

# Voting in Hate: A study of hate speech on Facebook surrounding Sri Lanka's Parliamentary Election of 2015

Full report at <http://www.cpalanka.org/voting-in-hate-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-surrounding-sri-lankas-parliamentary-election-of-2015/>

## Executive Summary

'Voting in hate' is a study of online hate speech surrounding Sri Lanka's Parliamentary Election of 2015. It is the third of a series of studies published by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, exploring the growth and effects of the phenomena of hate and dangerous speech on social media. The 2015 Parliamentary Election witnessed a new development in Sri Lanka where social media was used as a tool for political campaigning and election related activity. Facebook emerged the most used social media platform. The relatively unshackled freedom of expression found in social media also invited unchecked expressions of hateful and defamatory material targeting candidates. The new report examines 11 Facebook groups covering a period of one month prior to the date of the 2015 Parliamentary Election on 17th August. Relevant posts and responses were captured and translated in to English. The findings reveal appropriation of Facebook groups to promote hate speech thinly veiled as political speech, targeting candidates based on their ethnicity, religion, gender and to a lesser degree, their political affiliations. The study explored the relevance of online hate speech and its effect on the outcome of the election. While the findings do not support any significant impact on voter preferences, it exposes serious implications of unchecked online expressions of racism, extremism and sexism driven hate speech on an ever growing following of youth. It recommends action by the state, candidates and society at large in addressing the proliferation of hate speech in social media driven election campaigning, in the future.

- Awareness on the part of the government, the Elections Commission, political leaders and candidates of the space created online for campaigning, as much as on the ground and on traditional media.
- Establishment of a reporting mechanism by the Elections Commission where candidates or the general public can report online abuse and hate speech. The Elections Commission can in turn investigate and report the offending Facebook page to be shut down, by Facebook itself, as per their policy against hate speech.
- Political parties can be pro-active where they devise monitoring of social media to flag offensive material and report offending groups to be shut down.

While it is possible for hate mongering Facebook pages which are shut down to re-emerge under a new account name, intervention of this nature can discourage hate speech mongering to some extent, sending a clear message of zero tolerance.

- Establishment of two-way online communication with public by political candidates on interactive social media spaces such as Facebook as a healthy alternative of online discourse where grievances can be aired in a civilized manner and the candidate will post responses. Comments or posts amounting to hate speech or profanity can be deleted by the administrator, cultivating a positive engagement and dialogue with social media savvy youth who may yet not have fallen in to the grip of hate groups.

The report concludes that shrinking online space is not the answer; expanding the space for respectful and peaceful engagement is.