

# **Trump, Musk, and the USAID Controversy: How USAID Allegedly Shaped Sri Lanka's Political Landscape**



U.S. President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, Founder, CEO, Tesla Motors and Space X highlighting their criticism of USAID.

Under President Donald Trump's administration, USAID came under heavy scrutiny for allegedly interfering in Sri Lanka's political landscape. Trump publicly criticized

the agency, claiming it was “funding chaos” and undermining the sovereignty of nations under the guise of humanitarian aid. Elon Musk also echoed these concerns, referring to USAID as a “criminal organization” that was involved in political manipulation.

### **USAID’s Role in Sri Lanka’s Political Landscape**

**Funding Media and Civil Society Groups:** One of the key ways USAID allegedly influenced Sri Lanka’s politics was through its funding of media organizations and civil society groups. Programs like the Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka (MEND), which received USD 7.9 million in USAID funding, were accused of being used to support narratives that favored certain political factions.

- n The MEND project, implemented by IREX, focused on journalism training, digital literacy, and gender inclusivity.
- n However, critics—including Sri Lankan politicians—claimed that USAID-backed media organizations disproportionately attacked specific political leaders and promoted a Western-style governance model.

Former MP Wimal Weerawansa accused USAID of working with local NGOs and activists to create anti-government sentiment, suggesting that some funded journalists were actively shaping public perception in ways that favored U.S. interests.

**Involvement in the 2019-2022 Political Crisis:** USAID-funded organizations were linked to Sri Lanka’s political unrest – the 2022 mass protests (Aragalaya) that led to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

- n Trump’s administration alleged that USAID-funded NGOs helped mobilize anti-government protests, directing resources to activist groups that played a key role in demonstrations.
- n Namal Rajapaksa and other pro- Rajapaksa figures called for an investigation into how USAID funds were used in the lead-up to the protests, suggesting that some organizations deliberately fueled public dissatisfaction.
- n USAID had openly funded good governance and transparency programs, which critics claim were selectively applied to weaken certain political figures while sparing others.

## **USAID's Relationship with Sri Lankan Political Figures**

USAID's involvement extended beyond media and activism; reports suggest that the agency cultivated relationships with Sri Lankan politicians, particularly those aligned with U.S. strategic interests.

- n Some USAID-funded projects were said to favor political parties that opposed China's influence in Sri Lanka, aligning with the U.S. policy of countering Beijing in the Indo-Pacific region.
- n The agency reportedly provided support for policy advisors and economic strategists within Sri Lanka's opposition groups.

Pro-Rajapaksa figures alleged that USAID-backed economists and think tanks advocated policies that weakened state control over resources and favored U.S.-backed privatization efforts. This further fueled suspicions that USAID was attempting to shape Sri Lanka's political and economic policies to align with Washington's interests.



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**Trump's Decision to Freeze USAID Funds:** As part of his crackdown on USAID's global operations, Trump signed an executive order in January 2025 halting all USAID assistance to Sri Lanka.

n Trump called the agency's activities in Sri Lanka "a disaster", stating that "American taxpayers will no longer fund political chaos in foreign countries."

n Elon Musk backed the move, claiming USAID's programs were "designed to destabilize governments under the guise of democracy promotion."

n The funding freeze forced many USAID-backed NGOs in Sri Lanka to pause operations or shut down entirely, leading to further debate over whether the agency had been acting in the country's best interests.

USAID's role in Sri Lanka has been deeply controversial, with critics arguing that it influenced the country's political landscape under the pretext of development aid. The Trump administration's decision to halt funding was based on allegations that the agency had backed media campaigns, activist movements, and political strategies that destabilized Sri Lanka. Whether USAID's departure will lead to reduced foreign interference or create new funding gaps remains a subject of debate, but for now, its influence in Sri Lanka's political sphere has been severely diminished.



Sri Lanka Protests (Aragalaya 2022) – connecting USAID funding to allegations of political interference.