

Dedicated to Politics

Posted on

Former Southern Province Governor Willie Gamage is a political veteran. From a student activist and insurgent, he transitioned into mainstream politics and actively engaged in grassroots politics and campaigns. He has served in multiple public service positions since 2005. He is a son of the South and knows its complexities and dynamics, and his return to the province was an opportunity to serve it well. But his tenure had multiple challenges, which he faced fearlessly. Speaking to Business Today, he describes his contribution to the province and shows how it has evolved. As a diehard political animal with a background in sociology, Gamage gives an insight into the province's development trajectory.

Interestingly, he has some advice for young people – he urges them to be radical and use their energies for good causes. At the same time, he says they must cultivate the right mindset to succeed, fight their way out of their circumstances, and be strong enough to face challenges.

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Willie Gamage, former Southern Province Governor.

As the Southern Province Governor, how would you rate your performance?

I received my appointment as Southern Province Governor in November 2019. I was looking forward to a new start in 2020, but by then, the coronavirus was hanging like a specter, and by March 2020, Sri Lanka, like the rest of the world, went into a complete lockdown as the COVID-19 pandemic began to get out of hand. Hence, I define my four and a half years as Governor as a time spent fighting many challenges. I couldn't implement any significant development projects in the first two years of my governorship owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic was also an opportunity. Sometimes, disasters are opportunities to serve. Hospitals were pivotal as the primary service providers during the pandemic, and the need of the hour was to ensure that they were well-equipped with infrastructure to serve the public. We renovated and equipped the province's eight leading hospitals and several rural hospitals.

The Southern Province has produced outstanding results in the national examinations. For the past four years, it has been the highest scorer at the GCE Ordinary Level Examination, which began before I was appointed Governor. Thus, the province has been leading for the past nine years.

The province had been battling with an increase in demand for popular schools. There is intense competition to get into the popular schools in the province. However, the slots are limited, and those who fail to make the mark are disappointed and reluctant to send their child to a lesser school. Therefore, following discussions with experts and officials working in education, I introduced thirty Sauwbhagya schools close to the popular schools with upgraded facilities, refurbished classrooms, and digital facilities so that the pressure on the popular schools for grade one admission would lessen. As Governor, I encountered families' difficulties with accessing good schools for their children with financial problems being the biggest hindrance to affording their children the desired education. I found that children studying in remote schools who couldn't enter the popular schools owing to financial difficulties were extremely good in science, IT, and engineering subjects. However, their circumstances forced them to stay in their rural, under-facilitated school setting. We initiated a scholarship program for students in remote schools desiring to pursue science, IT, and engineering, starting

with two hundred scholarships so they can change their circumstances for the better.

During my tenure, I also introduced the Southern Province Multipurpose Cooperative Service Pension Act, ensuring that MPCS employees can retire with an income for the rest of their lives. I set aside one hundred million rupees from the cooperative fund. I added 9.4 million rupees from other reserves to establish a pension fund in 2020. Four years later, the fund accrued to four hundred and forty-two million rupees, of which we invested four hundred and nine million. The cooperative system in the province employs three thousand and forty-two, with two hundred and thirty individuals receiving lifetime pensions. I convinced the stakeholders of the pension fund's sustainability and its ability to address the issues faced by people operating in the system. On their part, the stakeholders have to obtain membership and make a monthly contribution from their salaries, ensuring them a monthly income for the rest of their lives. I am confident of its continuation, as the fund that began with a hundred and nine million rupees has grown enormously, including its membership of three thousand and forty-two. At the end of my tenure, I am pleased with the outcome of the scheme I initiated for the benefit of everyone working in the cooperative system, and the results prove its potential for the future.

The Government's Urumaya program, which involves the distribution of ten thousand land deeds of outright ownership to people who have lived and cultivated on those lands historically, was implemented in the Southern Province. Until 2024, we had given people only conditional deeds, amounting to 298,609 by the end of 2023, who should now come under the new Urumaya program.

As for agriculture, only the Hambantota district has commercial cultivation in paddy, while Galle and Matara have subsistence agriculture. Hence, their production is comparatively lower. However, Galle and Matara are known for the large-scale cultivation of tea and minor crops such as cinnamon and pepper. The central government's Ministry of Agriculture supports those economic activities. The Southern Province has tremendous tourism potential. When J R Jayewardene took over tourism in 1965, he focused on Hikkaduwa and neighboring areas. We see a boom in the South's interiors, such as Mirissa and Tangalle, whose potential has increased because of the southern highway.



Due to the country's situation, I could not make new appointments during the first three years of my tenure. But that changed, and I was able to appoint a thousand minor employees and more than five thousand jobs for graduates in various positions. My final assignment was to recruit three thousand teachers to the province, which we did with an initial recruitment of nine hundred. I have done the initial tasks, such as examinations and interviews, and now the process is under the Southern Province Public Service Commission.

How challenging was your job as Governor?

When I took over the Southern Provincial Council, it didn't have a chief minister or ministers assigned to the ministries, which meant that I, as the Governor, was entirely responsible for the affairs of the provincial ministries and the councils. Of course, the municipal and urban councils had elected members to make decisions. While my workload became enormous, it was also an opportunity to establish

authority and steer the work with the officials. However, I was the sole decision-maker for every organization under its purview. In doing so, I ensured that the councils had adequate money to support their activities, without which they couldn't have delivered their services to the public.

Therefore, during my tenure, without a more extensive apparatus to support my work, I navigated the affairs of the provincial council in a different direction away from a political agenda, reaching out to a larger population and their needs. A governor is a presidential appointee, and so was mine. However, I took a different direction in governing the province by studying the subjects and by working and seeking the advice of professionals. That allowed me to address and resolve the problems on the ground rather than playing the politics of favoritism and discrimination.

As we came to terms with the pandemic and learned how to navigate through the various situations it brought about, then came the economic crisis, which again pitted us against insurmountable pressure for at least another one and a half years as the government was unable to release any money to the provincial councils for development activities. It was a very challenging situation as the province's needs were enormous, and the economic crisis thrust us into a situation where we had no choice but to survive on our earnings. We abandoned many development projects because we didn't receive any money from the central government during the economic crisis. However, I found a way to overcome this limitation. The central government has its network of governance through district and regional secretaries. The provincial councils have their distinct management system led by a governor, chief minister, and council members in charge of provincial ministries such as education, housing, agriculture, health, infrastructure, transport, planning, social services, and local government. The three districts of the southern provincial council, Galle, Matara, and Hambantota, have forty-nine local government councils with their revenue streams. In the thirty-eight years of the history of provincial councils, I was the only Governor who had returned the total monies collected by the local councils for their spending, which had not exceeded thirty-five percent under other governors. At the end of four and a half years, I gave the local councils eight thousand four hundred forty-eight million rupees, giving them the wherewithal to deal with multiple situations, from the COVID-19 pandemic-driven crisis to the following economic crisis.

As the Governor, what sort of working arrangement did you have, and do you think the provincial council system can work outside political

interference?

Constitutionally, provincial governance has a degree of autonomy and the power to make decisions, although the larger political system in the country imposes many obstacles to its independence. As people's representatives, parliament members wield great power in the districts and the province, which I didn't have as a presidential nominee; hence, I was not the people's choice. As a presidential appointee, I felt obliged to the executive. However, none of the two presidents pressured me to do anything that undermined my position.

I navigated the affairs of the provincial council in a different direction away from a political agenda, reaching out to a larger population and their needs.

As I told you before, the five provincial ministries didn't have ministers, making me the sole decision-maker, and the two presidents under whom I served allowed me to govern the province independently without interference. The five provincial ministries were vacant, and I had to manage them. There are forty-nine local government authorities in the Southern Province. The Southern Province has a workforce of more than fifty thousand, of which more than half are teachers and related employees, nearly fifteen thousand are health sector employees, and ten thousand are employees in local government entities and other services. Hence, the Southern Province has a colossal budget of sixty billion rupees for salaries. Now, the central government wanted us to refrain from collecting taxes, claiming that it was their job and that they would send the necessary funds for our expenditure. But it didn't happen that way. We received seventy or eighty percent from the central government for salaries and fifty to sixty percent of the allocated budget for development projects, resulting in many projects needing to be abandoned and compelling us to cover the shortfall.



Having served in the Southern Provincial Council, what were its benefits as a mechanism for the devolution of power, especially the opportunity to work closely with people and relate to their circumstances?

The provincial council system is a good mechanism for the devolution of power so long as its members are elected by popular vote. Hence, the post of governor, too, should ideally be a people's choice. An elected representative maintains closer relations with the people. As Governor, I could not maintain a relationship with more than 2.7 million people in the province. Without a governing body in the province, I managed every activity and represented the provincial council at functions. At the same time, hordes of people met me, around three to four hundred people, on the allocated day to meet the public with their grievances about land issues and job-related problems.

On the other hand, the council members represent diverse geographies across the

three districts, allowing people to meet them in their homes or offices much more regularly than they would with me. But in the absence of a minister, I became the sole decision-maker, which placed a great deal of responsibility upon me and hindered me from connecting more with the people. However, I don't think the provincial council system is a white elephant. Today, people no longer have to come to Colombo to resolve their issues, as provincial government entities can fix various issues.

What evolving trends did you observe as the Governor of the province?

The Southern Province was an exciting place to serve. Nearly forty-four percent of the province worked in the public and private sectors. However, the province doesn't offer substantial economic opportunities, forcing people to seek employment outside. Historically, the Southern Province has been considered poor or underprivileged. There was a time, maybe more than half a century ago, when its people migrated to the highlands because they couldn't reap many benefits from their land.

Because of its circumstances and lack of economic opportunities, parents would strive to give their children a sound education so that they could seek better economic opportunities outside the province. While the Southern Province is famous for fisheries, tourism, and plantation industries, people working there seek to move out of their situations, which they achieve through education. Hence, there is migration out of the province by descendants of these professions who become socially mobile through education.

An example is Walasmulla in the Hambantota district, a rural area where the people endure many daily challenges and hardships. Education has been their savior, changing their fortunes for the better. Therefore, today, every family will have one or more graduates. Walasmulla has produced some of the highest achievers at the GCE Ordinary Level Examination for the past five years.

Historically, the people in the Southern Province have worked in fishing. The economically strongest were those who owned fishing nets. They were the elites. However, as they became affluent, the adults didn't want their children to follow in their footsteps. So, they invested their earnings from fishing in educating their children, and today, the children are leading in multiple professions, such as lawyers, judges, doctors, and accountants in Colombo. That indicates how the Southern Province's hardships have forced people to focus on education to escape

their plight.

I am an example of that drift. I am from a very marginal family in Akuressa, Matara. We moved out in 1965 for better opportunities, and that's how we grew and prospered. Our lands yielded very little for prosperity. Moreover, the dynamics in the village are complex. Unlike in Colombo, there is intense scrutiny and curiosity about other people's business. There is also fierce competition to outdo one another and extreme jealousy. Migrating from the province became a strong sociological indicator of escaping poverty. Even if one were to earn substantially in the village, it is of little use because too many obstacles and undercurrents prevent one from living a good life, with extreme resentment rooted in that social environment being a vital factor.

Is that situation a result of low opportunities in the province?

I wouldn't say that today. People's fortunes changed somewhat when, in the 1970s and 1980s, rubber and tea plantations grew in Galle and Matara. People began to work on the estates. Once people learned the techniques of growing tea and plucking the leaves, they began to grow tea in their home gardens as well as in adjoining state land and along river banks and employed family members free to tend to the crop and harvest the leaves and over the years those tea smallholders have prospered and today own a motorbike, a tuk tuk or a small lorry and can give their children a better education. Fifty-six families around my ancestral house are growing tea in their gardens. With tea prices at a healthy level, those families can accrue a good income from their small-scale plantations.

Korean migration for employment is another trend in the Southern Province that has changed people's fortunes. They are searching for land along roadways, desiring to move from their somewhat rural settings. So, there is migration within the district and province. An increasing number are migrating in search of jobs in hospitality and as technicians from rural areas. As their economic circumstances change for the better, they ensure that their children access better education and qualify as professionals or graduates. So, people are accessing better opportunities for economic prosperity within and outside the province.

As I said before, the village is a complex social collection. There may be homogeneity, intimacy, and neighborliness, but there are tensions too. There are multiple undercurrents. Competition among neighbors is intense. Hence, those striving to improve their economic circumstances are under intense scrutiny;

therefore, migrating to a new setting to enjoy their newfound comforts suits them better.



Are you happy about your role as Southern Province Governor?

I am happy for two reasons. Firstly, because I am a Southerner, my appointment was a great joy and source of pride for me, my family, and my relatives because it was an opportunity to serve our roots. After all, I am from a grassroots family, and returning to serve a diverse province, from leading urban centers and towns to very rural areas, was an excellent opportunity to serve my origins. Second, my southern roots inspired me to better its circumstances, which I did by upgrading rural schools, the health sector, and the handloom industry. I am content with what I delivered during my tenure, and the people are happy with what I delivered to the province. While the people and the officers who worked with me are delighted about

serving under me.

As Governor, I established a promotion mechanism that included a competitive examination, a marking scheme, and an interview process. Before introducing a formal promotional process, political appointments and random promotions were rampant in the provincial council. However, now that I have established a system that is fair to all, I am not willing to compromise.

How did you start your involvement in politics?

Basil Rajapaksa and I grew politically together. We started our journey in 1969; he was a young man fresh out of Ananda College, and I was an undergraduate. I was an insurgent in 1971. I worked with Rohana Wijeweera from 1967. All connections to the movement were lost once the authorities quelled the uprising. Subsequently, I met Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was working as an assistant librarian at the Vidyodaya University and invited me to help in the election campaign in Beliatta, Hambantota. Being withdrawn from all political activity, I was desperate and glad to join him.

I have grown with the Rajapaksa family since then, serving in various positions under their leadership. I was appointed chairman of the Strategic Enterprise Management Agency in 2005, which I served for ten years. I also worked for Gotabaya Rajapaksa as the Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Defense. In that capacity, I was involved in the welfare activities of soldiers, such as constructing houses while helping their families during bereavement. I was also secretary to the Ministry of State Resources, where I helped restructure several defunct State entities. In 2015, I accepted work in a relatively minor ministry, the Ministry of Botanical Gardens, because I was involved in the presidential election campaign. Then, we were defeated, and after a lull of several years, I returned as the Governor of the Southern Province.



You described yourself as an insurgent in 1971. Can you tell us more about this? Today, how would you view a young person's involvement in activism?

There is a saying in Sri Lanka that you must climb the Adam's Peak at least once in your lifetime. But you would be considered mad if you went there twice. Likewise,

young people have much energy, which they release in radical ways. I was only eighteen when I got involved in protests, eventually leading to my university eviction. It's natural for young people to harbor radical opinions and get involved in protest movements. Even my grandchildren have very radical views. It is a rebellious age when we refuse to listen even to our parents. But that is youth, and they will be so for a few years. So, we must allow young people to dabble in radicalism and political activism, especially for a good cause. But their militancy must be supervised to stop them from going overboard.

My southern roots inspired me to better its circumstances, which I did by upgrading rural schools, the health sector, and the handloom industry. I am content with what I delivered during my tenure, and the people are happy with what I delivered to the province.

When I entered university in 1967, they had just done away with the regulation of guaranteed teaching jobs for graduates pending final year results. That took away the assurance of employment, which naturally angered the students, forcing rural students to join the 1971 insurrection. Lack of employment opportunities and the resultant insecurity led to the 1971 uprising. As for me, I was on my own as a young undergraduate. I didn't have a family to support me in Colombo. I received a bursary of thirty rupees per month, which was quite substantial compared to the cost of living at that time. That stipend was significant enough to afford a canteen lunch of sixty cents and watch cowboy movies. As an undergraduate, the bursary was all I had to spend. So, many reasons spurred our activism, leading to the 1971 insurrection.

As a villager who came out of my rural circumstances, my advice to the younger generation is to fight their way out of their circumstances, to fight to beat economic poverty and other kinds of poverty, and to be strong enough to face challenges and stand up against intimidators, as that's how one earns the respect of others.

Have we encouraged a system where young graduates depend on the State for employment?

The public sector needs to grow more to accommodate many graduates. However, the key to change is attitude. I know a young woman who worked well at a leading private-sector company. However, she left her job to join the public service when

the government offered development officer positions. Women are very conformable in teaching because of the flexibility, work hours, and holidays. They work roughly half a day for one hundred and sixty days a year. Teaching is the popular choice of the younger generation. But that should change. Jealousy and resentment of others' achievements are other causes of the lack of progressiveness and backwardness, and there is vicious vilification among young people on social media. We must each develop our skills and refrain from trying to steal a share of the other person's success. And that's where attitudes must change. We must train young people to cultivate the right mindset to succeed. We can't go on like this.

What are your plans?

Although I am no longer Governor, I cannot leave politics. I have grown with politics, and politics have defined my career. As village folk, we have gratitude ingrained in us. Since everything in my life has revolved around politics and most of the time I served in those positions, I have to be grateful for those opportunities and the individuals who chose me to serve. Therefore, my involvement in politics will continue.

Secondly, I want to serve the village. I have joined the board of Lak Arcade, a gift and souvenir establishment with a chain of stores in Colombo. I happily accepted their invitation because it was an opportunity to serve the rural artisans. The impoverished artisans in the handicrafts sector need support and intervention to upgrade their skills, technology, and marketability. Tourism is a great way to uplift the lives of craftspeople, but they must be given the fillip from the outside. We are hoping to establish a handicrafts village on forty hectares of land in Hambantota, and through this involvement, I can serve the Southern Province again.

