Express Your Solidarity



The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) is a member of the United People’s Freedom Alliance government. However, being in an alliance does not mean that they agree to every decision the government makes. At times the opposition within the JHU has made sure that the government stays on course. Udaya Gammanpila, group leader of the UPFA for the Colombo District elaborates as to why the alliance should be elected to the Western Provincial Council and on another note, asks the country to express their solidarity to safeguard those who brought freedom to our country.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe Photographs Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

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As the group leader of the UPFA for the Colombo District in the upcoming Provincial Council Elections, can you tell us the key areas that will be focused on in this election?
The President appointed me as the Colombo District group leader breaking all traditions, as I am not a member of the SLFP but of the JHU. Our focus will be on good governance as that is the burning desire of the general public of this country.

I have been in active politics since 2000 on full-time basis. But till 2009 I never contested elections because I did not like the way that the elections were held. I came to politics on full-time basis because by 2000, 99 percent of Sri Lankans were of the view that the LTTE could not be defeated and therefore we should offer something, which could please the LTTE to settle that problem. Very few people were of the view that LTTE could be defeated and must be defeated. I belonged to that minor group. I decided to give up my professional career and enter politics on a full-time basis to convince the nation that the LTTE could be defeated.

On January 2, 2009 when our forces recaptured Kilinochchi-the stronghold of the LTTE-that was the first great signal to us that we would be able to win. At that time, I decided my task was completed and that I should return to my professional career. My party did not allow me to leave and they asked me to contest the Western Provincial Council elections. I agreed on the condition that I contest the election my way.

Last Time, I Volunteered To Declare My Assets, Today The Election Commissioner Has Made It Mandatory For All Contestants To Declare Their Assets. This Was A Result Of My First Submission, Which Triggered A Media Discussion About Asset Accumulation Of Politicians. This Time I Decided To Focus On Election Expenditure…

I started my election campaign by making a pledge at the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy. I pledged that I would not lie and mislead people in my election campaign.

I am not going to sling mud at others, I am not going to distribute liquor or cigarettes and I am not going to misuse public properties in my election campaign. Further, I am not going to use environmentally destructive polythene, posters and crackers in the campaign. I declared my assets voluntarily before contesting the election. Many people told me that I would lose because of my pledge. I thought I must take the risk and swim against the tide because that is how it should be. Surprisingly when results were released the entire country was surprised, because without pasting a single poster and with a very limited budget I was able to obtain more than 116,000 votes.

Last time I volunteered to declare my assets, today the Election Commissioner has made it mandatory for all contestants to declare their assets. This was a result of my first submission, which triggered a media discussion about asset accumulation of politicians. This time I decided to focus on election expenditure. As you know, because of the present electoral system, it is very difficult to win an election without millions of rupees to spend. Therefore after the elections usually the politician has to re-earn what he has spent. Or if someone else has taken care of the expenditure on the politician’s behalf, then he must be allowed to earn that money back. Due to this situation, politics has become a big business, which brings easy money. On the other hand politicians have become prisoners of profiteers and racketeers because, if you do not have large sums of money you cannot win elections.

I want to change this culture, due to this situation politicians are answerable not to the people who elected them but to the people who have financed them. We cannot blame politicians because they really don’t know who has voted for them. The vote goes into a secret box but they have no choice but to remember those who have funded their campaigns. I wanted to start a campaign to change this culture, therefore this time I invited the general public to come forward to finance my election campaign by contributing hundred rupees each.

Why should the people vote for you?

Today, many politicians are making news by involving in thuggery, corruption and sexual misconduct. I am not that kind of politician. Then inefficiency; during my first tenure, though I was a novice, the President offered me a ministerial portfolio in the Western Province. I used it to make revolutionary changes in the governmental system. Nowadays people complain that when they go to a government office it is a

waste of time. They have to visit these offices a number of times to get a simple thing done because one letter may lie on one table without moving to the next for weeks. I banned paper letter communication in my office. Instead email was introduced to ensure that a letter received would be sent to the proper officer. Due to the introduction of email, my ministry became very efficient and is the only one in the country that exclusively uses email for communication.

I realised that many of my officers were wasting time at meetings. We introduced a process of “assignment of task” to the officers through computers, where we used the iDelegate software and because of that my ministry became very efficient. Then we organised a symposium on traditional agricultural knowledge where we documented our traditional knowledge of agriculture, which would have disappeared without any record. Then I introduced agro societies to schools for the first time in history. I introduced environmentally-friendly decorations for funeral societies. Government schools were to discard all their broken chairs and tables and be provided with new ones. I initiated a project to repair those broken chairs and tables to make new furniture with the support of the students. Then I computerised the entire irrigation system in the Western Province, because there was no such data system in the entire governmental system.

Although Provincial Councils had been in existence for 25 years, no Provincial Council had obtained membership of any international organisation to get international exposure. I obtained membership of two international organisations. The government has state owned companies, but there were no such companies in the Provincial Council. I pioneered in establishing Provincial Council owned companies. As a result of this novel programme we were able to secure an Excellence Award in Productivity in 2012, at the National Productivity Awards. Then in 2013, we obtained ISO 9001 international standard certificate where we were the only ministry to do so. I revolutionised the entire public service through my ministry. If people want corruption free, efficient government system they may choose me.

Usually A Good Politician Should Be A Person Who Is Sensitive To The Burning Issues Of The General Public… He Should Be Able To Understand Their Problems And Bold Enough To Stand By The General Public.

What are your thoughts on the candidates contesting in the Election? What criteria should a person fulfill to actually contest?

Today when political parties select candidates they may consider two criteria; either the candidates should have adequate funds for the election campaign or they should be popular enough to attract votes. Unfortunately those should not be the criteria. Usually a good politician should be a person who is sensitive to the burning issues of the general public. Secondly, politicians should be able to understand their problems and be bold enough to stand by the general public. Thirdly, they should possess the intelligence to formulate alternatives. There are several political parties that make a big noise about the problems, but they do not have alternatives. If you do not have an alternative there is no point in criticising. If someone feels that the way the government is raising funds is inappropriate, they should come out with an alternative plan to increase government funds. Fourthly, they should possess managerial skills to supervise the governmental machinery. Fifthly, and lastly but not least, a politician should have a fair understanding about local, national and international political trends. If any person fulfills these five criteria, irrespective of their profession, they are qualified to be a politician.

In the recent past there was a debate on whether cinema and teledrama actors should be politicians. My view is that profession does not matter. If lawyers, teachers, trade unionists, entrepreneurs can be politicians why not actors, singers and sports personalities? In fact we had popular artists who were very good politicians. Take Vijaya Kumaratunga for instance, in fact he lost many things in his artistic career because of his political beliefs. His movies were not shown on televisions because he was a leader in the opposition camp. His songs were not broadcast on radio. In the end he sacrificed his life for his political beliefs. Gamini Fonseka was a grass root activist of the Puravasi Peramuna and ended up being the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament. Being an artist is neither a qualification nor a disqualification to be a politician. You can be a politician, irrespective of your profession as long as you possess those five characteristics, that is my view about it.

Some People Say That The JHU Is The Opposition Within. A Weak Opposition Is Not Good For Any Government. When There Is An Opposition They Highlight The Mistakes And Wrong Decisions Made By The Government, Creating An Opportunity For The Government To Rectify Such Mistakes.

Will the UPFA win this time?
Frankly you are the first person to pose this question because after 2010, no one would question the UPFA's capacity to win any election. The government has won all recent elections with a thumping majority. And the opposition's excuse for their defeat is election malpractices. I have a simple question to pose at that allegation. If we have such malpractices how did the UNP secure victory at the Colombo Municipal Council elections? If the government wanted to use any type of malpractice, it would have been used to secure the victory at the heart of Sri Lanka. Colombo is the biggest and the most important city in the country. Secondly, then how did the TNA secure victory in the Northern Provincial Council elections? Wherever we are weak, we are also losing elections. Wherever we are strong, wherever we have attracted people-we have won elections. Fortunately such places are more than 99 percent in this country.

Can you tell us the role of the JHU within the government?
Some people say that the JHU is the opposition within. A weak opposition is not good for any government. When there is an opposition they highlight the mistakes and wrong decisions made by the government, creating an opportunity for the government to rectify such mistakes. But whenever there is a weak opposition, the government loses this golden opportunity. There are three classic examples in the country. In 1970 the United Front secured more than 2/3 in Parliament for the first time in the history of the country. That meant that the opposition was less than 1/3, resulting in a very weak opposition. Therefore, there was no one to criticise the government, as such the government made mistakes repeatedly. The end result was that the United Front's representation in Parliament slid down to 8 from more that 2/3 in the next election. Then in 1977, the UNP was able to obtain 5/6 in Parliament, resulting a much weaker opposition. There was no opposition to point out the mistakes of the government. The consequence of that is that the UNP has been in the opposition for almost 20 years after losing the election in 1994. These two examples clearly show that a weak opposition is the worse thing that could happen to a government.

Unfortunately, I deliberately use the word unfortunately, the present government has more than 2/3rds and a very weak opposition. But we don't want the present government to face the fate of governments who came to power in 1970 and 77. Therefore the JHU began to play the role of the opposition within the government.

Wherever the government has made mistakes, we have highlighted those, agitated the people to force the government to change such decisions. Because of that the opposition has no viable slogan against the government at this Provincial Council election.

The JHU Is A Party Based On Buddhist Principles. Buddhism Is One Of The Very Few Religions, Which Promote Religious Co-Existence. The Buddha Has Always Said To Respect Other Religions And Encouraged The Co-Existence Of Religions.

The UPFA government has a contract with the people. People elected this government to implement Mahinda Chintana-Vision for the Future. The government is now duty bound to fulfill its promises. We as a party who urge people to vote for the UPFA are duty bound to ensure that the government tries to implement this programme. If I explain in a literal sense “the UPFA bus should go along the Mahinda Chintana road. But sometimes the bus turns to a wrong direction at the junction. At that point we shout, being inside the bus. And sometimes we forcefully turn the steering wheel the other way around and bring the bus back to the Mahinda Chintana road”. So far we have been very successful in fulfilling that role and that is why the opposition has failed to get any opportunity to bounce back.

In the recent past we have seen incidents that caused great concern among Sri Lankans. Can you elaborate the JHU’s stance on this?

The JHU is a party based on Buddhist principles. Buddhism is one of the very few religions, which promotes religious co-existence. The Buddha has always said to respect other religions and encouraged the co-existence of religions. The Buddha has always respected and accommodated alternative views in society. As you know when the Portuguese decided to expel all Muslims from coastal Sri Lanka, King Senarath decided to accommodate them in the Kandyan Kingdom where they were given refuge in temples. The sermon hall was the only large building in any village and this is where they were able to practice their religion. Then when the Dutch took action against the Catholics, again refuge was given to them in the Buddhist temple in the Kandyan kingdom where they held their Sunday prayers in the temple. No Buddhists objected to this. These are but a couple of examples of religious tolerance promoted by Buddhism.

In the past year we saw inter religious violence in the country. As in any religion, I must admit there are extremists and intolerant elements among Buddhists. However, the recent religious unrest was triggered by two reasons. First there were unauthorised constructions of religious places neglecting the laws prevailing with regard to such constructions. Secondly when people complained about these, the bureaucrats had been ignorant and silent about it without taking proper action. Those are the two main reasons to trigger inter religious violence and extreme elements may have added fuel to those issues.

Future plans?

Western Province is one of the most important provinces in the country, although it has a landmass of only six percent it accommodates approximately 30 percent of the nations population. Therefore urbanization is the biggest challenge we face at the moment. The government has taken steps to accommodate those who are living in unauthorised buildings. They occupy some of the prime lands of the country. Since land is a provincial subject to some extent, cooperation of the Provincial Council is essential for the successful relocation of such people. We have cooperated with the Urban Development Authority in the past so we will continue to do that.

Secondly waste management. As you know when I was the Chairman of the Central Environment Authority I launched a programme by the name of Pilisaru with the aim of creating a garbage free Sri Lanka by 2012. It was quite successful. Today we do not see waste dumped around the county, but that does not mean that the problem has been solved. Though waste collection and transportation has become efficient, we have not found a permanent solution to waste dumps. We have planned to talk to foreign investors for joint ventures with the Western Provincial Council to produce compost, electricity and recycling with waste with the latest technologies available.

My dream is to see a 100 percent literacy in the Western Province. Literacy is crucial for the forward march of any nation. At the moment our literacy rate is around 92 percent and it is 95 percent in the Western Province. I would like to provide classes for elders, after school hours to teach them to read and write. If you are literate you can easily communicate to prevent diseases and waste management. 100 percent literacy is one of my dreams with regard to education. Today we see our children spending more time in vehicles on the road than

enjoying their young lives. This is because it is every parent's and child's dream to go to good schools. As a result they have lost their childhood, they have no time to play, they leave home around five in the morning and they come home at night. That is why our younger generation is not mature enough to face the day-to-day problems in life. That's why when a boy breaks up with a girl she decides to commit suicide, and if they fail to secure a pass mark at the exam again they commit suicide. If the teacher or the parent has been tough on them, the easy solution in such situations is committing suicide. Committing suicide has become a big issue in Sri Lanka. Not only is our younger generation not mature enough to face life, our teachers and parents too need to understand the difficulties of young life.

Today most children only concentrate on education while in school and do not experience true life until they become adults. When you do sports you learn how to tolerate and accept defeat. Another aspect is that the young have become distant from religious teachings, which is very helpful in coping with day-to-day problems. We have to make our children close to the playground as well as religion. To do that we should ensure that they have good schools with all desired facilities in the vicinity; where they can walk to school instead of going by vehicles. Presently the government has a programme called Lama Mithuru Pasal (Child Friendly Schools) where primary schools with all facilities are going to be established. Implementation of that project in the Western Province is one of my dreams so that we have a stronger and mature younger generation.

Sri Lanka Has Time And Time Again, Shown By The Elections Held In The Country That The People Are With The Government… I Urge Voters Of These Two Provinces To Express Their Solidarity With The War Heroes By Defending The Government.

Final thoughts?

While we are campaigning for the election to be held on March 29, the US is also campaigning for an election on March 28 where a resolution will be brought forward in Geneva against Sri Lanka.

Many are confused as to what is going to happen, but as a nation that used to live with undated death certificates in our hands we are living in a free and peaceful country thanks to our war heroes. They risked their lives to save our lives. Now their lives are at a risk so the entire nation irrespective of ethnic, religious or political differences should get together to save our war heroes. The government is determined that it will not allow any foreign force to touch our war heroes. Though

the US has tabled resolution after resolution they have never suggested direct interference. That is because they have experienced the defeat in Vietnam by attempting to suppress a popular revolution.

Sri Lanka has time and time again, shown by the elections held in the country that the people are with the government. The entire nation is duty bound to shed their petty differences, to vote for the government and to show the world that this nation is with the government to safeguard their war heroes. Every single person who has survived the LTTE’s 30-year war has this duty to perform. Though the entire country does not have the opportunity, the people of the Western and Southern provinces have the opportunity to show their support on March 29. I urge voters of these two provinces to express their solidarity with the war heroes by defending the government.




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