

I Believe In The SLFP



Loyalty and trustworthiness are attributes that are fast disappearing from the modern politician. One could say that it is easy to enter parliament as money and power seem to do the talking these days. However, Minister Maithripala Sirisena, the General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Minister of Health in the UPFA government has risen to this position through sheer hard work and dedication. He is not from a political family but a person who decided to join the SLFP because of the ideologies he believes in were best represented by the party that once contested under the hand symbol and today the betel sheath. It is apparent that the choice is always yours.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography Menaka Aravinda and Mahesh Bandara

You are General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and you have been a member of the party since 1967. Can you tell us about your experiences?

I joined the SLFP in 1967 as the Secretary of the Youth Association of the Polonnaruwa electorate. I had not even sat for my Ordinary Level Examinations when I joined—the exams were in December in 1967 and I joined the SLFP in August. My journey as a member of the SLFP has been 46 years, of which for more than 12 years have been as the General Secretary. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party is 62 years old and so am I. I am the longest serving General Secretary of the SLFP. Dharmasiri Senanayake held that record prior to me as his term was seven years. The reasons as to why I sustained this position for this long is because of the trust I have built with the leadership of the party.

The General Secretary should be the most trustworthy person to the leader of the party. Having served under two leaders, I know that building that kind of a trust is not easy. But the respect I have for the leadership has earned me this position—I was the General Secretary of SLFP under the leadership of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and I continue in that position under President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

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The General Secretary of the party has a significant role to play. Having been in this position for more than 12 years it is my responsibility to ensure that every endeavour of the party is in accordance with the philosophy and vision of the party. Since its inception as a result of the efforts of S W R D Bandaranaike, the founder of the party to the current leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, SLFP has seen four national leaders; that is S W R D Bandaranaike, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Chandrika Kumaratunga and at present Mahinda Rajapaksa. Considering the party's history under these four leaders, it is evident that the SLFP has always respected Sri Lankan culture, values and traditions. We have worked with other progressive leftist parties in developing the country. Every single time the SLFP has come into power it has done so as an alliance of leftist parties. Why did we always form alliances with progressive leftist parties? It is because we are able to work with these parties as the SLFP philosophy allows us to do so. The strength of a political party depends on the support and the participation it receives from the general public.

Today, there are 127 members of parliament from the SLFP. Never before has there been such a large number in parliament. Once before we had a significant representation from the SLFP in the parliament with 90 MPs after the victory of the 1970's election. When we look at the growth of the party from 1970 to present, the prominent factors that have helped the party to reach greater heights have been; the strength, the popularity and the faith that the people have entrusted in the leadership. President Mahinda Rajapaksa won a very challenging victory in the 2005 elections. One of his first decisions was to end the war that was destroying the country. No one believed it was possible to end the war in such a short period of time. The war which lasted over three decades was concluded within a short span of three years.

Since our leadership was successful in defeating terrorism, which was considered to be an impossible task, the populace of this country developed a great loyalty and affection towards the President. There was a change in attitudes and Sri Lankans started to believe that they can achieve anything. That is why despite different political views, all people of this country celebrated the victory. They proudly hoisted our national flag, as one nation. As the General Secretary of the SLFP, I consider this as the golden era of the party. We were able to earn the respect of the general public due to this massive victory. S W R D Bandaranaike who created the SLFP became the country's Prime Minister after much effort, and he still lives in the hearts of the people. But he was in power only for three years. There have been leaders who have been in power for longer periods but they have been forgotten by the people. But Prime Minister S W R D Bandaranaike is still remembered with respect. That is because of the changes he made in the country following independence from British rule. If we look at the the elections of 2005 and 2010, during this time period the membership of the party has increased.

As the General Secretary of the SLFP my main responsibilities are to ensure that the party operates according to its constitution, protects the identity and the legality of the party under the laws imposed by Commissioner General of Elections and ensuring the constitutional functioning of the party. The General Secretary plays a key role in ensuring that the party is directed towards victory during elections. Then, you have to make sure that there is continuous growth in the party's membership. Furthermore, as the General Secretary, I need to take necessary action according to the party constitution after coordinating with the Central Committee and the All Island Working Committee. There can be different

views amongst members in a political party, that is a result of an evolving modern society. But as the General Secretary I have to make sure that all party members work together. The General Secretary has to give his fullest support to the leader to build unity in the party. We have to also ensure that cordial relations are maintained with other political parties. Today there are 17 parties united in the United People's Freedom Alliance under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. We have two third's majority in parliament, which is 162 out of the total membership of 225.

You have been with the SLFP continuously, abiding by the policies of the party. What are your thoughts on this?

I did not choose the SLFP because of my father or family. My father was not a SLFP member and he was not engaged in politics. He was actually a strong UNPer. I still remember, when I wanted to join politics and the SLFP, my father was against it. He was very upset and asked me why I wanted to join politics. I have always been a very obedient child, the only thing I did against my father's will was to become a member of the SLFP.

As a teenager I used to read quite a lot and it was through this that I was able to learn of the SLFP. I used to read books on Marxism and political ideologies based on leftism. I understood that the philosophy of the SLFP was the most suitable party for me to join. The head of the government in Sri Lanka at the time I decided to join the SLFP was Dudley Senanayake. The government of 1965-1970 had capitalist views and policies. But, I was heavily influenced by the books I had read on leftist politics and I believed that those policies were much more suitable for Sri Lanka.

I Have Supported The SLFP For More Than 47 Years Not Because Of The Influence Of My Family, But Because I Believe That The SLFP Is The Only Party That Has A Clear Vision On How To Develop This Country.

I don't have a family background in politics and I am not from an elite family, nor was my father a SLFP supporter. It is solely because of the books that I read that I chose the SLFP, at a very young age even before I sat for my O' Levels. I researched and learned more about politics by participating in political camps in USSR and China. Following the SLFP's defeat in 1977 elections, I participated in youth training camps in these countries. That was before the fall of the Soviet

Union and their politics were based on socialism. According to the best of my knowledge, I believe that the SLFP has a political structure and is based on an ideology that suits this country the most. I have supported the SLFP for more than 47 years not because of the influence of my family, but because I believe that the SLFP is the only party that has a clear vision on how to develop this country with a plan that actually suits Sri Lanka.

Why did I stay in the party continuously? Take for example, the period between 1977-1994, we had to face many threats and had to face imprisonment as well. On the day that the UNP was bringing the act to withdraw the civil rights of Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike, I was protesting in Polonnaruwa along with 3,000 other supporters. I was arrested in Anuradhapura and imprisoned for three months. I am one of the people who were subjected to various threats and distress every single time the UNP came into power. In 2001, when the UNP came into power they pressed false charges against me and imprisoned me. There were charges for crimes that I would not have even dreamt of doing. I would still be in prison had the SLFP not won the election in 2004. Choosing the SLFP was done with a clear understanding of the party's function and philosophies. I will never leave the SLFP.

We see that many who are in the UPFA are cross-overs and this includes majority of those who are holding positions in the government. What are your thoughts on this?

Yes, that is true, but we must consider those who have crossed-over — most of them are from the UNP. What compelled them to leave the UNP? They had reasons for doing so, they realised that it is only under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa that this country could be developed.

Then there was the LTTE issue. Since the assassination of the Mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappah, which was during Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike's time, none of the leaders of this country were able to resolve this issue. During J R Jayewardene's regime, he made an honest attempt to resolve the ethnic conflict based on his scope of knowledge. The Indo-Lanka Accord, peace talks and military operations that were carried out from time to time were part of such attempts. But none of those were successful. Then, R Premadasa too made such attempts. He waged war, had peace talks with the LTTE and also at times supplied their requirements. All this was done in his perspective to end the war and build a

somewhat positive relationship with the LTTE. He used war and other tactics. But ultimately President Premadasa was killed by the LTTE. Then D B Wijetunga succeeded R Premadasa and he too—in his short term in power—tried to put an end to war through weapons and attacks. Even President Chandrika Kumaratunga took all possible actions to defeat the LTTE as a result of which she was targeted by LTTE suicide bombers. In 2001, Ranil Wickremesinghe tried to resolve the ethnic conflict through a different approach, which was rejected by the country. Every step taken under all other leaderships failed to solve this problem. It was only under the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa that Sri Lanka was able to put an end to the 30 year conflict.

Considering President Rajapaksa's leadership qualities, his approach to conclude the war was successful. We are aware that the journey from this point onwards will not be easy, it will be complex. We have to take the necessary steps and political actions and direct the country towards development.

The people who left other political parties and joined the UPFA did so because they realised that President Mahinda Rajapaksa was the only leader who can end the war and develop this country. Given the situation in the country, people had to decide what they should do for the country. I believe that people who crossed-over made that decision because they were concerned about the future of the country. They helped strengthen the party and even President Rajapaksa was encouraged because of them. This also helped in convincing the international community that this government was very strong. A weak government could not have fought the LTTE. Hence people in other political parties knew that they had to help strengthen the government. That is why they made the decision to join the UPFA.

It can be said that the SLFP is not visible within the UPFA. Is that true?

Clearly SLFP is the main component of the UPFA and is very much visible. President Mahinda Rajapaksa who is the leader of the SLFP is also the leader of the UPFA. Susil Premajayantha who is the Secretary of UPFA is the deputy chairman of the SLFP. Two thirds of the office bearers in the UPFA are from the SLFP. At a glance, one can say that there are a lot of people who have come from other parties such as the National Freedom Front, Jathika Hela Urumaya and Muslim Congress. But all of them have joined the UPFA with a unified vision to achieve a common goal. All of us have decided that we will work towards the

implementation of the Mahinda Chintana, which means that they are with the leadership of the SLFP.

It is not easy for a government formed through an alliance to sustain in power. We have to maintain unity and good relations with the parties within the alliance. The SLFP is the strongest party in the UPFA and out of the majority of 162 in parliament, SLFP has the biggest representation of 127. Therefore the SLFP is the most prominent party in UPFA.

One Should Have A Vision And A Philosophy To Be In Politics. To Develop A Vision, One Should Gain Knowledge... A Politician Should Work With The People To Build Their Knowledge In Politics.

When we consider young politicians of the country, what is the future of Sri Lankan politics?

Honestly I am disappointed in the young politicians in this country. None of them have developed the habit of reading, I do not think that they even read the editorials of newspapers. One should have a vision and a philosophy to be in politics. To develop a vision, one should gain knowledge. There are several ways of gathering knowledge, one can either read books, or learn and take examinations on these subjects. But more importantly a politician should work with the people to build their knowledge in politics. Working with the people can be challenging but nevertheless rewarding.

I have been in the parliament continuously for 25 years, I first entered parliament in 1989. This government has been in power since 1994. Next year will be the 20th anniversary of this government. All politicians of this government should not forget their beginnings. They should not forget their voters who helped them to reach the positions that they hold today. But what happens to most of these young politicians is that, once they come to Colombo, they adopt only the negative aspects of city culture. This is happening not only in parliament but also in all governing institutions in provincial and district levels. It is sad to say that there is a degradation in provincial politicians today. Their approach to politics is far from one that is based on principles. They come into politics either through personal connections or through their success as businessmen. I used to discuss this with the late Gamini Athukorala, who was the General Secretary of the UNP and also a close friend of mine. He used to tell me that they referred to some MPs as 'first

time, last time'. That is because it was obvious that they would not be able to remain in politics. These young MPs do not work or talk with their voters. They never have public days where the people in their electorates could come and talk to them about their issues but adopt negative habits of the urban culture. However this is prevalent not only among young politicians.

We used to read all about leftism because at that time there was a clash between left wing ideologies of the USSR and China and the right wing ideologies of the US (West). And these countries were prompted to spread their ideologies to the rest of the world. When we were schooling, several magazines and books were posted monthly to villages by the Russian, American and Chinese embassies. There was a triangular fight between Russia, China and America to win the world and in this context, countries like Sri Lanka were very important. Because all of these camps needed votes of other countries at the UN. Due to the power struggle between these three countries, smaller countries were given prominence and they were important because the super powers needed their support. But with the fall of the Soviet Union, America became the only superpower in the world and thus, they were able to direct all other countries to go their way to a capitalist political culture. There may be numerous international organisations such as the UN, Non Aligned Nations and the Commonwealth, however everyone does what the US wants. The UN is at the pinnacle of international organizations but who controls the UN is a public secret. The attacks that were carried out against Iraq and Libya were not decisions of the UN. Today, there is no competition in the international arena. This has affected the village. There is no stimulus to provoke the minds of young politicians. They don't have to choose between left and right because everything is moving in one direction. This has affected all countries. There is no quality in politics practiced by these young politicians because they don't have the avenues to have political dialogues of their own since there is no stimulus for them to do so.

During our younger days, we used to debate about global politics. One would side with left while the other would oppose that view. There is nothing to debate about in today's international politics. Technology—mobile phones, laptops and all other high tech equipment—has destroyed all qualitative aspects of human society.

What can you say about your electorate —Polonnaruwa?

There are three electoral divisions in the Polonnaruwa district. The districts of

Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were developed through the agricultural strategy by Prime Minister D S Senanayake who introduced massive schemes after gaining independence from the British. There has never been a leader who was far sighted and had a long term policy on reviving agriculture. His national policy on agriculture is very important. He created all farming communities and I am a son of one of the famers in a farming community. I respect D S Senanayake for the vision he had.

After 1947, C P Silva is the only one who has represented Polonnaruwa in the cabinet before me. He was the Additional Divisional Secretary of Polonnaruwa when S W R D Bandaranaike invited him to join politics. C P Silva was not from Polonnaruwa, he was from Ambalangoda. The SLFP won nine seats in the 1952 election which was its first election since the formation of the party in 1951. C P Silva won the Polonnaruwa seat in that election. At that time, the entire Polonnaruwa district was one electorate. In the first SLFP government in 1956 C P Silva was a Minister in that government. He held a ministerial position for 17 years from 1956 to 1970. For ten years since 1956 he was with the SLFP and then he took a political decision and joined the UNP. He passed away after the elections in 1970.

I Became A Cabinet Minister 27 Years After 1970. I Hail From The Farmer Community In Polonnaruwa And I Was Able To Enter Parliament In 1989.

Twenty seven years after Minister C P Silva, I secured the Polonnaruwa seat and became a Cabinet Minister, which was the first time since 1970. I hail from the farmer community in Polonnaruwa and I was able to enter parliament in 1989. I became a Deputy Minister in 1994 and became a Cabinet Minister in 1997. I have been a Cabinet Minister since then—except in 2002 and 2003.

We have taken many steps to uplift Polonnaruwa district where children will have access to a new world. We can build a generation, which can compete in today's competitive social context. We have paid special attention to uplift the education, vocational training, health and agricultural sections of this district. There is a massive development that can be seen in Polonnaruwa. Polonnaruwa, while having a rich historical value also has a unique geographical location. It is the only district in the country to be surrounded by tanks and reservoirs and it is the only district with the highest density of forests.

You have held many positions and today you are the Health Minister of this government. What are your thoughts on this?

I have worked in many ministries. If I speak as a Buddhist, I can say that the Ministry of Health is the best place for a person to gain merit, provided the duty is done properly, or to sin if they do not. Anyone who works at the Health Ministry has the choice of hell or heaven when they work here. It has been four years since I became the Health Minister. Sri Lanka did not have a health policy, as such it took me one and a half years to formulate the national health policy. I created a five year plan of action for the health sector with the support of my officers. I am thankful to them for their support. The execution of this plan was initiated in January 2013.

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Sri Lanka has the best health services when compared to other countries. Our free health service is among the best in the world. Our infant and maternal mortality rates are very low. We are one of the few countries that offer free health services. We spend millions on patients but never charge a single cent from them. The National Cancer Hospital spends about 15 million rupees per patient. The ministry has also taken steps to reduce the rates of non-communicable diseases. This is the only ministry, which has provided an outstanding service in terms of the distribution of physical and human resources. I gave appointments to 1,100 doctors recently and in January 2014 we will present appointment letters to 10,000 para medical officers. While enhancing human resources we make significant investments to develop physical resources. The budgetary allocation for the Health Ministry for 2014 is 155 billions rupees. We received Japanese support to reconstruct the Jaffna Base Hospital and now it has a state-of-the-art ICU facility. It is the best in Sri Lanka. Then we are reconstructing Nuwara Eliya and Hambanthota Base Hospitals with assistance from the Netherlands. We received Indian assistance and engineering support to renovate the Hatton-Dikoya Base Hospital. We have received assistance from the US as well. Then many sections of the National Hospital in Colombo have been renovated. There are infrastructure developments taking place in all hospitals island-wide. The investments made on the health sector are long term investments. There may be criticisms, but we have a health service in the country that is of very high quality.

We had to fight with certain multinational pharmaceutical and other companies to ensure the continuity of a quality health service. The majority in this society measure everything in terms of money or financial gain. These are the challenges before us that are trying to destroy the free health service. But despite all this, we will do our best to provide a good service to the public.

Do you think that SLFP can be assured of victory in future elections?

Yes of course. There is no other party to win elections in this country. Provincial council elections will be held next year in the Western, Southern, Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces.

Finally,

Sri Lanka, as a country is facing many international challenges. Defeating Prabhakaran's separatist ideology of creating an Eelam state is behind us.

Though we eliminated terrorism physically it will take some time to curtail the spread of his ideology. We have to be united as one country to defeat this great challenge.





