



Democracy in Disguise: Inauthentic Online Influence on the 2025 Sri Lanka's Local Government Elections

Executive Summary

Over the past year, DRI has monitored the rise of inauthentic political activity on TikTok during key electoral moments across Europe, identifying accounts that support parties and candidates to artificially boost their visibility and engagement, often in violation of the platform's own rules. This research has uncovered the presence of murky accounts across multiple EU contexts, including the 2024 European Parliament elections and national contests in Germany, Poland, and Romania. Building on these findings, and recognising the global relevance and popularity of TikTok, we turned our attention to the 2025 local government elections in Sri Lanka, a context in which the platform plays a growing role in shaping political discourse, especially among younger voters.

Key findings;

- We identified 66 murky accounts: 79.0 per cent impersonated Sri Lankan political parties, 11.3 per cent supported candidates running in the 2025 local government elections, 4.8 per cent impersonated the current president, Anura Kumara Disanayake, and another 4.8 per cent were linked to other politicians.
- Murky accounts predominantly supported left-wing and centre-left parties.



The National People's Power (NPP) party was the most impersonated, with 33.3 per cent of inauthentic accounts in our sample mimicking the party, followed by the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance (24.2 per cent) and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya party (SJB) (22.7 per cent).

- Murky accounts supporting the NPP had the highest levels of activity and reach, averaging 44.6 videos, 1,894.5 followers, and 17,190.2 profile likes. They also led across all engagement metrics, with an average of 3,561.3 views, 400.3 likes, 19.1 comments, and 10.6 shares per video. Accounts linked to the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance also showed notable, though more limited activity and reach (14.9 videos, 1,032.9 followers, and 1,378.6 profile likes) and lower engagement (1,331.3 views, 56.6 likes, 1.3 comments, and 2.9 shares per video).
- Our research also allowed us to track murky account activity over time, showing that inauthentic behavior peaked around the 2024 presidential election. Still, accounts supporting the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the NPP, SJB, the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party remained active, albeit to a lesser extent, during the 2025 cycle.
- Murky accounts mainly shared videos promoting the parties and politicians they mimicked, typically featuring political debates, speeches, and campaign interactions with citizens. Many of the accounts used TikTok's in-app editing tools, such as native fonts, emojis, background music, and visual effects.

Our analysis highlights that murky accounts played a role in shaping the online political landscape during Sri Lanka's 2025 local government elections, by promoting well-established parties, reaching wide audiences, and generating substantial engagement. Addressing this issue requires stronger platform responses, the enforcement of national guidelines, and more robust cooperation between social media companies, electoral authorities, and civil society actors, especially in non-EU contexts such as Sri Lanka, where formal mechanisms are scarce. Failing to address these



gaps will further undermine electoral integrity and hinder meaningful civic engagement online.

Introduction

In recent years, TikTok has emerged as a powerful, yet largely underregulated arena for political communication. At DRI, we have been systematically monitoring the platform’s role in electoral processes, with particular attention to what we define as “murky accounts” – TikTok profiles of questionable affiliation that impersonate official government, politician, or party accounts, without declaring themselves as parody or fan pages.¹ These accounts, used to promote, amplify, or disseminate political content in misleading ways, have been documented across several EU elections, including the 2024 European Parliament elections, the 2024/2025 Romanian presidential elections, the 2025 Polish presidential election, and the 2025 German federal elections.

While previous analyses focused on EU contexts, this report marks the first attempt to monitor the phenomenon beyond that geographic and regulatory scope. Monitoring inauthentic political behaviour on TikTok in Sri Lanka during the 2025 local government elections is particularly relevant given the platform’s growing role as a space for political communication, especially among younger voters.² Murky accounts play a key role in shaping political narratives and amplifying campaign messaging, underscoring the importance of monitoring such actors to better understand the information environment during elections.

1 DRI, [“Scroll, Like, Deceive: Murky Political Accounts on TikTok before the German 2025 Elections”](#), 21 March 2025.

2 Veranga Wickramasinghe, [“Tik Tok Culture and its Social Media Usage Patterns among Young Generation in Contemporary Sri Lanka”](#), Conference paper: 2nd International Symposium on Social Sciences & Humanities, 2019, Development Towards Sustainability, December 2019.



Compounding this situation, regulatory frameworks for social media accountability in Sri Lanka remain limited, and cooperation mechanisms between platforms, electoral authorities, and civil society are still underdeveloped. This combination of high platform penetration and weak oversight structures makes the online political sphere particularly vulnerable to manipulation, further reinforcing the need for sustained and systematic monitoring efforts.

As a result, the use of such deceptive tactics poses systemic risks to the integrity of elections and civic discourse, especially in light of Sri Lanka's legal framework. According to the March 2025 Election Commission media guidelines,³ social media platforms are expected to tackle the spread of false or manipulated political content and prevent the creation of “fake public opinion” through deceptive accounts. The practices observed in this study directly undermine these principles, and call for urgent platform-level and regulatory responses.

This report seeks to support such efforts by shedding light on how murky accounts operated during the 2025 Sri Lankan local government elections. It presents our findings on the scope and behaviour of these accounts, offers a qualitative assessment of the content they shared, and discusses the challenges we encountered in communicating these issues to TikTok. Finally, it puts forward concrete recommendations to strengthen accountability mechanisms, both at the platform level and through national electoral oversight.

³ [“Media Guidelines under Article 104b\(5\)\(A\) of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka”](#), The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 3 March 2025.



Findings

We divided the analysis into two parts.

First, we examined the distribution of murky accounts across local election candidates, politicians, and political parties. To further understand the landscape of inauthentic accounts on TikTok, we analysed two complementary dimensions:

1. the account-level reach, measured by the average number of videos posted, followers, and profile likes; and
2. the content-level engagement, which captured how users interacted with the accounts' posts, including average views, likes, comments, and shares per video. We also included an activity analysis over time to map the periods during which these accounts were active and to assess whether their behaviour was aligned with key electoral moments.

Second, to examine the strategies murky accounts used to increase their visibility, we conducted a closer analysis of their profile design features, along with a qualitative assessment of the content they shared.

Murky account characteristics

Based on data collected between 16 April and 17 June 2025, covering both the pre- and post-electoral periods, we identified 66 profiles linked to various political entities in Sri Lanka.

Political Affiliations of Murky Accounts

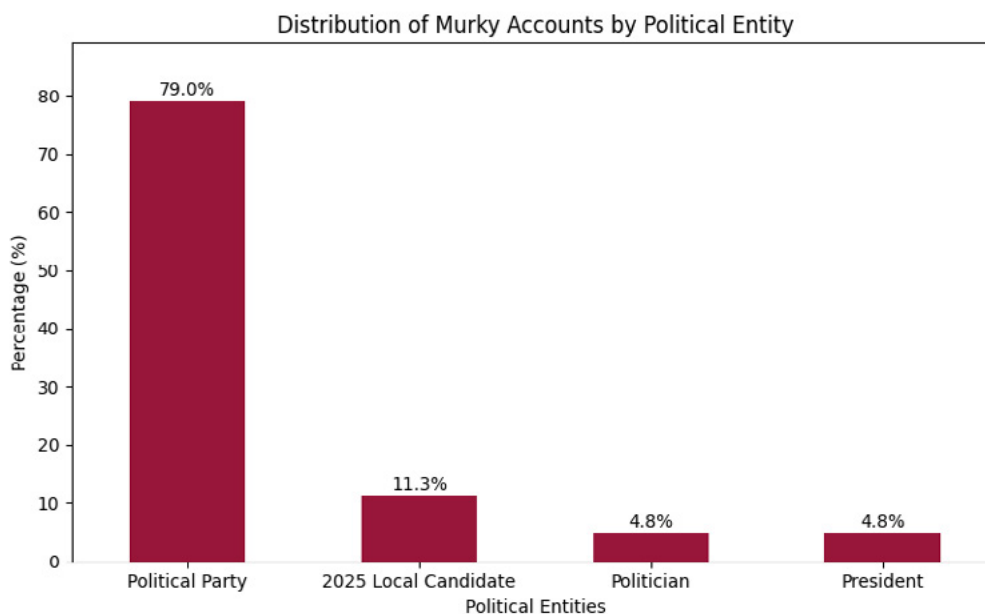
Figure 1 shows that 79.0 per cent the murky accounts in our sample impersonated political parties, including the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, the Democratic National Alliance (DNA), the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party, the National



People's Power (NPP) party, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party, and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Additionally, 11.3 per cent of the accounts focused on candidates running in the 2025 local government election, such as Dr. Ruvaiz Haniffa, Swasthika Arulingam, and Hassan Alaldeen, likely reflecting that local candidates, competing in smaller geographic areas, had limited visibility and were less likely to be impersonated on TikTok. Only a few accounts impersonated other Sri Lankan politicians (4.8 per cent), including the current president, Anura Kumara Dissanayake (4.8 per cent), or others, such as Manivannan Visvalingam and Sajith Premadasa (4.8 per cent).

Given this distribution, where murky accounts were more commonly used to impersonate political parties than individual candidates, this study focused on understanding the spread and characteristics of such accounts at the party level.

Figure 1: Distribution of murky accounts by political entity.





The NPP was the most frequently impersonated political party, accounting for 33.3 per cent of inauthentic accounts in our dataset, followed by the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, with 24.2 per cent, and the SJB, with 22.7 per cent. By contrast, only 1.5 per cent of murky accounts supported each of the following entities: the Tamil People's Alliance, the DNA, ITAK, and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress.

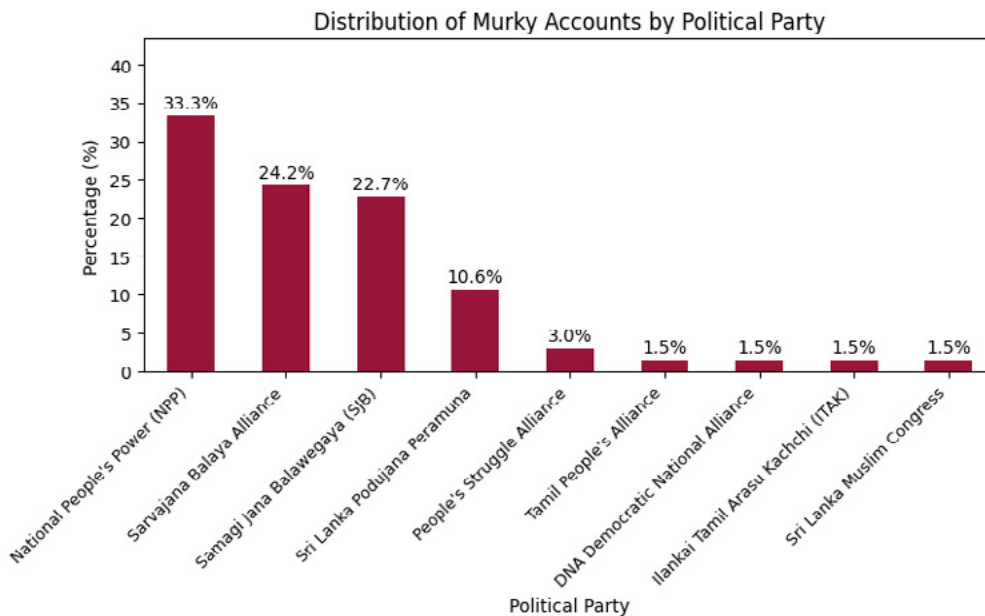
The higher levels of impersonation targeting the NPP and SJB likely reflect their popularity and strong nationwide presence, in contrast to smaller parties, whose limited geographical reach and regional focus likely contribute to the lower levels of impersonation observed in their cases.

In the case of Sarvajana Balaya, however, the pattern appears to be driven by a different factor; although the party itself does not have a significant grassroots base, its leader, Dilith Jayaweera, has maintained a prominent and active presence across social media platforms, potentially making the party a more visible and attractive target for impersonation online.

Interestingly, these findings diverge from what we have observed in previous investigations across the EU context. In the European Parliament elections, as well as in national contests in Germany, Poland, and Romania, murky accounts tended to support far-right candidates and parties, whereas, in this case, a higher number of accounts mimicked left-wing and centre-left parties.



Figure 2: Distribution of murky accounts by political party.



Reach of Murky Accounts (Account-Level Metrics)

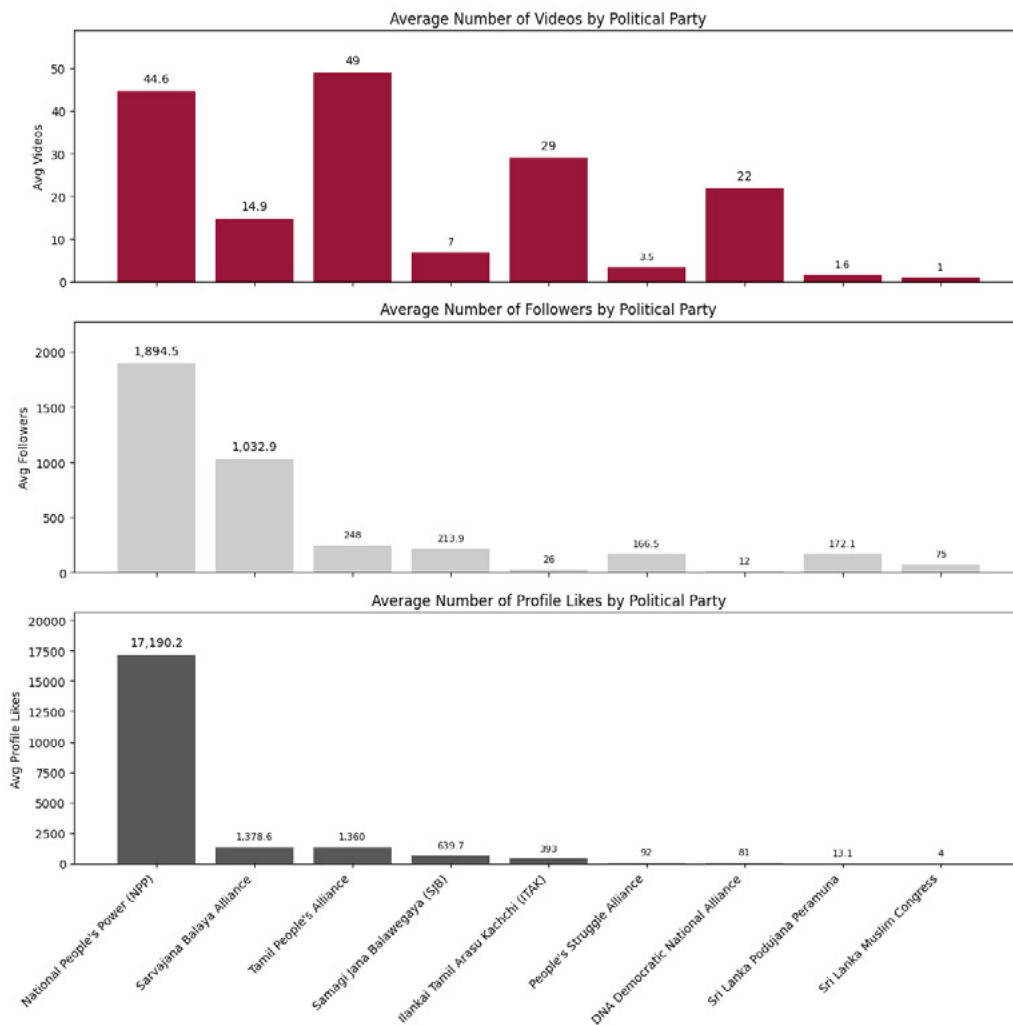
Analysing account-level metrics, such as the number of likes an account receives on its profile (profile level likes), their follower counts, and the average number of videos posted, is central to understanding the impact of murky accounts, as these indicators help evaluate their visibility and reach on TikTok.

Figure 3 shows the average videos, followers, and profile likes of murky accounts grouped by political party. Our analysis suggests that murky accounts linked to the NPP achieved broader relative reach compared to those supporting other political parties. On average, these accounts posted 44.6 videos, had 1,894.5 followers, and received 17,190.2 profile likes – higher figures than accounts impersonating any other party. In terms of content output, they were only surpassed by accounts impersonating the Tamil People's Alliance, which posted an average of 49.0 videos. Those accounts, however,



had significantly fewer followers (248) and profile likes (1,360), suggesting a narrower reach despite higher posting activity. Murky accounts linked to the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance also showed a notable, though more limited average reach, posting 14.9 videos, having 1,032.9 followers, and receiving 1,378.6 profile likes.

Figure 3: Average number of videos, followers, and profile level likes of murky accounts by political party.





The comparatively strong reach of accounts impersonating the NPP likely stems from the party's well-established organisational structures across the country. These offline strengths may contribute not only to a higher likelihood of being impersonated, but also to greater online traction. By contrast, the reach of accounts linked to the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance appears to be driven more by the strong digital presence of its leader, suggesting that different forms of visibility can shape how murky accounts gain amplification on TikTok.

Interestingly, murky accounts impersonating the SJB and the newly formed People's Struggle Alliance displayed notable contrasts. Despite SJB's strong offline presence, murky accounts associated with it showed a modest reach and activity on TikTok, averaging around 214.0 followers, 640.0 profile likes, and 7.0 videos. This limited visibility may reflect the party's relatively low presence on the platform compared to others where it is more active. Meanwhile, accounts mimicking the People's Struggle Alliance maintained a relative average reach, with 166.5 followers, 92.0 profile likes, and 3.5 videos, reflecting a stronger appeal among younger users who are more active on TikTok.

Murky accounts impersonating parties contesting only in specific districts generally failed to gain visibility on TikTok. Even relatively active accounts, such as those linked to the DNA and ITAK, with averages of 22.0 and 29.0 videos, had fewer than 30 followers and limited profile engagement. Accounts associated with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna were even less active and similarly low in reach. These patterns indicate that murky accounts tied to smaller or regionally concentrated parties struggled to generate meaningful impact, regardless of posting frequency.



Engagement Analysis of Murky Accounts (Content Level Metrics)

By focusing on how users interact with their content, engagement metrics, such as video views, likes, comments and shares, complement the picture of to what extent murky accounts gain traction in the online space. Accordingly, we examined these metrics for all murky accounts up to the end of the data collection period.

Table 2 presents the average per-video views, likes, comments, and shares of murky accounts, grouped by political party. Consistent with previous findings, murky accounts impersonating the NPP recorded the highest engagement levels across all metrics, averaging 3,561.0 views, 400.0 likes, 19.0 comments, and 11.0 shares per video. This prominence likely reflects the NPP's strong offline presence, its status as the ruling party, and its active, platform-tailored TikTok strategy, which may contribute to both the higher number of murky accounts and the elevated engagement they attract.

These were followed by accounts linked to the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, with an average of 1,331.0 views, 57.0 likes, 1.3 comments, and 2.9 shares, highlighting the amplifying effect of individual digital prominence. Murky accounts associated with the SJB also demonstrated notable, though comparatively lower engagement (averaging 532.0 views, 33.0 likes, 1.2 comments, and 1.5 shares per video), reflecting its established political presence.

Notably, murky accounts impersonating regionally focused parties, such as the DNA, ITAK, and the People's Struggle Alliance, recorded comparatively high average video views, but significantly lower levels of engagement in terms of likes, comments, and shares. Among them, accounts linked to the DNA stood out with the highest average number of shares (45.0), suggesting that even low-volume actors can momentarily capture attention, though not necessarily sustained interaction. By contrast, accounts impersonating the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress recorded the lowest engagement, overall.



Table 2: Average number of views, likes, comments, and shares per video of murky accounts across political parties.

Political Party	Average number of views	Average number of likes	Average number of comments	Average number of shares
Democratic National Alliance (DNA)	381.5	3.6	0.3	45.0
Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK)	274.5	14.8	0.6	0.3
National People's Power (NPP)	3,561.3	400.3	19.1	10.5
People's Struggle Alliance	194.6	15.8	1.3	2.5
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	531.5	33.4	1.2	1.5
Sarvajana Balaya Alliance	1,331.3	56.7	1.3	2.9
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress	48.0	4.0	0.0	0.0
Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna	176.2	9.1	0.0	6.2
Tamil People's Alliance	904.4	25.0	1.11	1.27

Murky Account Activity over Time

Understanding when murky accounts are active is key to assessing whether their behaviour is strategically aligned with specific electoral moments. We analysed the date of each account's oldest and most recent post, and were able to identify five distinct activity patterns:

- 1. Inactive accounts:** Accounts that had not published any content at the time of data collection. These made up 21.2 per cent of the sample.
- 2. Accounts active only before 2024:** The oldest and most recent posts for these were dated before 2024, suggesting no direct involvement in recent election cycles. This group represented 6.1 per cent of accounts.



- 3. Accounts active only in 2024:** The oldest and most recent posts from these were dated exclusively during 2024, which likely indicates activity tied to the presidential election. This was the most common pattern, observed in 45.5 per cent of accounts.
- 4. Accounts active up to early May 2025:** The first post by these appeared either in 2024 or 2025, but their most recent post was published before the date of the local government elections (6 May 2025), suggesting that they were active during both the 2024 electoral cycle and 2025 local government elections campaign. These accounted for 21.2 per cent of the total.
- 5. Accounts active after the local government elections:** Independent of their oldest posts, the most recent post came after 6 May, indicating continued activity in the post-election period. Only 6.1 per cent of accounts showed this behaviour.

These findings suggest that murky activity peaked during the 2024 presidential race, with markedly lower levels observed during the 2025 local elections cycle.

Figure 3 shows an analysis of murky account activity timelines by political affiliation, revealing distinct patterns across election cycles, particularly around the 2025 local government elections. Accounts impersonating the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the NPP, SJB, the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna showed varying levels of sustained inauthentic activity.

All murky accounts linked to the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress remained active after the 2025 local elections, while accounts impersonating the NPP were most active during the 2024 presidential campaign (59.1 per cent) and before the date of the local elections date (27.3 per cent). Similarly, SJB-linked accounts showed a more fragmented timeline – 20 per cent were active up to the date of the local elections, 6.7 per cent remained active after it, and 33.3 per cent had been active during the 2024 presidential race, while 40.0 per cent did not publish any content at all. Accounts tied to the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance were also concentrated in 2024 (50.0 per cent), with limited

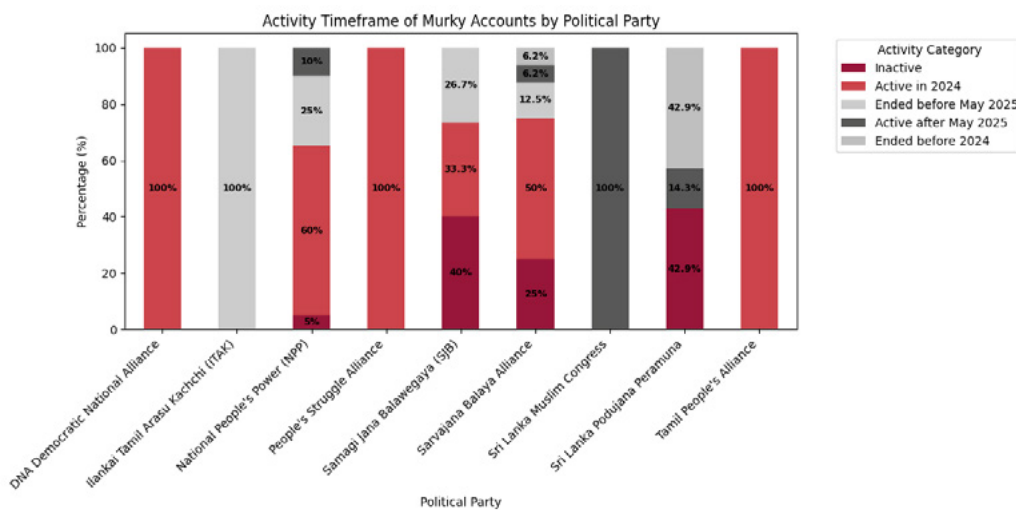


activity in the lead-up to the local elections (12.5 per cent) and a small share active afterwards (6.2 per cent). In contrast, most accounts impersonating the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna were dormant or outdated, although a minority (14.3 per cent) posted content after the 2025 elections.

Interestingly, accounts impersonating ITAK were active exclusively during the 2025 campaign period, ceasing activity immediately thereafter. Accounts linked to the DNA, the People’s Struggle Alliance, and the Tamil People’s Alliance were active solely during the 2024 presidential campaign, and did not reappear thereafter.

These patterns suggest that murky accounts were deployed with varying levels of strategic intent, with some designed for short-term amplification during specific campaigns, while others maintained a more persistent presence beyond the electoral cycle.

Figure 4: Activity timeframe of murky accounts by political party.





What and how murky political accounts post

In this section, we move beyond quantitative metrics to explore the strategies murky accounts used to make their profiles visible. Strategies included employing usernames and nicknames that mimicked political parties and candidates, as well as profile pictures that replicated party logos. Furthermore, we examined the type of content the murky accounts shared, focusing on what they posted in their TikTok feeds and to what extent they leveraged platform-specific features.

Profile Design Characteristics

Previous observations of impersonator account behaviour revealed that murky account usernames (unique identifiers marked by @) and display names or nicknames (which do not need to be unique) often mimic politicians and political parties, with slight variations. This case was no exception; accounts impersonating the NPP and the SJB were among the most frequent users of these tactics, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 3: Examples of murky account usernames and display names.

Political party impersonated	Murky account username	Murky account display name
National People's Power (NPP)	national.peoples4	National People's Power (NPP)
National People's Power (NPP)	national.peoples3	National People's Power - NPP
National People's Power (NPP)	national_peoples_power	NPP
National People's Power (NPP)	national.peoplespower	◆ NPP ◆ පා විනායක
National People's Power (NPP)	npp.9990	National People's Power
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	samagi.jana.balawegaya7	සමගි ජන විමුක්තිය (Party name in Sinhala)
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	samagi.jana.balaw0	Samagi jana balawegaya
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	sarvajana.balaya5	Sarvajana Balaya
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)	samagi.jana.balaw0	Samagi jana balawegaya



Although we lack sufficient empirical evidence to draw definitive conclusions about coordination among inauthentic accounts, the recurring patterns in usernames and display names observed above may suggest signs of coordinated behavior, possibly involving the creation of multiple accounts by a single actor.

Similarly, profile images predominantly featured party logos, sometimes with minor alterations, such as additional visual elements in Sinhala or Tamil, or slight modifications to the logos themselves, while still preserving the party's colour scheme.

Image 1: Examples of murky account profile pictures impersonating, from left to right, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), and the National People's Power (NPP).



Insights into Murky Accounts Content

By examining their content, we found that murky accounts primarily shared videos related to the political parties and politicians they were impersonating. These videos promoted candidates running in the 2025 local elections, such as Hassan Alaldeen (Sarvajana Balaya Alliance), Dr. Ruvaiz Haniffa (SJB), and Swasthika Arulingam (People's Struggle Alliance), as well as other politicians, such as Mohammed Faizal (NPP), Manivannan Visvalingam (Tamil People's Alliance), and the current president, Anura Kumara Dissanayake (NPP). The videos typically featured political debates,



speeches by candidates and party leaders, and interactions with citizens as part of their campaigning efforts.

Image 2: An example of a murky account impersonating local candidate Dr. Ruvaiz Haniffa and promoting campaign content.

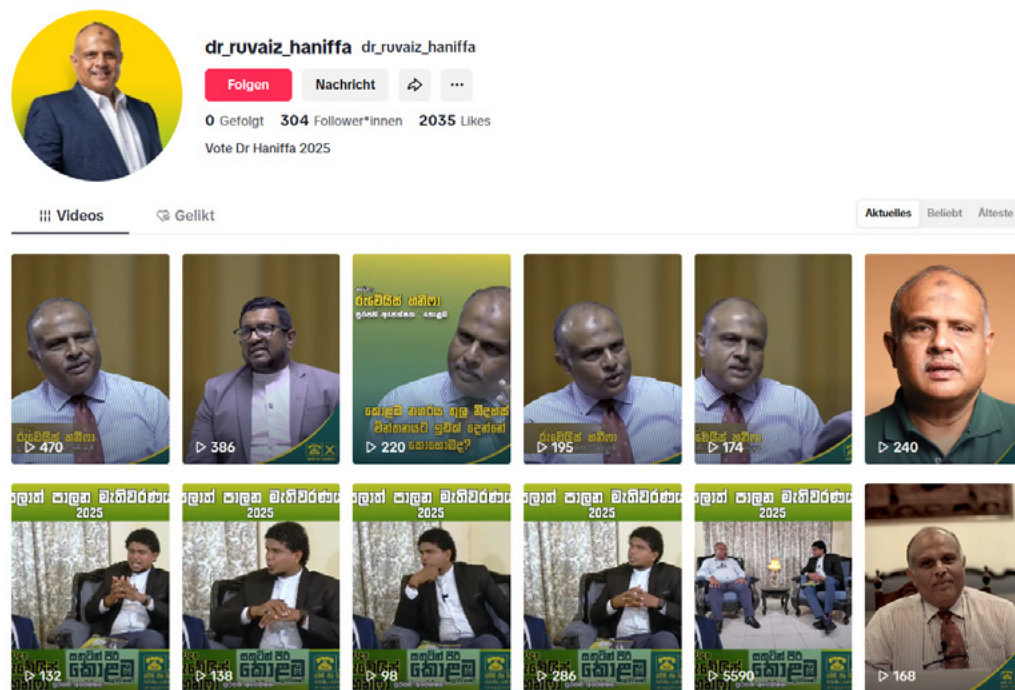
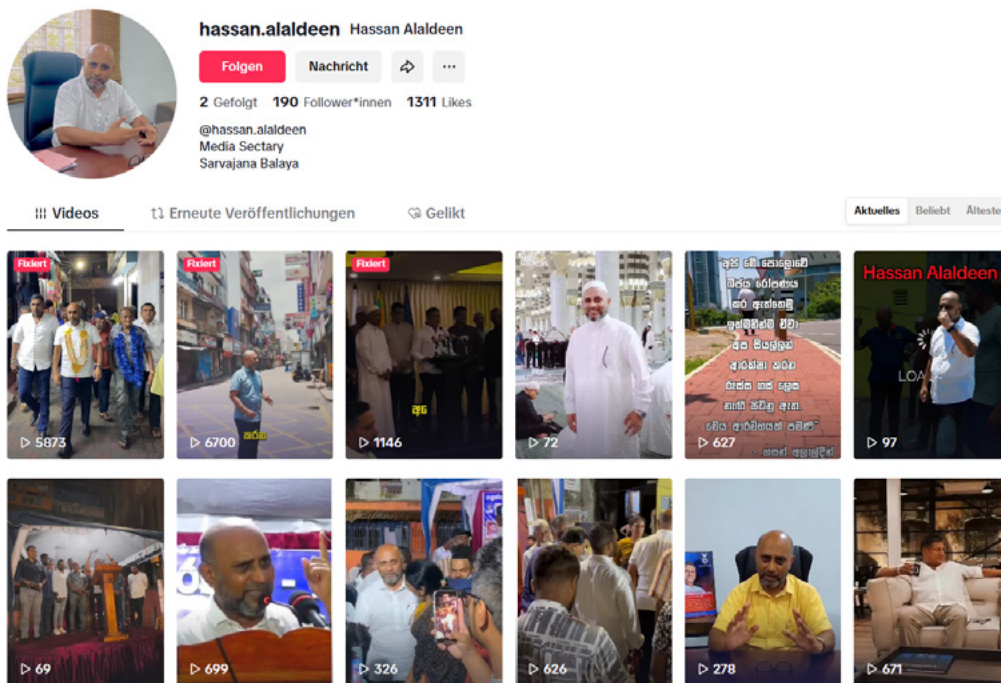




Image 3: The feed of a murky account impersonating local candidate Hassan Alaldeen, featuring videos of him speaking with citizens and promoting his candidacy.



Notably, many murky accounts used TikTok's in-house editing features, such as native fonts, emojis, background music, and visual effects.



Image 4: The feed of a murky account impersonating the National People’s Power (NPP) and its politicians, featuring videos with emojis and embedded on-screen text.

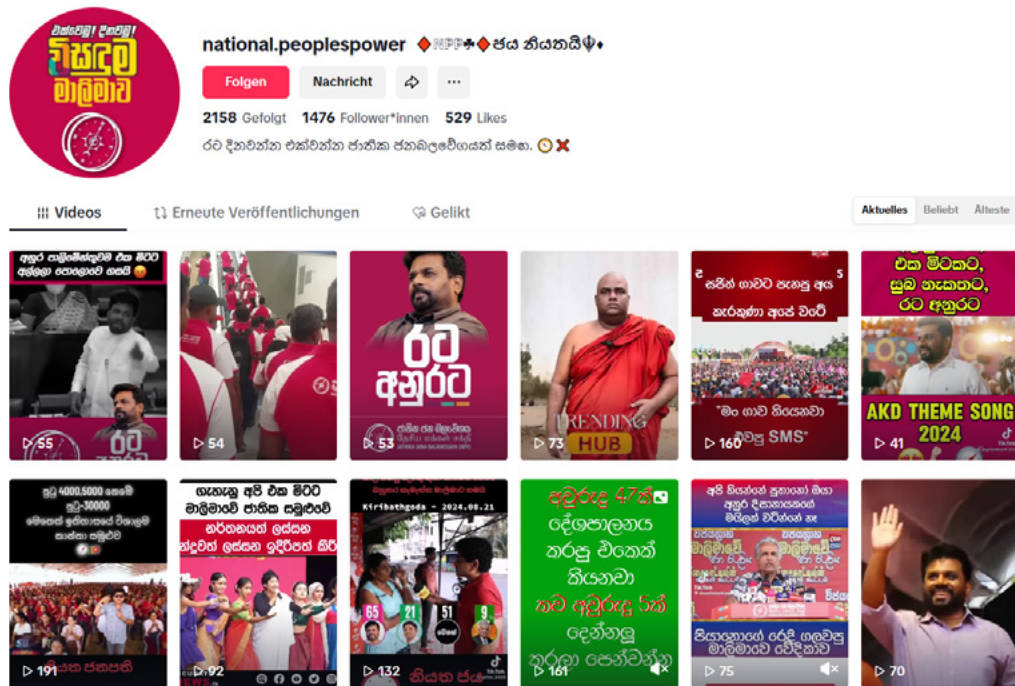
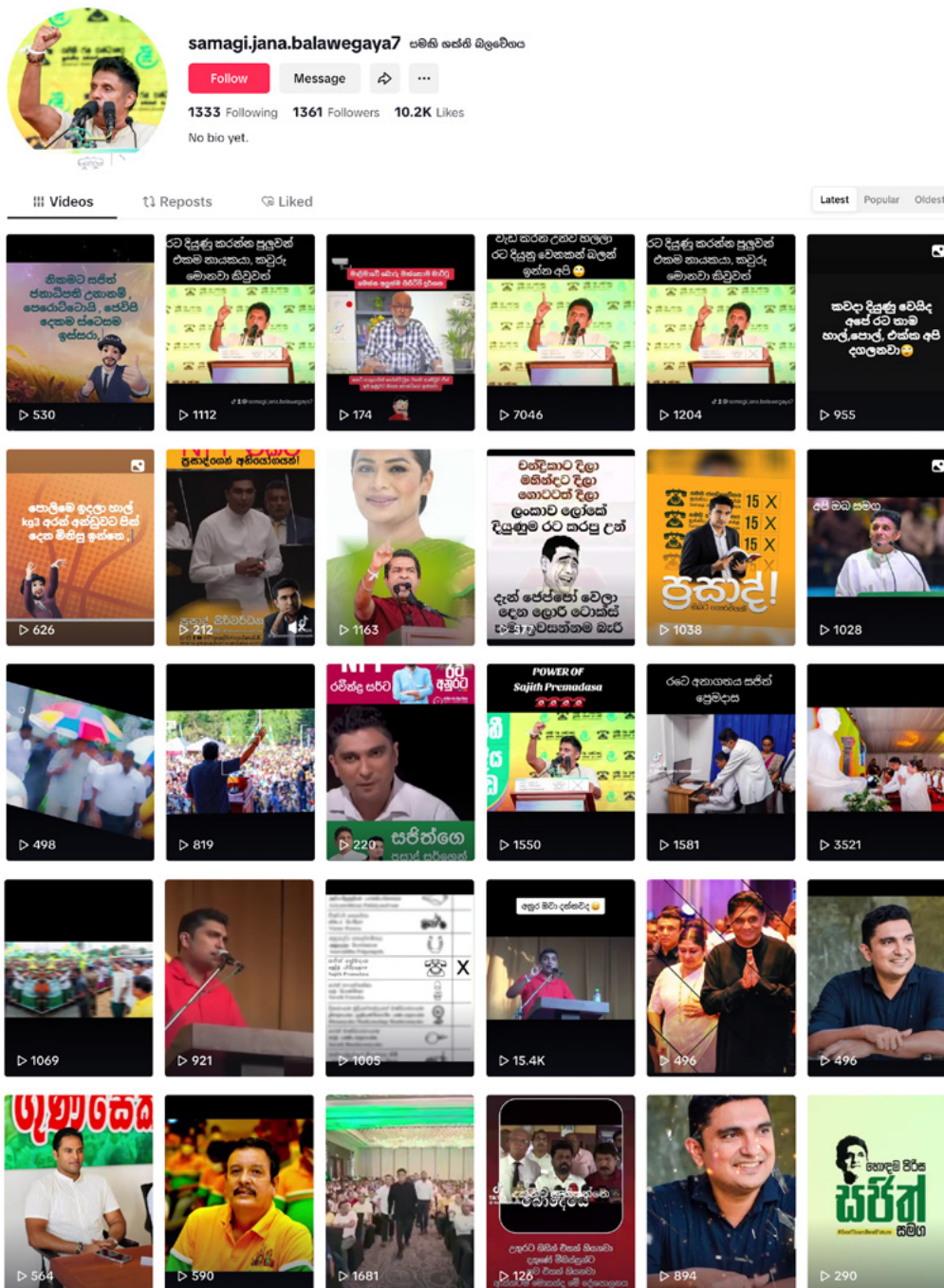




Image 5: The feed of a murky account impersonating the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party and its politicians, featuring videos with emojis and native TikTok fonts.





What do these findings show?

Our analysis paints a clear picture of the prevalence of inauthentic behavior on TikTok during the 2025 Sri Lankan local elections cycle, with murky accounts overwhelmingly benefiting well established political parties, such as the NPP, the Sarvajana Balaya Alliance, and the SJB. Not only were those murky accounts the most numerous in our dataset, but they also outperformed others across all observed metrics, including activity, reach, and engagement. Many of these accounts remained active throughout the 2025 electoral cycle, indicating a sustained presence around key political events.

The proliferation of multiple accounts impersonating political parties poses a systemic risk to civic discourse and the integrity of electoral processes. This tactic undermines the reliability of TikTok as a political communication channel, misleading voters and distorting the perceived level of public support for particular candidates or parties.

This dynamic is especially concerning when viewed in light of the Sri Lankan legal framework. Article 104(B)(5) of the Sri Lankan Constitution empowers the Election Commission to regulate the media, including social media platforms, by issuing guidelines during an election period.⁴ In its most recent Media Guidelines, published on 3 March 2025, the Election Commission stated that “social media platforms must not employ social media users to disseminate false news, misinformation, or intentionally altered or distorted information about parties/independent groups/candidates, or elections, nor should they generate false public opinion through fake social media accounts” (Measure 2.36).⁵

⁴ Verité Research, “[Briefing note: Powers of the Election Commission to Regulate Privately-Owned Media during Elections in Sri Lanka](#)”, November 2019.

⁵ “[Media Guidelines under Article 104b\(5\)\(A\) of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka](#)”, *Op. Cit.*, note 3.



The use of murky accounts that intentionally impersonate political actors or manipulate political content is inconsistent with these guidelines. Such practices risk creating a false perception of popularity or influence, while also opening the door to the spread of misinformation. Ultimately, this contributes to voter manipulation by artificially boosting visibility and engagement for certain candidates and political parties.

Strengthening electoral integrity online: Gaps, challenges, and recommendations

In light of these findings, we reported the identified murky accounts both through TikTok's in-app reporting mechanism and by contacting platform representatives at the EU level. The in-app reporting tool proved largely ineffective, however, as no visible action was taken against the reported accounts. More broadly, our ability to raise such issues is highly context dependent. In countries where regional frameworks and regulations, such as the EU Code of Conduct on Disinformation or the Digital Services Act, are not in place or remain underdeveloped, communication with platforms tends to be fragmented and inconsistent. Reporting these findings within the Sri Lankan context proved difficult due to the lack of structured frameworks and publicly available contact points for platform accountability. This ad hoc approach undermines timely and effective remediation, particularly in politically sensitive environments.

Furthermore, the absence of cooperation mechanisms with civil society and electoral authorities weakens accountability, allowing harmful content to circulate unchecked during critical electoral periods.

In response to these findings and the challenges outlined above, we recommend the following:



To TikTok:

- Remove murky accounts and make verified labels mandatory for political entities to help users clearly distinguish between authentic sources and impersonators, especially during election periods.
- Strengthen its account creation policies to help prevent the proliferation of impersonation accounts, while also developing proactive approaches to actively counter the issue on its platform.
- Provide the TikTok Community Guidelines in local languages, such as Sinhala and Tamil.
- Create direct, reliable points of contact for civil society organisations monitoring disinformation and harmful content, especially beyond EU contexts.

To the Election Commission of Sri Lanka:

- Facilitate formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and data-sharing with civil society organisations or researchers working on online electoral integrity.
- Enforce the 2025 Media Guidelines through concrete actions, such as requesting platform cooperation or issuing takedown requests during the election period.
- Include guidance on how to spot inauthentic behaviour on social media in public awareness campaigns.



Methodology

Since the 2024 European Parliament elections, DRI has been systematically monitoring inauthentic behavior on TikTok using a standardized methodology. A key focus of this work has been the identification of what we refer to as murky accounts: *“TikTok profiles of questionable affiliation that present themselves as official government, politician, or party accounts (GPPPA) when, in fact, they are not. Unlike parody or fan pages, murky accounts offer no disclaimer of their unofficial status and may be interpreted as attempts to promote, amplify, or advertise political content deceptively.”*⁶

To determine whether an account met the criteria for being considered murky, we developed a detailed authenticity assessment framework. Accounts were flagged as inauthentic if they exhibited one or more of the following indicators:

- The username closely mimicked a legitimate political account, by adding letters, numbers, or symbols;
- The profile picture showed signs of image theft or visual misrepresentation, using images of politicians or political parties;
- The account lacked verification and was not labeled as a “fan page,” which TikTok considers legitimate; and or
- Content consisted of monothematic posts, reposted or AI-generated material, often accompanied by poor grammar, awkward translations, excessive hashtags, and manipulated visuals.

Applying this framework, we carried out a structured investigation into the presence of murky accounts in the context of the 2025 Sri Lankan local government elections. We began by compiling a comprehensive list of 69

⁶ DRI, “Scroll, Like, Deceive”, *Op. Cit.*, note 1.



political entities, comprising major candidates and parties across different districts. Based on prior insights into impersonator account behaviour, we generated five username variations for each entity, using common tactics, such as inserting numbers, underscores (_), colons (:), and full stops (.) to mimic official profiles. These variations were then used to search for suspicious TikTok accounts referencing the selected candidates or parties. Unlike in other contexts, we found a higher number of suspicious accounts impersonating political parties, rather than individual candidates. Data collection took place between 16 April and 17 June 2025, covering both pre- and post-electoral periods.

For each identified murky account, we collected data on the political entity being impersonated, the account's username and display name, follower and following counts, the number of likes, and the volume of posted content. We also documented qualitative observations, such as descriptions of the profile image and overall account appearance. Additionally, we recorded engagement metrics at the video level, including likes, comments, and shares.



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