

Political Manipulator, Not Conspirator



A J M Muzammil is the Mayor of Colombo. A title that holds great responsibility. With a political career spanning more than 30 years, he has the sharp wit and political acumen that are required to ensure that he is able to fulfill his role as a Mayor from the UNP, within the folds of a strong UPFA central government. He shows how the two parties can work together as he has done with the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. He says that politics should be confined to elections, but as long as you do not lose your political identity, a politician's responsibility is to work for the people and that means working in partnership with the government, when it is apparent that the work being done is for the betterment of the country. If all Sri Lankan politicians thought in this manner, then our country would be far ahead in its forward journey...

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography Mahesh Bandara and Indika De Silva

Who is A J M Muzammil?

A J M Muzammil is known as a very controversial figure in the political arena. I am known as a political manipulator, but I am not a conspirator. I entered politics as a student during Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's era. I was very actively involved in politics with President Premadasa. One of the most interesting episodes in my political career, is the manner in which I was able to turn around a near defeat of the UNP in the Presidential election, to a victory in 1988. I was able to turn it around for President Premadasa. In fact that election was to be a victory for Mrs Bandaranaike but she lost due to the negotiations failing with my good friend late Alhaj M H M Ashroff, Leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. It was not his fault, but of Mrs Bandaranaike and the formation of the Democratic Peoples Alliance at that time. Ashroff had to move away from supporting Mrs Bandaranaike. I initiated that process and of course President Premadasa understood what he wanted. With the support of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the UNP was able to win that election. It is with this election that my name came into the limelight, as it was my negotiation with Ashroff that turned the table. This is how I earned a reputation as a political mover.

Another significant event was the impeachment of President Premadasa. Here again, I was able to garner the support of the SLMC, led by Ashroff. Even though there was a strained relationship between the President and the SLMC, I was able to convince Ashroff to support President Premadasa and we were able to overcome the crisis. The split within the UNP, where Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake formed a new political party was the pivotal moment that signified the decline of the UNP. In politics you have to be patient and play a very long innings. It is not like a T20 or a 50 over match. One should have a lot of patience. President J R Jayewardene was such a person, much like President Mahinda Rajapaksa and our Leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe.

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The Game Of Politics You Have To Play A Very Long Innings.

Following the assassinations of Lalith Athulathmudali and President Premadasa, there was the need to bring Gamini Dissanayake back into the folds of the UNP. Here too, I was the prime mover in bringing him back into the UNP, to strengthen the Party. Therefore, I have a long history in politics and it is also one that I can speak of proudly.

Moving on to a totally different field, I have been involved in developing cricket at a time where there was no money in the game. T B Werapitiya was the President of the Board in the late 1970s. We brought in Gamini Dissanayake on to the Board and began our bid to attain test status. I have been a former Vice President of the Cricket Board as well.

The Colombo Municipal Council can be considered as the most important in the country. Can you elaborate on what has been done so far and your plans for the city?

I have been in this office for the last two and half years. The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has always needed a long-term plan and that is what we have done by incorporating the Colombo Plan, the Metro City Plan and the one drawn out by the UNP, a few years ago. We are working according to a structured long term plan. During the past two to three years, there has been massive development within the city.

The city you see today is very different. A well-planned development programme is in progress. We have completely revamped the Viharamahadevi Park, Town Hall Square, Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha and Slave Island. We are now in the second phase of our work where we are giving priority to pedestrians on the Galle Road and Duplication Road up to Wellawatte. We have also completed a large section of the rehabilitation of the sewerage and drainage lines within the city.

The CMC plays a critical role in driving investments as well, by providing the required infrastructure platforms. Presently there is a colossal amount of property development in Colombo. With International hotels such as Shangri-La, ICT,

Sheraton, Hyatt and a new hotel by John Keells Holdings being constructed along with the development of the Port City as well as Queensbury and James Packer's leisure hotels along the Beira Lake, there are major implications on developing the infrastructure to support these mega projects. All infrastructure development within the city of Colombo are supported by the CMC. For example, we need ten million US dollars to expand drainage and sewer lines along with expansion of the pumping stations and other required infrastructure facilities for the Shangri-La, ITC and John Keells development as well as the development around the Slave Island and Beira Lake projects. The government has promised to allocate the funds.

As A Result, Some People Say That I Am “Gota’s Man”. That Is Not True. We Must Be Able To Work Closely With The Government To Achieve The Ambitious Development Goals. It Is Also Important To Appreciate The Good Work Done By Gotabaya Rajapaksa And The Ministry Of Defence And Urban Development.

The Colombo Municipal Council cannot sustain itself on its own. We are an opposition governed municipal council. Therefore, our sustainability is limited and hence, we have to work closely with the government. This is how we have been able to do a considerable amount of development work. The work that has been done so far has been achieved through a 70 million US dollar World Bank assisted funding programme, which was initiated by the Urban Development Authority under the purview of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. In addition, another 250 million US dollars soft loan, negotiated by the Local Government Ministry, from the Asian Development Bank was used for underground drainage, sewerage projects and pumping stations. In most of these projects CMC has contributed nearly one billion rupees as counterpart funding.

As a result, some people say that I am “Gota’s man”. That is not true. We must be able to work closely with the Government to achieve the ambitious development goals. It is also important to appreciate the good work done by Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development in developing Colombo. We must recognise the good work done by a person, because it is only then that your criticism becomes valid. If you just simply criticise everything, then people will laugh at you. There is a large amount of development being done by the Urban Development Authority, such as the renovation of the Colombo Racecourse, Dutch Hospital, Independence Square and the former Auditor General’s Department

building. Many of our heritage buildings have been or are in the process of being renovated.

My biggest focus during the remaining period of my tenure, is to solve the garbage problem. This issue cannot be solved by the city councils alone. It has to be discussed at a national level. We, together with the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development are in discussion with the World Bank on how we can find a permanent solution within the next couple of years.

Serving the under privileged settlements in the city is also another key area that we are focusing on. We can no longer allow these people to live under the present conditions. We need at least 60,000 housing units and we have the land to do so. We need to plan and build at least 10,000 units annually, so that within five years we may be able to complete this target. We are now exploring the possibility of raising 50 million US Dollars in municipal bonds. Discussions are already underway with leading banks in the city in order to achieve this. Building houses and settling these people can be made a commercially viable investment. Conferring to the global trend for 2020-2030, what is identified is that 65-70 percent of the population will be urbanised. Therefore more facilities need to be created in the main cities.

This Is The Taxpayer's Money At Work. The Supervision Part Is Also Very Important, So We Are Grateful To The Environment Police For Giving Us A Great Support In Monitoring And Supervision.

In the last few years we saw Colombo actually transform into a beautiful and clean city. Can you tell us how this was achieved?

The cleaning and collecting of garbage on the city has been privatised. The Colombo Municipal Council is spending nearly 1.2 billion annually to keep the city in this condition. This is the taxpayer's money at work. The supervision part is also very important, so we are grateful to the Environment Police for giving us a great support in monitoring and supervision.

We have not introduced strict laws to fine individuals when they litter such as in some other countries. However, when there is a clean environment, even the people do not like to litter. They will hesitate to throw anything on to the roads.

Currently, the city is being cleaned around the clock. We ensure that all areas of the city are clean; the roads, gardens and parks as well as public spaces. The CMC is divided into six divisions and the cleaning of all these divisions except for one is done by the private sector.

When we take the development work that is happening in the city, such as road works, drainage, sewage and water lines, we see that the work is done once and then again there is breaking and redoing of that work. Why is that?

There is a little bit of that, but we try our best to minimise it. Even if you build a house for example, your architect would design the house, but by the time construction is completed many changes have been done. Our main concept, which is to give priority to the pedestrians, has not changed though certain other design changes have been done. Walkability has been improved. We also make certain changes on the request of people. Even when we were doing the routes for Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) such as developing Horton Place and Ward Place, many residents started complaining. Finally, when everything was completed the people were happy.

The current roadwork that you see also includes the laying of sewerage lines. Therefore, roadwork will not happen again for that purpose.

You have also taken many steps to ensure that food outlets and restaurants maintain proper hygiene and health standards.

We do not care about the name of the place, we will go into the kitchen. Big name boards will not stop us from going into their kitchens. We have taken action against certain businesses and people now understand why we are doing this and the importance of ensuring proper health and hygiene standards. We are very particular about the food items that are being brought in from abroad. We are checking everything.

Politics And Serving People Are Two Different Subjects; I Look At It In That Way... The Government Never Wanted Me To Compromise My Political Identity Or My Political Culture Nor Do They Have The Ability To Do That. I Do My Politics Separately. I Do Not Mix It With My Responsibilities.

You have also taken action against tax defaulters?

They must pay their dues. People have to get used to paying their taxes. We have listed the people who have big arrears. What they do not understand is that the surcharge is very high. We cannot and do not have the power to give exemptions on the surcharge. However, I have told my officials to be reasonable. For example, if a person can pay 50 percent now they will be given a time period to pay the remaining 50 percent.

The CMC and the UDA are working very closely together. This is a good example of the opposition and the government working well. What can you tell us about this partnership?

Politics and serving people are two different subjects; I look at it in that way. I got elected from the UNP and I will not compromise my political identity under any circumstance. It is very important that I honour my Party. I have a council of 53 members. The council consists of the UNP, UPFA opposition members and minority groups. During the vote for my first budget in the CMC, the opposition abstained, they did not vote against. In my second budget they still abstained, they did not vote against. Then in my third budget, they voted with me. That is the political relationship we have cultivated.

In fairness to the government, they did not consider the CMC as a UNP council and neglect us. I believe that if the government takes one foot towards me then I will take three feet towards them. That is the way you display good faith and build a functioning working relationship. The government never wanted me to compromise my political identity or my political culture nor do they have the ability to do that. I do my politics separately. I do not mix it with my responsibilities. I feel it is a 'give and take'. At the end of the day the benefit is for the people and for the city of Colombo. What is the use of holding a prestigious position and not being able to do anything? What is the use of fighting? It is the people who will suffer. Today, people are enjoying the benefits of the work done.

If mature politicians can look at issues in this manner, then I feel we can solve many problems and it will be for the betterment of the country. Both parties have to work together, there cannot be one way traffic. Even in the North and East, I would say things could have been a little more flexible from both sides. Then things would have been far better.

What more can we expect from the Colombo Municipal Council?

We need the support of the private sector. As the key economic players, they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the development work that is being done. There are increasing number of businesses and traders in the city and more tourists are visiting the country. There are no dues to the CMC except the taxes, therefore we need the cooperation of the private sector. At this time we greatly need the assistance of the private sector to help curtail the menace of dengue. We are spending heavily to contain this disease and I earnestly call upon the private sector to come and help us.

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Political Future?

Politically we are at a very crucial stage. The government must understand that you cannot restrict the private sector and develop this country. You cannot have ultra-nationalistic policies on one side and private sector development on the other.

The government's policy on foreign investment has to be very firm and stable. Stability within policy will help drive investor confidence. Without confidence, you cannot attract foreign investment. Foreign investment coming into the country is a blessing not a sell-out.

In addition, the government must send a good message to the international community, particularly at a time when many human rights resolutions are being adopted against us. That is very important. However, it is the exact opposite that occurred during the recent unfortunate events that unfolded in Aluthgama.

The government should have taken every possible step to fully control the ethnic violence that erupted. Such incidents not only infringe upon fundamental rights, but lead to many negative social implications. It also has a detrimental impact on the economy and the development of the country. The government cannot allow any extremist groups of any religion to take over and dictate terms. That is where the government is making a big mistake. They should have never allowed an incident

like in Aluthgama to happen. What harm has these Muslims done to this country? Today, Muslim countries who have stood by us are up in arms against the Sri Lankan government because of the violence that is being perpetuated by certain groups. We need their support when the UN takes up another resolution against us next year. None of us want sanctions.

It is the responsibility of the government to protect every citizen of this country, to ensure that everyone has the right to practice their religion, to speak and write in their own language. Every citizen must have the right to live with self dignity and authority. Otherwise this country will not have any future.



