the range of 3 million (or 15% of total population). This may be a conservative estimate.

The latest number given by the Internet World Stats website for Sri Lanka is 3,222,200 Internet users in June 2012. The country's total number of Facebook accounts was 1,515,720 as of December 2012.¹² According to the social media analytical tool website, *socialbakers*, the largest age group among Lankan users of Facebook is 18 - 24 years, followed by those aged 25 - 34.¹³

These raw numbers represent only one part of a much larger and dynamic picture. The telecom services market, user types and profiles as well as socio-cultural and economic impacts of Internet use have evolved since commercial Internet connectivity was introduced in 1995. While connectivity and affordability constraints have eased off, and Internet is no longer an urban or elite service, some urban-rural disparities exist.

11 Latest available industry data, accessed on TRCSL website on 5 June 2013, at: <http://www.trc.gov.lk/information/statistics.html>

12 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#lk> and <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/lk.htm>

13 <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/sri-lanka>

SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE CMC ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

The two leading mayoral candidates - Milinda Moragoda of UPFA and A. J. M. Muzammil of UNP - mobilized social media as part of their campaigns. The main platforms they used were Facebook and Twitter; their official websites were also used.

The specific online locations were as follows:

	Moragoda Campaign (UPFA)	Muzammil Campaign (UNP)
Official website/s	http://www.ourcmb.com (now offline) http://www.milinda.org	http://www.muzammil.org
Facebook	www.facebook.com/mmoragoda?sk=wall	www.facebook.com/A.J.M.Muzammil
Twitter hashtag ¹⁴	@milindamoragoda	@AJMMuzammil
YouTube account	www.youtube.com/user/MilindaMoragoda	Not known

Following are brief surveys of the two campaigns as they engaged citizens on the above platforms. These observations are offered with the caveat that an overview of this nature cannot comprehensively cover the broader issues of governance and politics that shaped such engagements.

MORAGODA CAMPAIGN

Moragoda's campaign had a strong new media component which became contentious after a while when it attracted some critical and vocal cyber activists. The most innovative feature in the campaign was the campaign website, located at <http://www.ourcmb.com>. His policy platform promised both a citizens' charter (CC) and right to information (RTI) at CMC level.

ICT policy researcher Dr Rohan Samarajiva, who served as policy advisor to the Moragoda campaign, called it an attempt in "open-source policy formulation". He explained midway through the process: "A draft policy platform was presented early in the campaign. Comments and suggestions are being actively solicited through face-to-face meetings and through new

14 Twitter accounts are not officially verified by the platform, but are generally known to be owned and operated by these individuals or their authorised staff.

media. A revised document reflecting the process will be published a week or so before the election.”¹⁵

The website received and published many public comments on a wide array of topics and concerns ranging from urban transport and housing to open spaces and rights of slum dwellers. Calling elections as “engageable moments,” Dr Samarajiva noted it was only during elections that public affairs rise on busy people’s agendas. “Yet, effective policy formulation and implementation requires active citizen engagement.”

Moragoda launched an official Facebook page on 3 September, 2011, five weeks before the election.¹⁶ In that respect, he was not much different from most other South Asian politicians, who is engaging with the public only when an election is imminent. Thanks largely to innovative strategies by his web media team, the number of ‘likes’ grew to 13,000+ just before the election. The page advanced gradually, giving prominence to photographs of the candidate visiting potential voters.¹⁷

The rate of visitor commenting was slow at early stages, but improved with time. Readers questioned him on different topics. One question that repeatedly came up was about his non-declaration of assets prior to the election, while being a promoter of the public’s right for information.

Within days, it seemed as if Moragoda was becoming exasperated by dissenting viewpoints. On 15 September, 2011 he wrote on his Facebook: “I have watched today’s proceedings in this space with some disappointment and sadness. I will only have a dialogue with those who desire to engage constructively and conduct themselves in a civilized manner. In this space, that is my right and privilege. I will devote as much time and energy as I can to communicate through this new media, although it is not available to the majority of our society. However, due to competing demands, it is not humanly possible for me to respond to each and every question.”

As the campaign progressed, it appeared that some critical Facebook comments were deleted. Notwithstanding this, it gathered around 10,000

15 “Open-Source Policy Formulation for Sri Lanka’s Capital.” *Lanka Business Online*. 12 September, 2011. http://www.lankabusinessonline.com/news/Open-source_policy_formulation_for_Sri_Lankas_capital/1804290644

16 <https://www.facebook.com/mmoragoda>

17 Located at <http://www.ourcmb.com>, but no longer accessible online as at 5 June, 2013.

users within a month. Commenting on this milestone, Moragoda wrote: "Social media is starting to reach all sectors of society and it has vast potential to empower citizens and to create efficiencies and openness in government. It is only a tool though, and can be misused or used constructively. My hope is that social media will be a positive catalyst in creating a community of shared values and bringing about effective government rather than a tool to create further divisions and polarization."

Others, while commending the strategies used, questioned the sincerity and efficacy of this process. Most vocal was Sanjana Hattotuwa, a new media researcher and activist, who tried to engage Moragoda on Facebook and Twitter - with limited success.

In a critique published on 14 September, 2011, Hattotuwa noted: "The (Moragoda) campaign's central website, <http://www.ourcmb.com>, is leagues ahead of what any candidate at any election in Sri Lanka has produced. Aimed to elicit public feedback on a 12 point, 100 day plan for Colombo, the website is a model for how politicians can use the web to co-create policy in what is promised is an open, transparent manner. Milinda's Facebook group, growing apace in the number of fans, is something other candidates have done in the past, but not to this degree of curatorial prowess. He also has a presence on YouTube and Twitter."¹⁸

Hattotuwa argued how, despite these sophisticated trappings, the campaign was not as participatory, consultative or engaging as it appeared at first glance. He described in detail, with screen grabs of relevant exchanges, how he had questioned the Moragoda campaign on several contentious issues:

- relocation of slum dwellers in Colombo without the due process and compensation;
- religious tolerance (seen as coming under pressure from extremist elements);
- right to information (promised by the campaign at local government level when no laws exist at national level – see Box 1);

18 Milinda Moragoda: "The Gap Between Promise and Reality." *Groundviews.org* 14 September, 2011. <http://groundviews.org/2011/09/14/milinda-moragoda-the-gap-between-promise-and-reality/>

- the candidate's non declaration of assets prior to seeking public office; and
- the overall "inability of the campaign to deal with hard questions".

Hattotuwa also critiqued Moragoda's intermittent engagement with the public using social media. A case point was his use of Twitter. Moragoda had originally created a Twitter account in 2010 (when he contested and lost in the general election in April 2010) which lay abandoned from 7 April, 2010 until 6 September, 2011 without any public engagement.

It was suddenly activated when he decided to run for mayor. "Not a single tweet, not a single word about what he was doing to champion what he stood for even out of power," Hattotuwa noted sardonically.

Placing these individual concerns against the prevailing political reality, Hattotuwa argued:

"*Sans* any real democracy in Sri Lanka, <http://www.ourcmb.com> is actually not a framework for public engagement. Rather, it is essentially a platform (arguably a rather parasitical one) to get the best ideas from amongst us and make them hostage to the parochialism of a single ruling family that circumscribes in turn what Moragoda - if he should win - can and should do as Mayor."¹⁹

MUZAMMIL CAMPAIGN

The winning party's (UNP) online campaign, was less colorful, but seems to have been effective in its own way.

During the early stages of his campaign, A. J. M. Muzammil focused more on traditional methods of engagement as compared to new media. He probably looked at his constituency's demographics: despite metro Colombo having higher than average incomes, the percentage of urban poor within the CMC area is high. Social media did not offer pathways to these voters. However, as the campaign evolved, Muzammil warmed up to social media.

Having had no previous presence on Facebook, Muzammil launched an account for campaigning.²⁰ There are disadvantages in this approach: a

19 Op cit 18

20 <https://www.facebook.com/A.J.M.Muzammil>



Right to Information - at Local Level?

Despite many years of advocacy, Sri Lanka has no Right to Information (RTI) law. Two attempts by the Parliamentary opposition to introduce RTI laws in recent years were defeated by the Government.

RTI became a topic of much debate during the CMC election campaign, when the ruling coalition's (UPFA) mayoral candidate Milinda Moragoda pledged to recognise RTI at CMC if he won.

Dr Rohan Samarajiva, policy advisor to the Moragoda campaign, called it 'pragmatic RTI'. In an op-ed published during the campaign, he wrote: "One could of course try it at the national level and tweak until it is right. Alternatively, one could try it out at a lower level of government on a small scale as a pilot; learn the lessons of what works and what needs fine tuning and scale up."

Pointing out how Moragoda had long advocated RTI, Dr Samarajiva added: "Crafting a good piece of RTI legislation for the city level will require help. The draft developed while Milinda was minister of justice and law reforms will be our starting point. We'd be happy to adapt it for the city level in a participatory way, starting even before the election." (See: <http://tiny.cc/RTIMM>)

Moragoda's detractors were not quite convinced. Economist and opposition Member of Parliament, Dr Harsha de Silva, argued that the ruling coalition had consistently resisted and ridiculed attempts to legislate RTI at a national level. He wrote: "In fact the President is on record having said there is no need for people to have the right to information. So, in this background no right thinking person would ever believe the promise of the UPFA mayoral candidate about ensuring right to information in the CMC. This regime will never allow it." (See: <http://tiny.cc/RTIHdS>)

Cyber activists repeatedly asked Moragoda to practise RTI by declaring his own assets. The candidate remained silent on this point and his campaign team said he would do so if and when elected, as strictly required by election laws. Activists decried it as Moragoda's failure to 'walk the talk.'

Meanwhile, the UNP also included an RTI pledge in its campaign for the neighbouring Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte Municipal Council. In the event, UNP lost that council while UPFA lost the CMC.

It seems unlikely that RTI would be legislated anytime soon in Sri Lanka. In July 2012, secretary to the Ministry of Mass Media and Information declared that the Government will not be introducing any RTI laws "because it would compromise the country's national security". See <http://tiny.cc/RTICH>

Facebook account can have only 5000 friends. On the other hand, an open page can gather any number of 'likes.'

Yet Muzammil chose a Facebook account, probably wanting to build closer and tighter relationships with cyber-savvy sections of his constituency rather than mechanically approaching a large, but non-customized, audience. While Muzammil's number of 'friends' was less than that of his rival, his Facebook campaign was just as engaging. This was possible because others could 'tag' him as an account-holder.

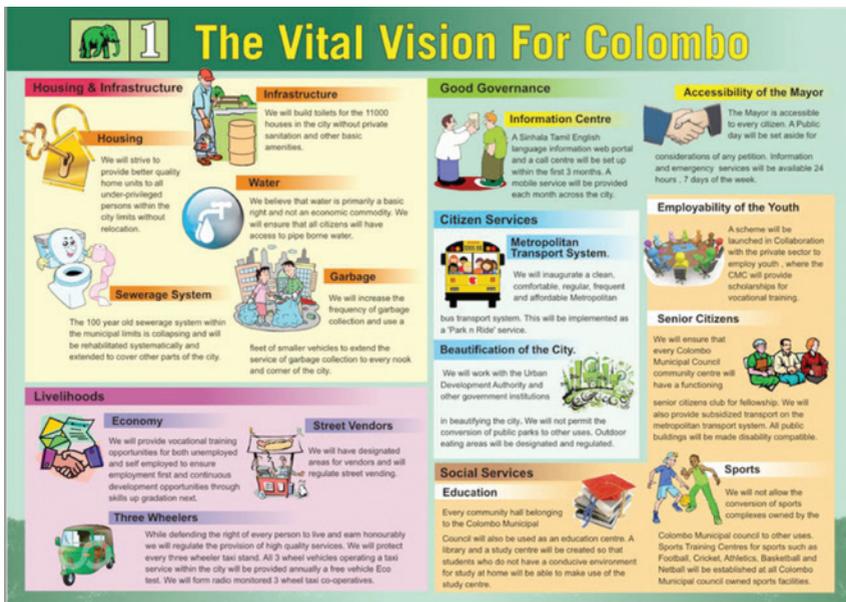
The Facebook activity was sustained by Muzammil's campaign staff and supporters. Muzammil himself was never seen directly engaging via Facebook or any other social media. While he had a standard website, he did not maintain a personal or official blog. His Twitter account followed a few hundred people, but never gathered a significant following. He tweeted only once in the entire campaign. Cyber activists' tweeted questions went unanswered (but then, Muzammil never attracted that many questions, as Moragoda did).

Muzammil's social media relied heavily on his campaign photos. He had plenty of photos showing him talking in a relaxed manner with slum dwellers, professionals, businessmen and many others. While his main opponent's spouse was never photographed during the campaign, Muzammil's wife was often shown mingling among crowds. The imagery seemed to convey a simple message: "I am one of you. Vote for me. I will look after you."

Muzammil's campaign manifesto did not dabble much in policy matters, for which the scope at local government is rather limited. Instead, it addressed practical problems faced by the residents of Colombo such as adequate housing; proper water supply and sanitation; satisfactory waste disposal; improved public transport; livelihood support for the poor; development of sports and enhancing a range of other services.

Muzammil pledged that, if elected mayor of Colombo, he would be accessible to every citizen. Coming from a man of the people, this sounded both sincere and credible.

The manifesto also relied heavily on graphics. The document was so brief that it was printed double-sided on an A5 sheet. Multilingual online versions were shared via social media and were also distributed through email with the help of volunteers.



UNP Muzammil Campaign Manifesto for CMC Election Oct 2011

POLITICIANS ENGAGING CITIZENS USING ONLINE PLATFORMS

Sri Lanka's is a politically engaged society where voter turnout at elections is high and there is widespread interest in all matters political. For much of the 20th Century, political discourse happened at small group level through political rallies, or through newspapers.

The advent of broadcast television in 1982 provided another platform, but political talk shows became a mainstream genre of programming only at the turn of the century. As Sri Lanka's first television generation rises in society and economy²¹, it has finally produced a few politicians skilled in the art of TV debating. Most others failed to adapt their platform oratory to suit the more nuanced and demanding audio-visual medium.

The web presents its own set of challenges to political players and analysts, and some innovative Sri Lankan politicians will eventually master the art of harnessing the web-based media. For now, however, not a

21 <http://collidecolumn.wordpress.com/2012/02/12/when-worlds-collide-2-get-used-to-the-idiot-box-folks/>

single Lankan political figure seems to have grasped the full complexity or potential of web 2.0 platforms and social media.

Still, the CMC election 2011 can be seen as a watershed event where new campaign strategies and new forms of political engagement were tested. The Moragoda campaign went further than any previous attempt at national, provincial or local government level. The ultimately victorious Muzammil campaign, on the other hand, was characterized by an average new media strategy.

Where new media is concerned, one interesting development was how independent activists without any political party affiliation tried to engage the leading candidates through social media platforms.

It was not just the residents of Colombo - strictly speaking, the only ones registered to vote for or against candidates - who took part in online debates during the CMC 2011 election campaigns. Given Colombo's strategic significance in Sri Lanka's policy, law and economic spheres, many non-residents also joined. Discussions often transcended the strict purview of local government bodies - apparently, to the chagrin of some campaign managers.

Most attention was directed at the Moragoda campaign - for understandable reasons. A former minister of science and technology, Milinda Moragoda, projects himself as a liberal, tech-savvy and modern politician. As noted above, his media campaign was superior in design and style - largely thanks to his new media campaign manager Indi Samarajiva, one of Sri Lanka's leading bloggers.²²

Yet the slick campaign could not easily gloss over some fundamental issues raised by activists. Such debates were also framed and shaped by larger factors of national level politics and governance, as well as the candidate's own past track record of sporadic engagement with the electorate. The gap between Moragoda's words and deeds was brought into sharp focus.

Perhaps Moragoda also became the 'lightning rod' for middle class and minority discontent within the UPFA government that is completely dominating national politics in the absence of a united and coherent opposition.

22 <http://indi.ca/2011/10/unp-wins-colombo-municipal-council/>

Cyber activists, including the present writers who tried to engage the Moragoda campaign on core issues on social media platforms, were frustrated by how the campaign sidestepped to discuss certain “inconvenient truths”. Moragoda campaign managers sometimes used a convoluted logic or technocratic arguments in defending their candidate.

As opposition parliamentarian and public intellectual, Dr Harsha de Silva, noted in an op-ed essay published during the campaign: “Neither the Secretary (to the Ministry of) Defense (and Urban Development) nor the UPFA mayoral candidate has answered the repeated question as to why the National Involuntary Resettlement Policy was not followed when hundreds of poor families were evicted from their homes.”²³

On 20 September, 2011, Dr de Silva also raised in Parliament the matter of Moragoda’s assets declaration, citing Sri Lanka’s first citizen journalism website, Groundviews.org, by name – probably the first time that social media led calls for transparency found expression in parliament. It is now part of the official record.²⁴ Unlike Moragoda, Muzammil did not project himself as a tech-savvy policy wonk. So the Muzammil campaign was not challenged by activists with the same intensity or frequency.

It was not just young activists who used online platforms for discussing and debating issues of urban governance during and after the CMC election. Concerned senior citizens also did.

For example, on the day of the election, retired civil servant Austin Fernando (a former secretary to the ministry of defence) published an open letter on Groundviews.org website addressed to the two leading mayoral candidates. In it, he focused on the two candidates’ different approaches to ‘under served settlements’ (USSs) in the CMC area, and drew their

23 Local government elections: “Military Puppeteers, Elected Puppets, Right to Information and People’s Liberties.” *Groundviews.org* 20 September, 2011. <http://groundviews.org/2011/09/20/local-government-elections-military-puppeteers-elected-puppets-right-to-information-and-peoples-liberties/>

24 Milinda Moragoda’s ‘Right to Information’: “A Sordid Record of its Real Nature and Limits.” *Groundviews.org*, 26 September, 2011. <http://groundviews.org/2011/09/26/milinda-moragodas-right-to-information-a-sordid-record-of-its-real-nature-and-limits/>

attention to the UN-Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons (Pinheiro Principles).²⁵

POST-ELECTION CYBER GAPS

Social media use during the CMC election 2011 is a case of the glass being half full. It raised the benchmark higher, but at the same time, there were gaps and missed opportunities.

Two weeks prior to the election date, Moragoda's new media manager Indi Samarajiva wrote on his own blog: "Personally, I think it's good when anyone gets onto social networks, especially politicians and elected officials. I think politicians should be thus encouraged, whatever party they're from and however they choose to engage. It's encouraging that so many candidates for the Colombo Municipal Council elections are making use of Facebook. I hope in the future there will be more, and that elected officials will continue to stay engaged through as many channels as possible."²⁶

Unfortunately, such continuing engagement did not happen. Neither the winner nor others sustained their social media presence with the same intensity or frequency. Admittedly, doing so entails much time and effort – something in which mainstream political parties or politicians in Sri Lanka are not yet willing to invest. One common drawback in many web-based discussions is the lack of proper content curation (the collection and archiving of digital assets) and the absence of content archiving. Both were evident in the aftermath of the CMC 2011 election.

All the crowdsourced ideas, interesting debates and other user-generated content in the Moragoda campaign's 'Our Colombo' website are no longer accessible online. Researcher Sanjana Hattotuwa says it is a travesty that the site was not archived. In his view, this suggests that new media is still deeply partisan in design and deployment. He noted in a tweet in early April 2013: "Value of content beyond campaign and party, for citizens, for posterity, is unrecognized. SM of candidates as partisan as parties."²⁷

Research for this paper located only one partial attempt to capture

25 "Developing the 'Under Served Settlements' in Colombo: An Open Letter". *Groundviews.org*, 8 October, 2011. <http://groundviews.org/2011/10/08/developing-the-under-served-settlements-in-colombo-an-open-letter/>

26 <http://indi.ca/2011/09/facebook-and-the-colombo-election/>

27 <https://twitter.com/groundviews/statuses/318905297328553984>

some interesting debates appearing on news websites, Twitter and Facebook on the right to information during the CMC campaign. It was collated by a citizen journalist using the American based information network website *Storify*,²⁸

CONCLUSION

There is no unequivocal evidence to prove that the use of social media, on its own, significantly changed CMC election results in 2011. As with all election campaigns, the influences were many, varied and nuanced.

Nevertheless, social media enabled urban, tech savvy individuals - young and old - from different social and cultural backgrounds to engage in the political discourse. This is noteworthy, when the overall trend among many young people is political apathy. To that extent, this election may one day be seen as a turning point in electronic citizenship engagement in Sri Lanka's governance and politics.

For the moment, however, 'offline' factors dominate politics and economics in Colombo and elsewhere in Sri Lanka, as the contest between centralization and decentralization unfolds in the national parliament, provincial councils and local government bodies. The CMC election has given out a signal that excessive political centralization and monocultures would not be favored by Sri Lanka's growing urban middle class citizens.

Political analyst Dayan Jayatileka summed this up best: "The country's rulers and foreign critics have similar lessons to learn from the election results. The foreign critics must know that Colombo and Jaffna are not the country at large, and that the country at large has gone overwhelmingly one way. The rulers must know that the world outside, from Seattle to Singapore, is more like Colombo and Jaffna, only far more so, than it is like any other part of Sri Lanka."²⁹

Declaration:

Both writers were among the cyber activists and citizen journalists

28 <http://tiny.cc/R2ICMC>

29 Reading the results of the municipal elections in Sri Lanka, Groundviews.org, 10 Oct 2011 <http://groundviews.org/2011/10/10/reading-the-results-of-the-municipal-elections-in-sri-lanka/>

who tried to engage leading mayoral candidates on social media during the CMC election 2011. Neither has any political party affiliation; all their comments were made under own names.



Mind Your Language!

Heated online debates at times descended to name calling, veiled threats and other insults – often posted anonymously or pseudonymously.

The Moragoda campaign belatedly offered to moderate comments when cyber activist Sanjana Hattotuwa drew their attention to such hateful remarks. Vilification of candidates themselves, as well as their supporters, continued in various blogs and other online platforms not officially affiliated with any candidate. These highlighted the need for respectful online communications – not widely appreciated or practised in Sri Lanka.