



# When Politics Turns Personal: Hate Speech and Online Gender Based-Violence in Sri Lanka's 2025 Local Elections

## Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade, discourse in Sri Lanka's digital sphere has mirrored the country's deep social and political divisions.<sup>2</sup> Online hate speech, often rooted in ethnic and religious polarisation, has repeatedly followed or spilled into offline violence and intimidation.<sup>3</sup> From the early outbreaks of digitally amplified communal tensions in 2014 and 2018 to the surge of anti-Muslim narratives following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, hate speech has become a defining feature of the country's online political discourse. These narratives not only stigmatise minority communities, but also target political leaders who challenge nationalist or majoritarian ideologies.

By the time of the 2024 parliamentary elections, however, the dynamics of online hate speech had further evolved. While ethnic and religious narratives continued to circulate, a new and equally harmful dimension of

- <sup>1</sup> Warning: This report contains references to, and screenshots of, hateful and gender-based violent content directed at political candidates and public figures during the 2025 Sri Lankan local elections. The material is included solely for research and documentation purposes.
- <sup>2</sup> Sanjana Hattotuwa, "[Digital Blooms-Social Media and Violence in Sri Lanka](#)", Toda Peace Institute, November 2018.
- <sup>3</sup> Groundviews, "[How Social Media is Fuelling Sri Lanka's Ethnoreligious Issues](#)", 5 February 2024.



online hate speech gained prominence – one centred on gender. The visibility of women candidates, at its highest in Sri Lanka’s history, has been accompanied by unprecedented levels of misogynistic attacks online,<sup>4</sup> undermining women’s participation in public life and eroding the overall quality of democratic debate.<sup>5</sup>

Expanding on these findings and recognising the reach and influence of social media platforms in Sri Lanka, this study examines online discourse ahead of the 2025 local government elections. Specifically, it examines patterns of online visibility and hate speech directed toward Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and Colombo mayoral candidates Vraie Balthazar (NPP) and Ruvaiz Hanifa (SJB) on Facebook and YouTube. By analysing visibility, levels of hateful content, and the narratives underpinning them across platforms for both men and women candidates, the study examines how gender and platform dynamics influence political discourse and digital participation in Sri Lanka.

### Key findings:

- During the 2025 local election campaign, Prime Minister Amarasuriya was the most visible political figure on both Facebook and YouTube, with approximately 47.0 per cent of all content in our sample based on posts referencing her. The two local candidates, NPP candidate Balthazar and SJB candidate Hanifa, were considerably less visible, each achieving roughly half of the prime minister’s visibility on both platforms.
- Prime Minister Amarasuriya and Balthazar were more frequently targeted with hate speech in general, many instances of which qualify as

<sup>4</sup> #Generation, “[Electoral Shifts and Digital Dynamics: Sri Lanka’s 2024-2025 National Elections in Review](#)”.

<sup>5</sup> DRI, “[Gender-Based Violence on X and YouTube in the São Paulo Mayoral Election](#)”, 16 October 2024.



online gender-based violence (OGBV), compared to their counterpart Hanifa. The prime minister was the main target, with 10.3 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her containing hate speech, followed by Balthazar (7.8 per cent) and Hanifa (1.7 per cent).

- Prime Minister Amarasuriya and Balthazar were subjected to OGBV through narratives that questioned their leadership competence, invoked motherhood-related critiques to undermine their political legitimacy, and employed derogatory portrayals aimed at diminishing their credibility. In contrast, Hanifa was primarily targeted with hate based on his religious identity.
- Analysis across platforms reveals distinct patterns of targeting. On Facebook, hostility was most pronounced toward Balthazar, with 12.1 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her containing hate speech, followed by the prime minister (9.7 per cent) and Hanifa (2.0 per cent). On YouTube, the prime minister was the main target, receiving hateful comments in 11.0 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her, compared to 5.2 per cent for Balthazar and 1.4 per cent for Hanifa.

These patterns illustrate how hate speech and online gender-based violence remain ongoing challenges in Sri Lanka's digital sphere, with repercussions for all political candidates, but particularly for women, whose participation and public engagement may be disproportionately affected. Addressing these issues 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 contexts such as in Sri Lanka, where formal mechanisms for reporting content and holding platforms accountable are scarce. Failing to address these gaps risks further undermining electoral integrity and hindering meaningful democratic participation, both online and offline, in an already sensitive political context.



## Introduction

In Sri Lanka, online hate speech within the political sphere has been playing an increasing role in offline political events for much of the past decade. The 2014 Aluthgama riots and the 2018 Ampara and Digana unrests marked the rise of large-scale online hate speech in Sri Lanka, but it was only years later, following the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019, when coordinated bombings by Islamist extremists targeted churches and hotels, killing more than 250 people, that its intensity reached a peak. Within this context, research by DRI found that, in the aftermath of the attacks, nationalist and anti-Muslim narratives gained significant traction on Facebook.<sup>6</sup> These narratives not only portrayed minority communities as security threats, but also extended to political figures, particularly those who challenged dominant majoritarian, religious, or cultural narratives. Hate speech during this period thus reflected intersecting forms of hostility, combining religious and identity-based attacks against both communities and individual politicians.

By the end of the 2024 national election cycle, the dominant forms of online hostility had shifted. Despite Sri Lanka recording its highest proportion of women in Parliament that year – around ten per cent – the intensity and frequency of OGBV surpassed all other forms of hate speech. This marked a significant transformation in the country’s online hate speech landscape, as hateful narratives increasingly centred on misogynistic stereotyping, threats of physical harm, and coordinated disinformation campaigns against women politicians.<sup>7</sup>

As documented by DRI research across multiple contexts, including in Brazil,<sup>8</sup> Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, and Tunisia,<sup>9</sup> OGBV predominantly

<sup>6</sup> DRI, “[Facebook and Sri Lanka’s Easter Sunday attacks](#)“, 26 February 2021.

<sup>7</sup> #Generation, “[Digital Challenges to Electoral Integrity: Social Media Monitoring Insights from Sri Lanka’s 2024 Parliamentary Elections](#)“.

<sup>8</sup> DRI, “[Gender-Based Violence on X and YouTube in the São Paulo Mayoral Election](#)“, 16 October 2024.

<sup>9</sup> DRI, “[New Paper: Online Gender-Based Violence in the MENA Region](#)“, 24 January 2024.



targets women public figures, politicians, and candidates. Our research has shown that women politicians consistently faced higher levels of online violence than their men counterparts, resulting in self-censorship, withdrawal from public debate and, in some cases, the escalation of online harassment into offline threats. OGBV thus not only has undermined women’s individual rights, but also has eroded broader democratic participation and equality.<sup>10</sup>

Within this context, this report focuses on the prevalence and dynamics of online hate speech during the 2025 local government elections in Sri Lanka. The analysis examines how this form of online discourse targeted two prominent candidates for the Colombo Municipal Council – Vraie Balthazar, of the National People’s Power (NPP), and Ruvaiz Hanifa, of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). It also considers the case of Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, who faced intense online attacks during the 2024 parliamentary elections, due to her high visibility as the country’s highest-ranking politician. To ground the subsequent analysis, we adopted the following UN working definition of hate speech: “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender, or other identity factor”.<sup>11</sup>

Examining the manifestations of hate speech in Sri Lanka’s online political discourse remains relevant, as it not only contravenes the media guidelines issued by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, which prohibit the promotion of hateful and violent behaviour,<sup>12</sup> but also breaches the platforms’ own terms of use, which ban harmful expressions such as hate speech.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, “[What is hate speech?](#)”.

<sup>12</sup> “[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.

<sup>13</sup> Meta Transparency Centre, “[Community Standards](#)”; YouTube Help, „[YouTube’s Community Guidelines](#)“.



## Main Findings

Our analysis is structured in three sections. First, we examined the visibility of the selected political figures on Facebook and YouTube during the election campaign. Second, we focused on the comments to explore the extent to which each politician was targeted with hate speech, noting relevant differences across genders and platforms, where appropriate. Finally, we explored the dominant narratives through which hateful content manifested towards the candidates and prime minister.

### Visibility on Facebook and YouTube

Examining the visibility of politicians is critical in electoral contexts, as it provides an understanding of their general and relative visibility during the campaign period, and consequently allows for an understanding of the scale of hate speech they were subject to. See the “Methodology” section of this report for qualifications that should be kept in mind regarding our sampling when considering this distribution.

Figure 1 shows that Prime Minister Amarasuriya was the most visible political figure on both platforms, with 47.5 per cent (2,910 observations) of Facebook and YouTube content in our sample referring to her. This high level of visibility likely reflects her dual status as both the country’s most prominent woman political leader and the head of government, illustrating how national-level figures can dominate and shape online discussions even during local election periods.

By contrast, the visibility of the two local candidates was substantially lower, roughly half that of the prime minister. Hanifa was mentioned in roughly 28 per cent of the observations sample (1,743 instances), while Balthazar appeared in 24 per cent (1,478 observations).



Figure 1. Total number of Facebook and YouTube observations by political figure

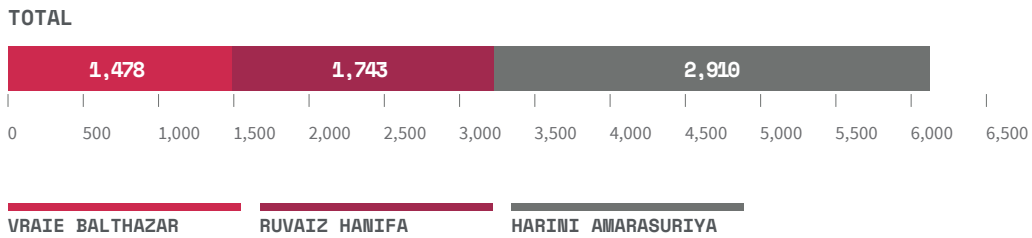


Figure 2. Number of observations by political figure and social media platform

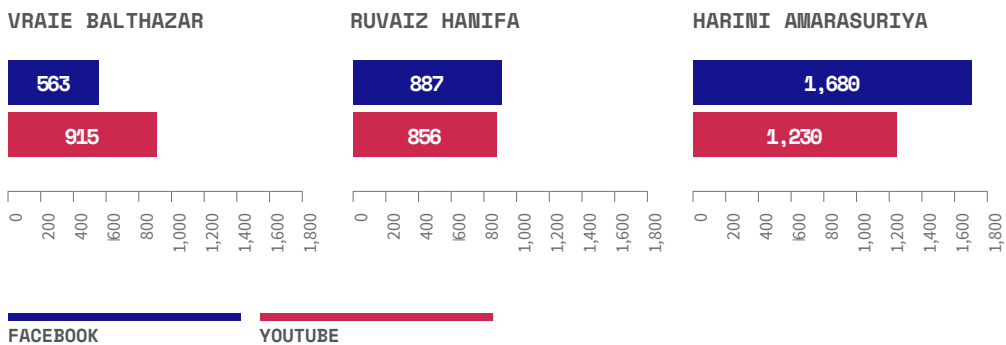


Figure 2 illustrates that the prime minister’s visibility was slightly higher on Facebook, where she was mentioned in 53.7 per cent of all posts and comments (1,680 observations), compared with 41 per cent on YouTube (1,230 observations). Balthazar attracted greater attention on YouTube, being mentioned in 30.5 per cent of YouTube observations (915), compared to 18 per cent (563 observations) on Facebook. In contrast, Hanifa’s visibility did not vary between platforms – he was mentioned in 28.3 per cent of Facebook observations (887) and 28.5 per cent of YouTube observations (856).

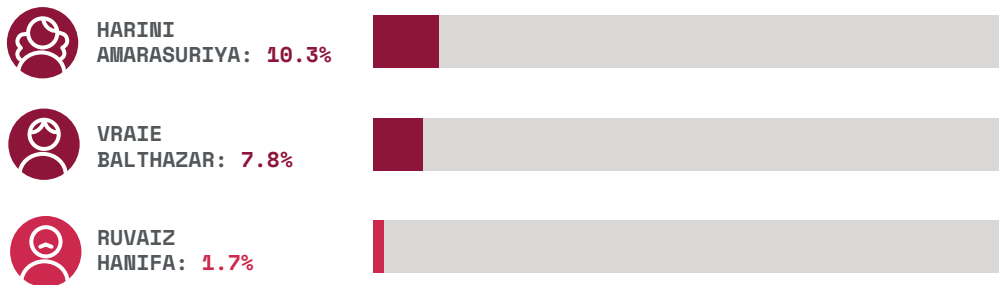


### Exposure to Hate Speech

Building on the analysis of visibility, we examined the extent to which local candidates and the prime minister were targeted with hate speech, focusing specifically on comment sections of posts mentioning them (as further detailed in the “Methodology” section).

Overall, both the woman mayoral candidate for Colombo and the current prime minister were more frequently targeted with hateful content than was Hanifa. Notably, the prime minister was subject to the highest proportion of hate speech (10.3 per cent of all observations in our sample mentioning her), followed by Balthazar (7.8 per cent), while Hanifa was subjected to this type of content in only 1.7 per cent of the comments.

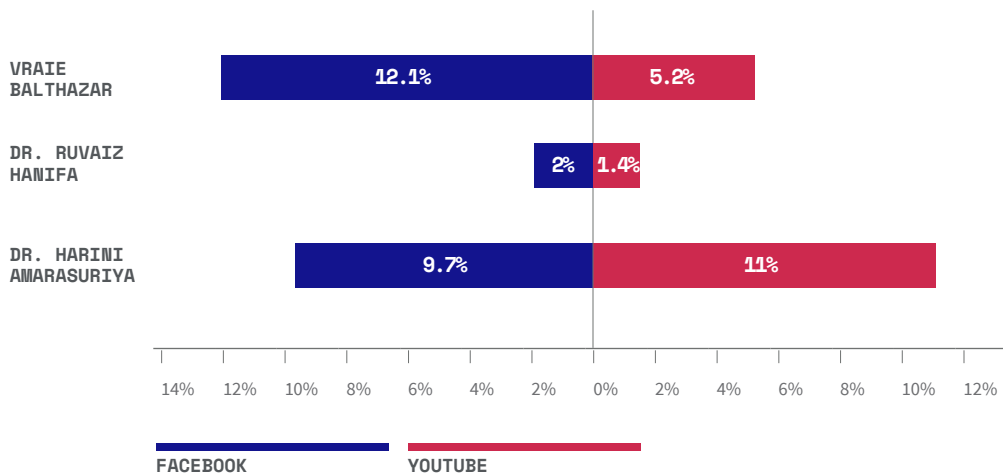
**Figure 3. Distribution of hateful comments by political figure**



When examining distributions across platforms, we see that on Facebook, Balthazar was the most heavily targeted, with 12.1 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her containing hateful comments, followed by the prime minister, with 9.7 per cent. By comparison, Hanifa was subjected to hateful comments in only 2 per cent of comments on posts mentioning him. On YouTube, the prime minister was subject to the largest share of hateful comments (11 per cent), followed by Balthazar (5.2 per cent), while comments related to Hanifa contained hate speech in only 1.4 per cent of cases.



**Figure 4. Distribution of hateful comments by social media platform and political figure**



Taken together, these findings indicate that, while Prime Minister Amarasuriya enjoyed greater visibility on Facebook than on YouTube, the latter platform contained a higher proportion of hateful comments directed at her. In contrast, Facebook served as the primary space for online hostility toward local candidates, particularly Balthazar, who also attracted relatively more attention on YouTube. Hanifa’s visibility, by comparison, remained consistent across both platforms, with comparatively low levels of hate speech directed at him.

### Topic Analysis

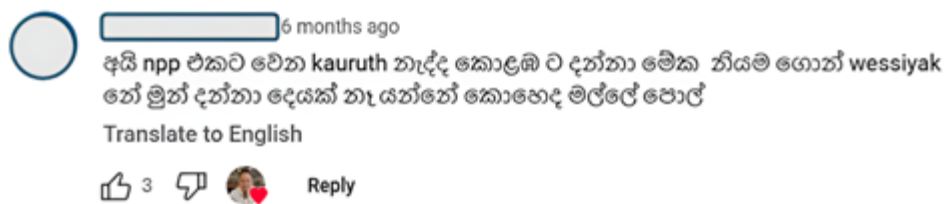
Finally, we examined the discursive patterns underpinning these attacks, with particular attention to the narratives through which hate speech was articulated. We observed that the form and content of these narratives varied according to the candidates’ gender, revealing distinct patterns in how women and men political figures were targeted. Hate speech directed at women political figures in our sample was predominantly gendered, targeting them based on their sex and perceived social roles. In this sense, these attacks can be understood as a manifestation of OGBV, defined by UN Women as “*harmful or abusive online behaviour directed at individuals*



on the basis of gender, with the intent or effect of silencing, humiliating, or excluding them from public life.”<sup>14</sup>

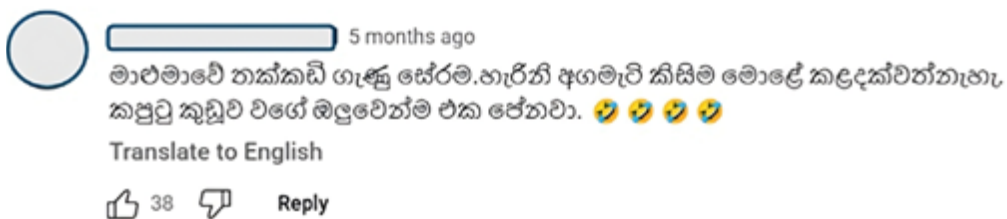
In our study, expressions of OGBV took different forms. For instance, comments directed at Balthazar and the prime minister consistently questioned their competence, and portrayed them as inherently unfit for leadership based on their identity as women, physical appearance, and other gender-based stereotypes and expectations.

Image 1. A YouTube comment using a gendered slur to question Balthazar’s suitability as a candidate.



**Above:** “Doesn’t the NPP have anyone else better to run for the office in Colombo? This one is a real stupid prostitute who doesn’t know anything at all”

Image 2. A YouTube comment mocking the prime minister’s appearance and questioning her intelligence.



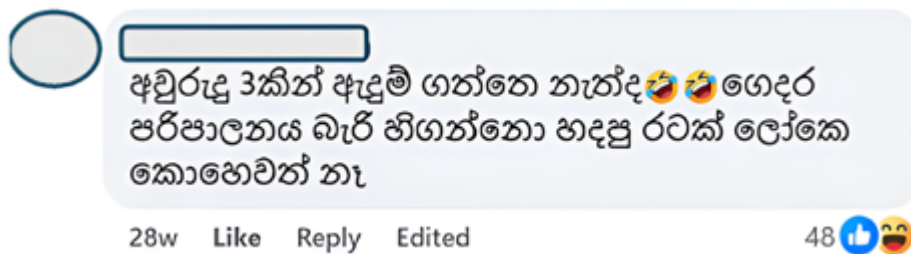
**Above:** “All women of Malimawa (NPP) are rascals. Prime Minister Harini has no brains at all [uses a play on the words “prime minister” in Sinhalese to portray her brain is full of clay]. You can also see this when you look at her hair, which looks like a crow’s nest.”

<sup>14</sup> UN Women, “[Creating safe digital spaces free of trolls, doxing, and hate speech](#)”, 28 June 2024.



Another approach used against Balthazar sought to delegitimise her candidacy by scrutinising her parenting. In particular, references to parenting approaches such as re-using children’s clothes were frequently decontextualised and reframed to depict her as impractical or lacking the seriousness expected of a political leader. Such rhetoric reflects a broader gendered dynamic in which women’s political legitimacy is evaluated not only through their professional capacities, but also against normative expectations of motherhood and domestic roles.<sup>15</sup>

Image 3. A Facebook comment mocking Balthazar for her parenting approach and questioning her ability to manage public office.



**Above:** “Did you not buy clothes in 3 years ...beggars who can’t even manage their households have never been able to build countries.”

In addition, our analysis showed that women politicians were frequently subjected to gendered discrediting discourses based on stereotypes related to sexuality. This dynamic was evident in the case of Prime Minister Amarasuriya, who became the target of hostile commentary portraying her as a lesbian, a sexualised delegitimation strategy aimed at eroding her political authority in a country with a low level of acceptance of LGBTQI+ groups.

<sup>15</sup> Kuziwakwashe Zigomo, “[Virtue, Motherhood and Femininity: Women’s Political Legitimacy in Zimbabwe](#)”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48(3), pp. 527–544.



Image 4. Facebook comments employing derogatory slurs against the LGBTQ+ community to insult Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya.



**Above:** Comment contains the word “butterfly”, a slur used as an insult against the LGBTQ+ community.

In contrast to the women political figures in our sample, hate speech targeting Hanifa primarily reflected identity-based hostility, with much of the content invoking anti-Muslim stereotypes, consistent with previous literature discussed earlier in the report. This included the use of derogatory language toward the Muslim community and narratives portraying him as “Islamifying” Sri Lanka to consolidate political power. These narratives served not only to delegitimise him as a political actor, but also to reinforce broader patterns of religiously motivated hostility within Sri Lanka’s public sphere.



Image 5. Facebook comments employing derogatory language and stereotypical narratives about the Muslim community in reference to Ruvaiz Hanifa.



**Above:** Muslim-f\*\*\*\*\*r [comment contains a term specifically used to identify the Muslim community in a derogatory manner]. It refers to the narratives that were most popular during 2017-2020 period, when it was said that Muslim food shops intentionally poison food with infertility drugs, which is then served to non-Muslims.

In addition to attacks using anti-Muslim stereotypes, we also found that negative comments were frequently redirected toward the party leadership, rather than manifesting as personalised attacks against him. These comments targeted party leaders such as Sajith Premadasa, portraying him as an inept political figure and referencing his past corruption allegations.

### What Do These Findings Show?

Our findings show that hate speech continues to play a strong role in online political discussions in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Amarasuriya stood out as the central figure of the campaign, attracting the highest level of attention and hostility across both platforms, while the two local candidates, Balthazar and Hanifa, had significantly less visibility overall. Yet, among them, the gendered asymmetries remained clear: Balthazar, like the prime



minister, was more frequently targeted with hate speech, which generally took the form of online gender-based violence, illustrating persistent efforts to delegitimise women's political participation through the use of gendered discreditation to question their legitimacy. In contrast, Hanifa, while not exempt from this broader trend, was primarily exposed to identity-based hate speech, albeit at a much lower rate.

These patterns indicate that the visibility afforded by social media platforms can also heighten candidates' exposure to different forms of hostility, and particularly so for women public figures, underscoring the complex relationship between visibility, identity, and vulnerability in online political discourse.

## **Strengthening Electoral Integrity Online: Policy Recommendations for Regulators and Platforms**

These patterns also raise important questions about platform accountability and the enforcement of electoral media guidelines. Facebook and YouTube remain central arenas for political communication in Sri Lanka, yet the persistence of gendered discrediting and identity-based hate speech indicates that existing regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms are insufficient. Strengthening cooperation between social media platforms and the Election Commission will be essential to protect candidates and political leaders from online harm and to foster a more equitable and democratic digital campaign environment.

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

### **To The Election Commission of Sri Lanka:**

- Enforce the 2025 Media Guidelines through concrete actions, such as requesting platform cooperation or issuing takedown requests during the election period.



- Explicitly incorporate provisions against OGBV into the 2025 Media Guidelines and future electoral frameworks. Such provisions should acknowledge that these forms of abuse undermine candidates' rights, distort democratic debate, and deter the participation of women and minority candidates in politics.
- Facilitate formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations and researchers working on online electoral integrity.

### To Social Media Platforms:

- Strengthen content moderation practices to ensure timely detection and removal of hateful content, particularly hate speech and OGBV, during electoral periods.
- Provide community guidelines and terms of use in local languages, such as Sinhala and Tamil, to guarantee accessibility and meaningful understanding for all users.

## Methodology

Our dataset comprised 6,131 observations, including 3,130 from Facebook (posts and associated comments) and 3,001 from YouTube (videos and associated comments), covering the period between 22 March and 6 May 2025.

Figure 5. Sample distribution across social media platforms

	Facebook	YouTube
<b>Posts/videos</b>	150	334
<b>Associated comments</b>	2,980	2,667
<b>Total</b>	3,130	3,001



The sample encompassed content produced by political parties, candidates, politicians, media outlets, political analysts, and influencers that directly referenced the three political figures under analysis, along with the comments associated with this content. The period data in the sample coincides with the official 2025 local electoral campaign, allowing us to capture emerging patterns of hate speech in the lead-up to the elections.

Data collection was carried out using a combination of tools. To identify and retrieve YouTube videos and comments, we relied on the YouTube API. To collect Facebook posts, we used the Meta Content Library, and complemented this with additional tools to retrieve comments from the pre-identified posts. As this process was time-intensive, only comments from the top 50 Facebook posts per candidate, as determined by the number of comments on the posts, were selected for the subsequent analysis.

To ensure that the material captured politically relevant discussions, we used keyword-based queries in Sinhala and Tamil to identify relevant political content related to the local elections. We applied a set of keywords that included candidates' names in both languages, as well as general terms such as “කොළඹ පුරපති” (Colombo Mayor), “කොළඹ මහනගර” (Colombo Municipality), “කොழும்பு மாநகர மயேர்” (Colombo Municipal Mayor), and “கொழும்பு மயேர்” (Colombo Mayor).

The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, keyword frequencies and their distribution across platforms were used to analyse candidates' visibility. Qualitatively, a manual topic analysis was conducted to determine whether each comment contained instances of hate speech. We used common gendered slurs such as b\*\*\*h and prostitute in Sinhala (බෑ \*ලී, වෛ\*) and Tamil (பொ\*டடை நாய், \*வபியாள்), along with their transliterations and spelling variants. This allowed us to examine the narratives through which hate speech was articulated.

A significant limitation of this study was the comparatively limited presence of local candidates on social media when contrasted with national-level politicians. Where such actors were active online, their presence was often



concentrated in smaller-scale profiles, support groups, or community pages with modest followings. This posed a methodological challenge when collecting data from Facebook, as the Meta Content Library only provides systematic access to content from public profiles with more than 25,000 followers and from public pages and groups with more than 15,000 likes. As a result, only two local candidates, Balthazar and Hanifa, could be systematically included in our dataset, thereby restricting our analysis to a narrow subset of politicians affiliated with major parties in Sri Lanka's largest urban areas, such as Colombo.



**Date: November 2025**

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