

CAN DO IT

Posted on



Tissa Attanayake is the General Secretary of the United National Party, the first party of Sri Lanka. Many consider this to be a very turbulent time for the party with the elephant symbol. The United National Party has always been known for its leaders and the powerful impact that it has had on the country. As Tissa Attanayake reveals the party has in no way lost its vigour. Politics is unpredictable and as such highs and lows are expected. In a day and age where everyone is trying to rise to the top, he stresses that there are no short cuts. Everyone has to earn their positions, that has been the way. Always.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography Menaka Aravinda and Mahesh Bandara

Who is Tissa Attanayake?

The person by the name of Tissa Attanayake is well known by the people of this country. I first entered Parliament in 1989. Even before entering Parliament I was a member of the student movement. I was a student leader of the Samawadi Shishya Peramuna of the Kelaniya University, which was affiliated to the United National Party. Therefore the people of this country have known me for a very long time.

Then, by chance I was able to enter Parliament. The reason why I say 'by chance' is that I never planned to participate in national level politics. However, the political journey that started with the student movement paved the way for me to enter Parliament. In 1989, when I contested for the first time as a newcomer, the battle was very tough. At that time the entire country was facing a JVP insurrection, and we had to contest elections during that time. Previously elections were held at electoral level but in 1989 for the first time elections were held at district level. It was very difficult for politicians to contest in this type of elections. It was a new experience. I was able to face such a challenging election and win.

I have worked under President J R Jayewardene, President Premadasa, President Wijetunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. In 1993, I was appointed as the Minister of Higher Education, then in the 2001 UNP government I was the Minister of Development. It is with this political background that I came forward.

With the defeat of the UNP in the 1994 elections, we have been consistently under pressure. The impact of defeat after a long reign in government is a different kind of experience. Therefore with the change in government we were in the opposition. As far as I remember I have been in the government, only during the first five years and another two years in between. That is in my 26 years in politics I have been in the government for seven years and the remaining 19 years I have been in the opposition.

In 1997, I was appointed as the UNP Kandy district chairman. Before being appointed as the General Secretary of the UNP in 2006, I was appointed as the Deputy General Secretary in 2004. My journey has been full of obstacles but I have always moved forward.

You mentioned that you have journeyed through many obstacles. How did you overcome these challenges?

Dedication and determination. The main personality in Sri Lankan politics will always be J R Jayewardene. Gamini Dissanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali were our heroes when we

joined politics as youth leaders. That was during my university years. We were very passionate about politics and these were the characters whom we considered to be our role models. J R Jayawardene was my mentor. As far as I know, there has never been a politician who with a history such as J R Jayawardene's. It is from him that I learnt how to face challenges. J R Jayawardene was the first Minister of Finance of the 1948 cabinet of independent Sri Lanka. But he waited until 1977 to become the head of state. That shows the patience he had.

From his appointment in the first cabinet of independent Sri Lanka, until he became the president in 1977, he faced numerous challenges in his political career. Despite those challenges he had the courage to reach his goals. That is the most significant lesson I have learned from J R Jayawardene's character.

It is quite a challenge to face such obstacles in the present political environment as politics today have no principles. There is only unjustified criticism, mud slinging and insults. But the lessons I learnt from all the UNP leaders helped me continue my journey amidst all challenges.

You have stood by the United National Party through thick and thin, tell us about this?

It is somewhat fair for a party to be subjected to criticism and various accusations when it is facing continuous losses. Voters expect victory. Political parties use various methods to secure victory. However we should market ourselves among the general public. People should be given a reason to have hope and faith in us. Therefore we should innovate and change our strategies. Given this, in the recent past, the UNP focused on making the necessary changes. For instance we made structural changes and in 2010, we introduced a new constitution with the aim of building trust with our supporters and to make them believe that the UNP can work together as a team and gain victory. Unfortunately that did not work out very well.

We Must Show The Country That The UNP Is In Fact United And That We Are Working Together. Teamwork Is Essential For The UNP, No Matter How Many Policies We Adopt, Nothing Will Make A Change If We Are Not United.

I believe that with the new organisational structure and the functional mechanisms that we introduced recently, the UNP will be able to secure victory. It is our responsibility to make changes whenever necessary. If the times require an alternative policy, then it should be allowed. However, whatever the changes we make, for a positive transformation there are key factors to be fulfilled. Just because we established a leadership council, that does not

mean that we will win. There are a few who think that the leadership council can do anything and the party will win. But, there is no such guarantee. The leadership council is a plan, executed within a certain policy framework. For us to win, we must believe that the party can win. We must have faith in the party. Then we should build our organisational structure. We must motivate everyone to work together and use our past experiences to move forward. We must show the country that the UNP is in fact united and that we are working together. Teamwork is essential for the UNP, no matter how many policies we adopt, nothing will make a change if we are not united.

You resigned as the organiser for Kundasale, when the UNP lost. In a day and age where politicians rarely resign, this is a very rare occurrence.

I felt that no one else should take the responsibility for the defeat of the UNP in the recently held Central Provincial Council elections. We work hard, but if we are unable to see results of our hard work, then we should take responsibility for it without pointing fingers at other people. As far as the present political environment is concerned, not everyone has been able to grasp it properly. A person should have the self confidence to take responsibility for their actions-not only when it comes to politics but also in day to day life. Today's political culture is such that, people accuse each other without taking responsibility, this was not the case in the past.

Consider the UNP, we faced a drastic loss in 1994 and then we were able to secure a difficult victory in 2001. However, due to a decision made by then President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the government changed. From history we have seen how difficult it is for an opposition party with the executive presidency system. That has been evident since 1978. I know the challenges that the Sri Lanka Freedom Party experienced after the UNP's victory in 1978. Today some SLFP members still talk about what the situation was until their victory in 1994. We must learn from these experiences.

In Politics There Are No Permanent Victories Or Permanent Losses. We Have To Understand That.

I must clearly state that as a member of the UNP, an MP and as the General Secretary of the UNP, it has always been my practice not to hand over my responsibilities to others. If I am given a responsibility and I fail to fulfill those responsibilities then I will admit it rather than point a finger at someone else. That is why I resigned from my post as the organiser for Kundasale. In politics there are no permanent victories or permanent losses. We have to understand that.

We see many cross-overs from the UNP to the government, why is this?

It is true that the majority of those who are in the government are crossovers from the UNP. This is widely spoken about in the country. Many high level UNPers did cross-over to the government. They did so solely because of ministerial and other high positions that were offered to them. But if we look at this situation in another way it shows that the government does not have the capability to formulate its own policy and implement it. The majority of those who are in top positions in the government are former UNP members. Then, how can the government have a policy of their own?

Despite the strategies practiced by the government, one thing is becoming painfully evident day by day. That is poverty. The people of this country expected more from this budget. They wanted concessions to reduce the cost of living. The working community expected salary increments and factory owners expected the government to create an environment, which ensures the smooth operation of their business. Yet none of those were fulfilled from the budget, despite the team the government had on their side.

They should have revolutionised the country's economy. J R Jayewardene was the only person who was able to create an economic revolution in the country. The revolution he created was equal to that of what was created in China by Mao-Tse-Tung. Mao created a revolution in the governance of the country. In the same manner, J R Jayawardene created an economic revolution in 1978. The present society too needs such a massive change. One of the main accusations directed at the government today is the lack of transparency and corruption. Then there is the increased cost of living. It is true that roads have been carpeted and there is infrastructure development, but development is limited to only that. That is not sufficient for the growth of the country. We need a new policy and a new plan of action. That is why there should be a social revolution.

The UNP Has Always Executed Their Strategies To A Long Term Plan Of Action And Has Taken Steps To Uplift The Economic Standards Of The Country, [We Never Focused On Short Term Relief.

How important is it for Sri Lanka to have a strong opposition, can the UNP fulfill that role?

People have faith that the UNP can stabilise the country's economy. There is enough proof in the history of this country to prove that. It is accepted that the UNP is the best in terms of managing the economy. In recent times, whenever the country has experienced an economic downfall, the UNP has revived it. The UNP has always executed their strategies to a long

term plan of action and has taken steps to uplift the economic standards of the country, we never focused on short term relief.

During the UNP government, large scale businesses were established. There may have been corruption but not to this extent. Today, the prices of essential goods and services have gone up. The vision of UNP is to stabilise the economy of the country. Unfortunately people failed to see the long term gains of the economic policy introduced by Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2002. They looked at it with a short term view. Had the people been able to see the long term benefits, they would have realised that Rani Wickremasinghe and the UNP government were right in their approach. During the UNP regime, there were many large investments- be it local or international investments. What are the types of investments coming into the country today? In a report presented in parliament, out of the 14 projects that was proposed by the BOI, six were hotel projects. Even out of the six, four are casino projects-to what extent is this right? In fact Sri Lanka expects investment to come in for manufacturing and production. Investments from casinos may bring in money but that does not facilitate the benefits to the economy as in other investment. The UNP's policy on investments are different from that of the government. We will bring investments that will help the country to achieve economic stability.

During the UNP regime, we had very little tolerance for corruption. It is true that corruption might have been there to some extent but none of the ministers in the UNP government were accused of stealing money from investment projects. Never to the extent that ministers are being accused today. We expect a constitutional change in the country. That is, a new political culture and a new economy from the point of changing the executive presidency to the formation of a new society. We hope to initiate dialogue on the economic policy of the UNP and thereby create a stable plan of action. One of our suggestions is to strengthen the power of the parliament by abolishing the executive presidency. We hope to introduce constitutional provisions to reduce the number of cabinet members to less than 25. We want to introduce provisions so that the appointment of ministers will be done through the constitution and not by the president or the prime minister. We seek constitutional change and we have presented our proposal to be discussed among the general public.

Do you think that information on UNP policies are effectively conveyed to the general public?

It is true that the public is misinformed about UNP policies. Most of what we plan are not properly conveyed to the public. In the recent past, whenever the UNP is mentioned it is about the fighting within the party. Productive discussions in terms of policy formations are

not disseminated by the print and electronic media. This is a very sad situation. The media culture today is such that what is broadcast are things that are of no social value.

The UNP has made a decision to have a substantial plan of action with regards to our policies and election manifestos. We have decided to appoint a team to start discussions about the formulation of national policy instead of waiting till an election. I believe this is a step in the right direction and if our policies are forwarded to the general public now we can get their feedback and make the necessary improvements. We want to create our own publicity and communication campaign. This campaign will be headed by Mangala Samaraweera.

Many in the private sector, though they started with the UNP are now siding with the government, what are your thoughts on this?

This is not new to society. The private sector will always try to develop their businesses and maximise profits. If they do not adapt to the political culture that is prevalent today, they will not be able to do business. Most of them say that they are representing their businesses. It may not be ethical, but it is hard to uphold principles in today's social and political culture. That is why we have to ensure the growth of our private sector. Local businesses and manufacturers are not happy. It is possible that they are only siding with the government for survival. The UNP believes that the business community does not have to be dependent on the government. We want to create an environment where they will be able to conduct their business activities, investments and maximise their profits without having to depend on anyone. We have to accept that this is not possible in today's context. People go behind the government because the government has not left any room for them to grow on their own. In such an environment businesses will fall. Government policies too have not generated confidence within the business community, with the threat of the government being able to take over their businesses looming over them. We want to create an independent business community, not one that has to rely on the government. Creating an independent environment for businesses is the responsibility of the government.

We Want Leaders Who Stand By And Represent The Actual Opinions Of The Public. Unfortunately, Today's Leaders Are Not Like That. Many Of Them Who Enter Politics Today Do So Through The Power Of Money Or Strong Political Connections.

We find that many of the younger politicians are actually not qualified to be in politics. How can a stronger younger generation of politicians be developed in this country?

It is true that the younger generation of politicians today are not of the calibre of those in

the past. Leaders cannot be created overnight. A politician is a leader of the people, the country. The governance of our country is based on democracy where people have the right to make their own decisions, but since everyone cannot rule the country, we select representatives to represent our opinions. And thus a constitution has been created for the governance of the country. This may differ in reality but in theory a government is ruled by the people. We want leaders who stand by and represent the actual opinions of the public. Unfortunately, today's leaders are not like that. Many of them who enter politics today do so through the power of money or strong political connections. There are limited opportunities for those who are honestly concerned about the people to get to the top.

It is a common complaint that many who hold top positions in the country are under-qualified and are not suitable to be in such positions. Only the general public can resolve this because it is the public that elects them. Most of the time it is the same people who vote for these individuals who criticize them afterwards. During an election, people will vote for anyone if they are given money or if the contestant has a good publicity campaign. We have had such experiences. The public has to think twice when they select their leaders.

I am not sure if a certain qualification criteria can be imposed for politicians-if it is possible, that would be the best thing to do. In fact, some countries look for educational qualifications when entering politics or when selecting representatives for the parliament and other public institutions. It is essential to have a criteria for eligibility when selecting representatives for municipal and provincial councils, parliament, ministers and for the posts of Prime Minister and President as well.

Does the UNP have any programmes to train new members or the younger generation that joins the party?

In the UNP we never practice nepotism. Dudley Senanayake became the leader of the UNP not because he was the son of D S Senanayake but because he was an active politician at the time. He had been a member of the UNP since its inception and the formation of the first government. There has never been family rule in the UNP. Everyone who held top positions in the party were appointed to those positions because they were active members of the UNP who worked towards the victory of the party. Ranil Wickremasinghe became the leader of the UNP not because he is related to J R Jayewardene, but because he joined the party as a member of the UNP Youth Front, where he was the Treasurer and later the leader of the Youth Front before he became the leader of the UNP. This tradition in the party will continue when selecting leaders in the future as well. There is a long journey that one should travel before becoming a leader but the issue today is that, everyone looks for

shortcuts. That is the same perspective they have with the presidency as well. The UNP has shown that there are no shortcuts for leadership. Our leaders have not been elected overnight. All of our leaders have been people who have been engaged in politics for a long time; Dudley Senanayake, John Kotalawela, J R Jayewardene, R Premadasa and Ranil Wickremasinghe, never came to leadership positions through short cuts.

There Is A Long Journey That One Should Travel Before Becoming A Leader But The Issue Today Is That, Everyone Looks For Shortcuts. That Is The Same Perspective They Have With The Presidency As Well.

Almost all our leaders have started their political careers in the Youth Front. We have tried to encourage the youth into politics through the UNP Youth Front. But nowadays many young people are not interested in joining politics. The number of voters are decreasing. This is an issue that is common for all parties, not only for the UNP but also for the UPFA, JVP and all other parties. If the youth is not interested in engaging in politics then who will be our future leaders? That is why we want to create a Youth Force. The Leadership Council has received a new proposal regarding this. The proposal is that a young person who is interested in politics and also an active member from each Grama Sevaka Division will be selected to create the Youth Force. We believe that we will be able to create a Youth Force with 25,000 members through this initiative. These people can be trained to be the future leaders of the UNP as well as the country.

Take my political career for example, I entered politics and worked under the leadership of J R Jayawardene and R Premadasa, but I was appointed as the General Secretary of the party under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe. I came through the Youth Front. We invite the people to join the UNP through such campaigns. Young persons can gain political experiences through this. If you have an aim and the courage to stand tall regardless of how many times you fall, then you can be a leader.

Almost All Our Leaders Have Started Their Political Careers In The Youth Front... If You Have An Aim And The Courage To Stand Tall Regardless Of How Many Times You Fall, Then You Can Be A Leader.

It is usually said that the UNP does not have village level representation. Is that true?

It is important that UNP takes steps to re-establish our network of village based organisations. There are 160 electoral divisions in Sri Lanka and out of them the UNP doesn't have any representation in certain areas of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. But we represent majority of the electoral divisions. Over a period of one and a half years, we

have been trying to re-establish our village based organisations such as our branch network and women and youth associations. We have progressed fairly well but there is much more to be done. The leadership council has decided to appoint new organisers for all divisions after a review and to give them time bound targets to revive all UNP village based associations. There should be UNP representation in every village so that the party message is taken to the villagers. We need a communication network to carry our message to the village level. That is why I said we will have our own publicity campaign.

People complain that the UNP is not nationalist. Your thoughts on this?

It is true that some complain that the UNP is not nationalist or that we have no regard for nationalism. This is because the UNP has always been a very open and a liberal political party. When D S Senanayake created the UNP, the party had a representation of all communities-Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. UNP was not limited to one community belonging to one religion. Some political parties in Sri Lanka have been limited to certain ethnicities and religious views but the UNP is not one of them. That is why the party is named the United National Party. Our identity is Sri Lankan. For us, every community is important and we respect all. UNP will never promote communalism.

As Sri Lankans, we all love and respect our country. We were even accused of helping international forces to divide the country, but I would like to stress that we never had such motives. We only wanted unity in the country. In 2002, when Ranil Wickremasinghe was requested to sign certain international treaties, he refused to do so. The Rome Statute of 2002 accepted war crimes as punishable under international law, being a member of the Commonwealth, International Human Rights Council and United Nations, Sri Lanka too had an obligation to sign the treaty, which meant that the country accepted what was stated in the Rome Statute. But Ranil Wickremesinghe sensed a threat here. He knew there was a chance that Sri Lanka could face difficulties because there was a war going on in the country and had we signed this statute it could have been a disadvantage for the country. That is why we did not sign the Rome Statute. None of the citizens in this country-be it members of the three forces-can be accused or prosecuted for war crimes. We averted what could have been a threat to the country and its citizens sensing a threat and taking necessary precautions. That is patriotism.

At the CHOGM held recently, a declaration containing 98 conditions was signed by leaders of the Commonwealth countries. In this statement, from the 36th condition onwards, there are several conditions that relate to human rights, which Sri Lanka has accepted. This means that we have indirectly given our consent to statutes such as the Rome Statute. What

patriotism can you see in such actions? The UNP will never let any party breach the sovereign rights of this country. We have never accepted that.

If we have obtained the membership of international organisations, then we have to abide by their rules and statutes. We can't isolate ourselves. These statutes are only introduced for the betterment of these countries.

If we look at Iran, they initially did not cooperate with the international community, they too have realised that they cannot survive in isolation. We now see Iran working together with the international community. Sri Lanka too is going through somewhat a similar situation. The international community has requested for an investigation into certain incidents that occurred during the war. What they are requesting is for an internal investigation by the country's authorities and to provide a solution. The President too has accepted this. Issues arise only when we acknowledge something but do not take any action about it. There will be no interference from the international community if the necessary steps are taken to resolve our issues internally.

Is the UNP a disappearing entity?

No. It is normal for any political party to be subjected to periods of fluctuations where there are highs and lows. In 1977, people used to say that the SLFP would not win an election ever again, but that has been proven wrong. President R Premadasa used to say that he will make sure that the UNP regime will continue a further 12 years after his two terms. He had a 24 year plan to make sure that the UNP government ruled the country. But in an instance, all that was changed. I am not saying this will happen all the time but we have to understand that this is the nature of politics. Then on the other hand, S W R D Bandaranaike defeated the UNP in 1956 with the newly formed SLFP. And he used to say that he completely destroyed the UNP. Even though that was said in 1956, the UNP won the elections in 1960 and 1965 and then in 1977 UNP had an excellent victory. The losses we experience today are temporary and the UNP can win again.

There were many instances where there were attempts to destroy the party-JVP riots and the LTTE. Many UNP leaders were killed. We lost leaders such as R Premadasa, Ranjan Wijeratne, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake but the UNP as a party has always stood strong. Whoever is appointed next will take the party forward. D S Senanayake created a party that can never be destroyed. No one can rule a country like it is their own property and be in power for ever. Examples for this can be seen all over the world.

The UNP Won The Elections In 1960 And 1965 And Then In 1977 UNP Had An Excellent Victory. The Losses We Experience Today Are Temporary And The UNP Can Win Again. Some people predict that this regime will continue in the coming years. But that will not happen. I believe this government will not be able to continue their rule after 2014. There is economic tension in the country because of the increased cost of living and the government is facing a lot of international issues as well. No matter what we say, Sri Lanka can not isolate itself from the international community.

What are your future hopes?

My hope is to see a UNP government again. That is my dream. We, the members of the UNP have faced numerous challenges and barriers since 1994. Many of our members have been subjected to political revenge. There are families who have been working for the party since 1994 and their children have been deprived of many opportunities because of their political views. All of them dream of a UNP government and so do I.

I am concerned about the stability of the country. Some individuals think that hiding all our mistakes is patriotism, that is not so. The war is over and there is no need to argue over it. The government has to be given credit for concluding the war and no one can take that away from them. We have to move forward, towards a plan of action to re-stabilise the country. My objective is to create an action plan where people will be able to lead a comfortable lifestyle. We will have to work hard to achieve this goal.

My political career is not over yet. I have been in politics for 26 years now and I will be able to sustain my position for few more years. During this time I want to work towards achieving the goals of the party. Nothing is permanent in politics, we have seen that with many political leaders in this country. Despite their potential they were not able to reach their political goals. This is the nature of politics. I can't say that I will be the next leader of the country but I am ready to accept both defeat and victory.

The UNP Is The Only Party That Can Stabilise The Country. What We Have To Do Now Is To Win This Economic War And Stabilise The Economy. And We Want The People To Believe That The UNP Can Do It.

Final thoughts?

The United National Party has been in this country's politics for a very long time. The people believe that the UNP is good managers of the country's economy because we have always revived the economy whenever there was a downturn. Sri Lanka faced an economic

crisis from 1970 to 1977 as a result of the economic policy adopted by the government in power at the time. But we were able to make a significant change in 1977. The liberal economic policy that is prevalent today was introduced by the UNP. UNP is a party that has always been able to make a change in the country. The biggest challenge that Ranil Wickremasinghe had when he assumed duties in 2001 as Prime Minister was to determine how to revive the economy. And we were able to do it, the country was able to regain its reputation in the international arena. Unfortunately the government was defeated in the election that followed as people were under the impression that the government did not do anything for the general public. We have shown-in several instances-that the UNP is the only party that can stabilise the country. What we have to do now is to win this economic war and stabilise the economy. And we want the people to believe that the UNP can do it. We want their help for this. We are confident that we can create the economic revolution expected by the public and move towards a development process that is free of corruption. That is our objective.





