

President Maithripala Sirisena: Patience. Determination. Courage.



By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

His Excellency Maithripala Sirisena is the President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. His political journey spans over 50 years, where the experiences gained during this period has shaped him to be a strong leader. He does not waver under pressure and will always put the country first. This has been

proved by the many decisions he has made as the President of this island nation.

Following his election as the Head of State of Sri Lanka, the country is independent and enjoys the true meaning of freedom. However, the people need to learn how to use this freedom for their betterment as well as the development of the country. If that precious freedom is misused the rule of law will be applied.

During the past four years, President Maithripala Sirisena made great achievements in terms of policy such as the National Health and Drug Policy, in development such as the completion of the Moragahakanda Reservoir, and in terms of the betterment of society, action against tobacco, narcotics and alcohol. These are but a few of the many successes he has achieved.

Sri Lanka today is respected internationally due to the efforts of the President. The country can speak with pride at any global forum. A positive image of the country has been created. All countries and international financial institutions support Sri Lanka because they have great respect and trust in President Maithripala Sirisena.

The political journey of President Maithripala Sirisena is a unique one that spans over 50 years. He achieved a task that no one thought was possible. From humble beginnings, without any family or political connections he rose to become the Executive President due to his courageous efforts and by also having the strength to take the risk. Yet, he did the unthinkable; the executive powers of the Presidency were reduced significantly through the 19th Amendment, which will be more apparent in the next election.

As a statesman, he reflects the qualities, charisma and principles that were present in politicians of this country long time ago. He is a gentleman politician that makes decisions with great thought. Educated and well-read, President Maithripala Sirisena epitomizes the character of a great leader. He is a true Sri Lankan that follows the Dhamma while respecting all religions and communities. Simple and modest, he does not focus on publicizing his achievements but proves by action.

Having interviewed President Maithripala Sirisena in 2014, then Minister, it is apparent that power has not changed this great statesman who is today the President of our beautiful nation. His advice for future generations is to focus on their education, be honest, always be true to oneself and never fear to take risks. His vision is one that should resonate in all Sri Lankans. He has delivered on the promises made to the country.

In our interview with you in 2014, you spoke about your political journey and also about the SLFP. Much has happened since then, but you have remained true to yourself and what you believe in. Can speak about your experience and journey you have traversed since then?

Our journey to transform Sri Lanka truly started in 2015, after the Presidential Election on January 8, 2015, where I was elected and sworn-in as Head of State on January 9. We have made great progress that we can be proud of in the three years and nine months since then, but true leadership is about always looking ahead and not resting on our past accomplishments. Of course, our opponents will question or criticize us no matter what we do, but the fact is that we changed the course of the country away from the disastrous path on which it was on. That was the people's mandate, and that is what we have delivered. Democracy and individual freedoms for our citizens have never been stronger. Sri Lankans can live in a secure and peaceful environment without fear. Human rights have not only been upheld but constitutionally enshrined. Partisanship and corruption at the highest levels of the judiciary have come to a halt. Judges can no longer be appointed, promoted or removed by the Executive, and they need not fear reprisals for judgments that go against Government policy. That is true judicial independence. Today, we can hold our head up high in the international community.

These are the foundations of a strong and prosperous Sri Lanka, but by themselves do not put food on the table. Many people are still facing hardships in their daily life. Our economic policies such as the reintroduction of fiscal responsibility have not yet had a chance to bring stability to the rising cost of living or to create enough jobs for our youth. These are the critical challenges that remain, and we are determined to find long-term real-world solutions that benefit all Sri Lankans.

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On January 8, 2015 when the people of Sri Lanka voted for me, they were not asking me for more employment opportunities, land rights or welfare. Their vote was for good governance, and for an environment in which they can live freely and happily with faith that their voice will be heard in a free and fair democratic process. Sri Lanka was isolated internationally, and our image was tarnished. The United Nations and liberal democracies around the world had almost written us off as a failed state. At the time we were elected, the international community had already begun imposing economic sanctions on Sri Lanka. Europe had banned our fisheries exports. GSP Plus and other tax concessions for our garment industry were revoked. That was just the beginning. At that time, whenever Sri Lanka was discussed in global forums and the media, the only topics that came up were international war crimes tribunals, the electric chair and foreign judges. Today, we have engaged the international community honestly and transparently and shown the world that we have nothing to hide. Due to the efforts of our Government, we are once again respected internationally.

Before 2015, major UN bodies such as the UNHRC and international financial institutions had distanced themselves from Sri Lanka. The World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA) and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) among other international financial institutions had taken a step back, wary of dealing with corrupt and oppressive regimes. Moreover, due to the issues faced by the Muslim community in Sri Lanka at that time, the Arab world including traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait stopped providing financial aid. We have won over the international community and have succeeded in securing international assistance by healing those wounds. We have re-formed these relationships, which are very strong today.

The massive Moragahakanda-Kalu Ganga reservoir development project was completed with the funds received from China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the ADB. All international donors are now working very closely with us and are assisting

us with development projects across the country.

We have restored friendly relations with all international financial institutions and the administrative arms of the United Nations. Sri Lanka has taken a front seat in signing, ratifying and accelerating implementation of the Paris Agreement within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and we are leading our peers in our efforts to protect our natural resources and move towards a carbon-neutral economy. This is just one example of how we are working with the rest of the world instead of against it.

Before we were elected, media freedom had eroded to such a degree that print and electronic media institution faced immense challenges. Several journalists fled the country. We reversed course immediately, drawing back the curtain of fear so journalists could report how they wanted without fear or favour. Today, the Government and its ministers are regularly attacked and opposition spokespeople have an outsized voice in the press. While I disagree with many of these opinions that get publicity, I am proud that we have restored a culture that allows criticism. I do not regret it. Free expression is a right guaranteed to all Sri Lankans in our Constitution, and our responsibilities as leaders is to guard the Constitution, not our own political parties or personal interests.

Sri Lanka is a 'republic', which means that supreme power is held by the people who elect representatives on their behalf. A true republic depends on an environment in which, democracy, freedom of expression and other human rights are protected above all, or else it risks becoming a fascist dictatorship or monarchy simply dressed as a democratic republic. We have learned the hard way that if basic human rights are not protected or can be violated with impunity, and if the core tenets of civil society are suppressed or manipulated, then no citizen or civil servant truly can count on having any physical or economic security in their own country.

Power brings corruption and it is easy for leaders to promise reforms before coming into power. No leader of Sri Lanka has reduced their power after coming into office. Everyone has tried to strengthen their power once elected either by changing laws or by using their power to change norms. The power of the Executive President was limitless and left the country very vulnerable to a totalitarian environment. That is

the reason we campaigned so ferociously on curtailing the powers of the President. It is for the same reason that once we were elected, we introduced and passed the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

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Through this landmark instrument of law, I became the first Head of State to preside over the curtailment of their own powers. My own term of office was reduced by one year, and the power of appointment and oversight of public servants whose independence is critical to democracy were vested in independent commissions and the Constitutional Council. The days where a President could unilaterally appoint his or her loyalists as Inspector General of Police, Attorney General and Chief Justice and control the strings of justice, are gone. I knew in many ways that by reducing my powers and the powers of my Government, I was emboldening the anti-democratic forces who want to see Sri Lanka return to an ethnocentric autocratic path. However, this is what we promised the people that we would do, and we remained true to that promise. I have faith in the country to protect the progress that we have made.

For now, we have paved the way for a better future for the country. My Government has removed the barriers that we faced internationally and we can proudly speak of Sri Lanka. What remains to be done is to address the economic hardships still faced by Sri Lankans across the country. Economic and social development is presently the priority.

You have always been clear on your vision for the country. Can you elaborate on your plans in terms of economic and social development?

Our aim now is to work towards developing a strong economy with a focus on the balance of payments. We need to strengthen our exports while reducing our dependence on imports where possible. When the export of Sri Lankan produced goods to the international market is increased, we strengthen our foreign reserves. As a result, it is important to uplift the agricultural sector of the country. This has

been and continues to be one of our key development priorities.

Our development focus has been on projects that will have an immediate and lasting impact on economic growth. There has not been a major focus on agricultural or irrigation infrastructure in Sri Lanka for decades. After 1977, President J R Jayewardene and Minister Gamini Dissanayake had the vision to realise that the Mahaweli project could be completed in five years instead of thirty, and they made it happen.

Since then, there has not been a focus or significant programme by any regime to restore and renovate the over 10,000 reservoirs in the country. In 2015, we followed the example set by President J R Jayewardene and Gamini Dissanayake, and gathered funding and completed the delayed Moragahakanda reservoir project within three years. This project alone will irrigate enough paddy fields to sizably increase paddy production, create a new source of inland fishing and provide drinking water for millions of Sri Lankans. The associated hydroelectric power station will provide 25 megawatts of electricity, reducing our dependence on imported fossil fuels by over USD 1.6 billion annually.

At every level, irrigation development projects of this nature are underway, including the Kalu Ganga, Ihala Elahera Ela, Minipe Ela, Maha Ela and Wayamba Maha Ela projects. Although these are called Ela or canals, these are in fact small rivers. We are reviving over 2,500 water tanks across the island. These projects are fully funded, and we are actively recruiting engineers to complete these projects as soon as possible. Together, our goal is to re-energize the forgotten agricultural sector that was once the backbone of our domestic economy and become a net exporter of rice.

The Government has also instituted reforms in the dairy industry, funded the development of cottage industries, such as crafts and promoted the gem industry. These initiatives are far-reaching changes to the policy and culture of economic development, aimed to uplift the livelihoods of our people and ultimately reach harmony between the interests of workers and the creative ambitions of entrepreneurs. Several initiatives encourage risk-taking in domestic entrepreneurial endeavours. This is the future of Sri Lanka's economy, not political cronyism and a

ballooning public sector that spreads a culture of dependence on jobs in the Government sector that is a recipe for inefficiency and corruption. Through livelihood development initiatives, we have been offering loans, equipment as well as advice so that those who participate can earn a living and support their families with dignity.

I Was The Minister Of Health For Five Years Before My Presidency, At That Time I Was Not Given The Latitude To Implement Critical Reforms. Today, That Is Not The Case. We Have Been Able To Implement The National Drug Policy And National Health Policy In Their Entirety, Something That Had Been In Discussion For The Past 60 Years But Never Done.

Long-term plans for the development of the tourism and fisheries industries have been announced and set in motion. The tourism industry is ready for expansion. Several new hotels are springing up across the country in a variety of boutique sectors. This is a great opportunity for Sri Lanka to make our mark as a tourism destination to new demographics.

Reform of the educational sector is key to our success. We need to change the status quo. We see students graduating with various university degrees and then protesting on the roads demanding jobs. This is a challenge that has been faced not just in Sri Lanka, but in advanced economies around the world. As policy-makers, our job is not just to reform the system for tomorrow's students but to engage today's graduates productively in the economy. Vocational training is critical. University may not be the right option for every student. Pretending that this is not the case, just leads to a situation where you have thousands who graduate with degrees that give them no advantage in the job market. As of 2016, all training institutions under the purview of the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training provide free training to all students. While previous Governments have charged for education, we have increased state spending in education. This is not charity or welfare. By providing appropriate, high-quality education to every citizen, we are investing in more than one person. We are investing in the fruits of their education, and the economic growth that their new skills will bring to their families, communities and their country.

That is why we have begun making improvements to over 10,000 primary and secondary schools in the country, and devoted funds to better equip state universities. Over the past three years, we have invested over 100 billion rupees towards the renovation and expansion of student hostel facilities as well as for the extension of basic facilities at universities.

For the first time in Sri Lanka, we have introduced a student insurance policy that benefits every single person of the over four million students in the country. Students who do not pass their GCE Ordinary and Advanced Level Examinations are now eligible for free vocational training programmes that provide inclusion in the modern economy. We have introduced new syllabi for the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Our vocational training and traditional educational institutions are being revised to compete with peers internationally. These are long-term initiatives and we are dedicated to seeing them through to completion.

I was the Minister of Health for five years before my presidency, at that time I was not given the latitude to implement critical reforms. Today, that is not the case. We have been able to implement the National Drug Policy and National Health Policy in their entirety, something that had been in discussion for the past 60 years but never done. We introduced new legislation to regulate pharmaceuticals and tobacco products.

During my tenure as Minister of Health, the National Drugs Act that we had formulated was even stolen by senior government officials colluding with pharmaceutical corporations. After being elected as President, together with Health Minister Dr Rajitha Senarathne, we were able to enforce these regulations and ensure the price of pharmaceuticals were reduced. We have improved the facilities available to patients in the country.

We have also been able to enforce stringent laws against illicit drugs and tobacco use. Within three months of being elected President, we were able to adopt the Tobacco Control Legislation in Parliament, enforcing the law that 80 per cent of cigarette packets are required to display a health warning.

You have been able to achieve things that were not possible before, such as in the health sector, in terms of development, the Moragahakanda reservoir. Even now, you are focusing on the Nilwala and Gin Ganga projects. How is this possible?

Before 2015, cabinet ministers did not have autonomy to think big and spearhead major reforms. Ambitious projects that put the wellbeing of the people were shelved and blocked. As a senior minister in that Government I witnessed these challenges. Since I became President, all projects that had been at a standstill have now been given approval to proceed. As President, I see my role as overseeing, supporting and enabling line ministers and public officials to do the correct thing. That is what good governance means. Be it the Health Minister, Education Minister or Finance Minister, they have the autonomy to implement Government policy. The ministers too, are expected to select high-quality officials and grant them similar autonomy to reduce bureaucracy.

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For example, when I was Minister of Health, my tobacco control policies and plans were frequently impeded. As President, I have no friends in the tobacco or alcohol industries and even if I did, I would not exploit my power to meddle with the duties of the ministers in charge of those subjects. As a result, today we have been able to proceed with stringent control regulations.

From 2019, the cultivation of tobacco in Sri Lanka is banned. Affected farmers are receiving assistance in switching to alternative crops. Similarly, we have banned harmful asbestos and excessive microplastics in polythene. These are public health initiatives that only saw the light of day because we have a Government today that does not play politics and prioritize special interests over the health and safety of its citizens.

The Nilwala Project is another example of a project hindered due to crony capitalism

and corruption. The Nilwala Project is a huge irrigation project that will bring about many benefits. It could resolve the water shortage in Hambantota and mitigate floods in Matara. However, due to vested interests, the Nilwala Project was halted.

Today, we know that billions of rupees in payments purportedly for the project had been issued by the Treasury on January 6 and 7, 2015. That is absurd on its face because Government officials were not working on those days. Government officials were off-duty from January 5, 2015 while many had also been deployed for election work. The Cabinet communiqué in this regard has also been lost. More than three years have gone by and under the present Government too I have witnessed reluctance and delays. Unfortunately obstacles remain, despite several findings of irregularities by the Auditor General. Law enforcement authorities have been instructed to look into this matter. I am determined to see this project through to completion, whatever it takes.

Agriculture has always been a key focus. What is your assessment of the potential for this industry, and what are the mechanisms in place to enable the export of our agricultural goods?

A robust agricultural sector is a critical feature of a stable, growth-minded Sri Lankan economy. Of that I have no doubt. The development of the country depends in part on agricultural growth. We have initiated several long-term anti-corruption strategies and until they mature, I want to continue pushing for growth in the export of rice, vegetables and fruits, spices and other export crops including ornamental plants. These crops can also be refined domestically into higher-margin exports. For example, many biscuits, beverages and other food items can be produced with rice for export. On the other hand, seeds and nuts, such as green gram, cowpea, ginger, common millet, chilli and cashew are still being imported. We must reform the traditional cultivation methods to reduce our dependence on imports of these crops. There are many opportunities within the agricultural sector and the consumer too will benefit as the agricultural sector grows.

Fisheries is another industry with very high potential. At present, we export fish to Europe, however our supply is insufficient to meet the demand in Europe. Recent innovations in agricultural research mean that today, farming is becoming a high-tech industry. We cannot allow traditional farmers to be left behind as has happened elsewhere in the world. We can empower our farmers and raise their

standard of living by introducing them to technological innovations. This will also attract youth to this industry. While engaging in agricultural activities, the young and educated farmers in areas such as Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Ampara should be able to determine the price of goods in Colombo by using their own smartphones, and thereby set their own prices accordingly. Similarly, they should have access to data on food items imported to Sri Lanka from places like India, Pakistan and Thailand such as potatoes, onions, ginger, chillies and spices. Ginger, for example, is a crop from which farmers can earn a substantial income, however, these opportunities are not visible today to most farmers. Along with the development of the country's reservoirs such as Moragahakanda, we are moving ahead with plans to elevate the agricultural industry of Sri Lanka.

Strict action has been taken on agrochemicals as well. What is the rationale for the restrictions placed on agrochemicals?

The countries that initially introduced agrochemicals to Sri Lanka are now gradually moving away from using such chemicals. They are using organic fertiliser such as compost instead of chemical options. Sri Lankans suffer from many diseases that may be caused by agrochemicals. Kidney disease has become a significant problem for the country. At least 5,000 new cases of kidney disease are reported annually. Until we know more, we must limit the use of agrochemicals in the country, as much as possible. The extensive use of agrochemicals in the hill country has caused severe issues for vegetable and fruit cultivation, as well as tea plantations. These chemicals have flowed through to the low country along our rivers. Kidney disease is prevalent all-around the country. We must move away from the use of agrochemicals not all at once, but step-by-step. The future is in organic fertiliser and compost.

Chemical weedicides, which were introduced to Sri Lanka in the 1950s, are also not to be taken lightly. Today, the very countries that brought these chemicals into Sri Lanka are moving away from their use and production within their own borders. We too must do the same. Over the past ten years, the agricultural landscape in the world has changed. The focus is on organic agriculture.

The Challenge For Sri Lanka Is Not To Outright Reject Innovation And Technological Advancement But To Be Thoughtful About Adopting The Best Practices From The Modern World And Our

Own Agricultural Traditions That Date Back Thousands Of Years.

The challenge for Sri Lanka is not to outright reject innovation and technological advancement but to be thoughtful about adopting the best practices from the modern world and our own agricultural traditions that date back thousands of years. How can we learn from the knowledge of our ancestors, adopt the technology of the future and learn from advanced countries? We must answer that question together and chart our own destiny. This is a hot topic of research and policy study in the country today.

What are your thoughts on energy efficiency, power generation and fuel pricing? Can you tell us about the progress in this sector?

Our focus and the focus of advanced nations around the world, is tapping into natural and renewable sources of energy such as solar, hydro and wind power, and moving away from carbon-based power generation. To overcome forecasts of a power shortage in 2021-2022, we are focusing heavily on adopting renewable energy sources, such as the 'Soorya Bala Sangramaya' (Battle for Solar Energy), which is aimed at bringing 200MW of solar electricity into the national grid by 2020 and 1000MW by 2025.

We are also studying international initiatives to harvest energy generated through oceanic winds where boats are fixed with specialized equipment to harness this energy. Sri Lanka is blessed with abundant opportunities to generate electricity from renewable sources. We enjoy sunshine for at least 11 hours a day. We have abundant sources of wind and hydro-power. The Government is exploring all of these options. We cannot continue to rely on imported fossil-fuels. We do not have our own coal mines or oil wells, and our import of foreign oil and coal has a severe impact on our foreign currency reserves. Renewable energy is the long-term solution.

We have a similar dilemma when it comes to volatile fuel prices. Sri Lanka depends on imported crude oil to produce petrol and diesel. This is why fuel pricing presents a challenge for any Government. We cannot control the price of the raw material imported from overseas. We introduced the fuel price formula to take politics out of fuel pricing. When the global oil price decreases so do fuel selling prices within Sri

Lanka and vice versa. Rising prices are always painful for the average citizen who is struggling to make ends meet. The challenge for a responsible Government is to solve the problem without sowing the seeds of a fiscal crisis for future generations. Especially with national elections on the horizon, the easy, politically convenient and selfish thing for us to do would be to use the people's tax rupees to keep fuel prices artificially low and hide the economic cost from the people for another day. I have faith that we were not elected to do easy, politically convenient or selfish things but to be honest with the people and govern with their long-term best interests at heart. We never hesitate to take short-term political risks for long-term national interest. This is the key difference of this Government.

We Brought To The World Stage The Same Honesty, Transparency And Good-Faith With Which We Approached The Country In January 2015. Just As We Listened To Our Own People, We Listened To The Heads Of States And Diplomats Representing Our Traditional Allies And International Agencies.

Just like we took the politics out of Local Government elections by holding them nationwide on a single day, to our obvious detriment, and just as we curtailed the power of the executive branch at the very beginning of my term in office, the fuel pricing formula is yet another example of my Government prioritizing national interest over political expediency. As a country, we need to adapt our dependence on fossil fuels as the prices of this limited resource fluctuate. We would not be doing the country any favours by insulating them from this reality. My belief is that at the right time, the people will see through the propaganda of those who try to twist this fundamental reality.

What about foreign policy and strategies? You have changed the global perception of the country, and we are held in high esteem today. How did you win over the international community?

When you try to win the hearts and minds of anyone, whether domestically or internationally, there are two options. The first is to tell them what they want to hear, to be deceitful and manipulative. This is how most win elections and gain favour in the short-term with the international community. However, while leaders can do this domestically, and make up for the deceit six years later by, say, cutting fuel prices or increasing other subsidies, there are no similar solutions on the

international stage. Deceiving our allies and taking them for granted will have consequences. We brought to the world stage the same honesty, transparency and good-faith with which we approached the country in January 2015.

Just as we listened to our own people, we listened to the heads of states and diplomats representing our traditional allies and international agencies. We engaged them candidly, rather than bombastically villainizing them and sowing divisions. Wherever their views and agendas aligned with Sri Lanka's national interests, we worked with them, and where such alignment was lacking, we were candid and treated our international partners with respect and dignity.

Speaking for myself, whenever I meet a Head of State or a leader of an international organisation, even though our discussions may only be 30 minutes long, I place emphasis on understanding them and building a personal connection. For example, Pope Francis visited Sri Lanka on the third day of my Presidency, and I benefited immensely from a thoughtful exchange of ideas. Whether I am sitting down one-to-one with the Supreme Leader of Iran, or together with the with six heads of the BIMSTEC states, I focus on building a personal bond. Whenever I meet state leaders at international conferences and events such as at the Commonwealth and the UN, I have found that this style of engagement leads to mutual trust and understanding. Forming and improving such relationships is an art and requires an inherent quality and talent as well as strong principles. Whether it is Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, South Korean President Moon Jae-in or leaders of North American nations, I have prioritized fostering positive relationships with them. It is the same with leaders of organisations such as the IMF, World Bank, ADB, JAICA and KOIKA. At every level of diplomacy, not just between heads of state, Sri Lanka has adopted this approach, which has been central to our rise in stature on the world stage.

You have stressed on the importance of strengthening the public sector. Can you elaborate on this? How can the public sector be made more efficient?

When we came into office, the most critical need in the public sector was to remove undue political influence. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution established several independent commissions and the Constitutional Council that were intended to accomplish this.

Today, there are independent commissions governing the Public Service, Judiciary, Human Rights, Police and National Audit functions, to name a few, none of which existed with any true independence under any previous Government. The goal of these commissions is to prevent external influence or manipulation by politicians and others in the public service, judiciary and in law enforcement. The Audit Service Commission was formed to ensure accountability. These commissions have strengthened the Public Sector. However, because these institutions are relatively young, we have yet to see them mature to the state where they exercise the full potential of their powers. Over time, frameworks must emerge for engagement between the commissions and the executive branch of Government, ensuring that the commissions are not intimidated out of exercising their constitutional duty due to political considerations or pressures. Essentially, since the executive branch has taken a step back, it is important for the commissions to actively and judiciously exercise their powers in the interests of the people.

It Is Critical For The Government And Businesses To Work Together, Even When Our Interests Do Not Always Align. Corporate Leaders Are Responsible For The Capital And Interests Of Their Shareholders And Employees, While Government Leaders Must Sometimes Make Difficult Decisions In The National Interest.

Improving the efficiency of the public sector requires instituting long-term changes in culture, anti-corruption initiatives and recruitment strategies. For development projects, we have set goals and introduced key performances indicators (KPIs) to improve productivity of state institutions and introduce a sense of accountability. We have set the stage for an environment in which civil servants can work with pride, confidence and freedom, which is essential for productivity. The public sector employs 1.5 million people, and we have created a setting in which they can work in positions according to their knowledge and skills and in line with the training they have received.

We have presided over radical anti-corruption reforms to improve public confidence and fairness in the public sector. Under this Government, annual convictions for bribery and corruption have more than doubled, while the number of reported cases has not changed substantially. This is a clear sign of increased efficiency and accountability in the state anti-corruption apparatus, especially the Bribery

Commission. Similarly, we are reforming the asset declaration laws to require all public servants to regularly report significant changes in their assets within 15 days over the internet. This will be a radical reform in our asset declaration laws, and the first reform to this regime in over 30 years. Under the proposal I made to the Cabinet, which will soon go before Parliament, even candidates for election will have to submit asset declarations with their nomination papers. Similarly, the Right to Information Act, one of the strongest of its kind in the world, has given every Sri Lankan citizen an unprecedented power to hold its public servants to account. I have appointed a commission to unify efforts across Government to bring about competitive and fair salary increases across the public sector to allow the recruitment of top talent. These are the seeds of reform. It is critical that these advances be protected over time from anti-democratic forces that would seek a return to the old status-quo.

For a robust economy a dynamic private sector too is a must. Today, they are very critical of the Government. Are their demands reasonable, and their perceptions fair?

After 50 years in politics, I cannot ever remember a time when a Government and private sector always saw eye-to-eye. Different Governments have been better or worse for different industries, all of whom, when disgruntled, like to represent themselves as the 'private sector'. I want all business leaders to know that they are entitled to their opinions and perspectives. Today they are free to lobby for their interests and object to Government policies without fear of reprisal. They can attack us in the media or donate to any political entity of their choice without risking retaliatory arrest, abduction or arbitrary criminal investigation. These are rights that they will enjoy for as long as I remain in office. Whether I am criticized or not, we will do everything possible to protect this right of dissent, and we will never allow Sri Lanka to ever again fall into the shadow of dictatorship.

I Decided To Re-Introduce The Death Penalty Against Those Found Guilty Of Narcotic Related Crimes And The Underworld Due To The Magnitude Of The Issue In Sri Lanka.

That said, it is critical for the Government and businesses to work together, even when our interests do not always align. Corporate leaders are responsible for the capital and interests of their shareholders and employees, while Government

leaders must sometimes make difficult decisions in the national interest. Government must not place undue pressure on the private sector, and we must do what we can to create a perception of stability in Government Policy. Leaders in both business and Government must look to a future where the country is fiscally stable, and we can ensure the freedom for the private sector to thrive. Just as the public benefits from the innovations and free competition of the private sector, business leaders and shareholders also benefit from the Government's investments in national security, infrastructure, public health and forging an educated workforce. In times of adversity, it is easy for one side or the other to forget this co-dependence, but mature leaders on both sides must rise above the bickering and work together to find common ground and move forward together.

You have taken a strong stance against narcotics and discussed re-introducing capital punishment. What is behind these initiatives?

The proliferation of Illicit drugs is a worldwide menace that has been around for millennia. Even in the Pansil (Five Precepts), the Buddha has described the adverse effects of narcotics. Every country must do its part to combat this scourge. Some drug cartels boast that they have the power to even topple governments.

I can never allow heroin, cocaine, marijuana and other drug smugglers to have the same power in Sri Lanka that they do elsewhere. To combat drug smuggling, we have deployed the Tri-Forces, the Police and Customs. Despite the high cost, I have directed the relevant authorities and agencies to acquire new technology to aid in the detection of narcotics. Today, drug cartels even target children. They first provide students drugs for free. All institutions responsible for the prevention of drug use must work together with the Police. We have deployed the Armed Forces together with the Police to curtail the selling and smuggling of narcotics. Prevention programmes must be strengthened.

I decided to re-introduce the death penalty against those found guilty of narcotic related crimes and the underworld due to the magnitude of the issue in Sri Lanka. Strong punishments are one of the many tools to combat such severe crime. Organised crime syndicates, criminals, smugglers and even politicians are involved in the narcotics trade in Sri Lanka. The risk to our nation is too great to consider half-measures any longer. This was not a discussion. It was my decision, and my decision on this is final.

Could you elaborate on the initiatives taken to protect the environment?

Polythene is a cancer on the environment. We decided to enforce a ban on polythene to combat pollution and waste. Furthermore, we are committed to the agreements on climate change, declarations and work with the WHO, UNDP as well as the UN and other organisations that work globally to protect the environment and drive down carbon emissions. Sri Lanka needs stringent regulations to curtail the use of polythene before it becomes a serious hazard. Production and importation of polythene has to stop. Be it the consumer or producer, those who use polythene must seek out environmentally-friendly alternatives. The Government has provided these alternatives as well. Today, I am the first President to retain the Environment Cabinet portfolio, due to the importance of environmental conservation.

What 'Peace And Reconciliation' Means Is Ensuring That Sri Lanka Will Never, Ever Again Be Torn Apart By A Civil War... The Role Of Government In A Pluralistic Society Is To Bring Everyone Together, Whether Sinhala, Tamil Or Muslim, And Not To Prey Upon Divisions For Political Gain.

The forest coverage in Sri Lanka was plummeting, with an annual reduction of 1.5 per cent. At present, the forest coverage is 27-28 per cent and that could have seen a drop to 17-18 per cent in ten years. Sri Lanka was at risk of becoming a desert. Our forests and wildlife must be protected, which is why I have prioritized ambitious reforestation drives.

We have done more than any previous Government to prioritize environmental protection, but on this issue we can never rest. Much more needs to be done to ensure that Sri Lanka's rich and unique biodiversity whether in our forests or in dry zones is protected. Taxonomists and researchers must be given the freedom to do their valuable work without fear of harassment.

The Coastal Conservation Department also comes under the Ministry's purview. You have ensured that there is no political influence to impede their work. They are unbiased and are able to work freely. Can you elaborate on this?

We are a nation of laws, and the law must be upheld at all times, equally for all citizens. There is no room for political pressure on law enforcement. In terms of coastal conservation, my policy is no different to anywhere else in Government. The officials know their job and are held accountable to do it well. Political interference will simply not be tolerated. It is the responsibility of state officials and politicians to avoid exerting external pressure, not to be influenced by undue pressures and to perform their duties without fear, for the betterment of the country. This Government, and I, will stand by any public official who does this.

Law Abiding Sri Lankans Can Exercise Their Rights And Freedoms Without Fearing Their Government... It Must Also Be Mentioned That With Freedom Comes Responsibilities. I Hope Our Country Grows To Respect And Cherish These Freedoms In The Future. People Need To Understand The Value Of The Rich Culture Where People Use Freedom With Responsibility.

Could you comment on the Government's stance on the National question, peace and reconciliation?

What 'peace and reconciliation' means is ensuring that Sri Lanka will never, ever again be torn apart by a civil war. The previous Government failed to promote peace during the post-conflict period. This is more than material benefits and handouts. 30 years of conflict in Sri Lanka had shattered harmony and trust between ethnic communities. The role of Government in a pluralistic society is to bring everyone together, whether Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, and not to prey upon divisions for political gain.

Peace and reconciliation is more than urban and infrastructure development. It is of paramount importance to address the social and human dimensions and residual insecurities of the people. Much of the north and east lived under the brutal fascist dictatorship of the LTTE for decades. The LTTE forcibly prevented the education of Tamil children, and condemned a generation of youth to bloodshed by brainwashing them into child soldiers and suicide bombers. Hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans were manipulated by force into hating their own countrymen and women. Millions lost loved ones or their homes or livelihoods.

To rebuild the trust amongst the communities, we have appointed several bodies, formed a new Ministry, launched multiple rehabilitation programmes and have invested more funding to develop the areas that were affected by the war, with both local and foreign funds.

Building trust is the main focus, so that all can live in an environment devoid of fear, distrust and disharmony.

We are expanding the education system to include the national languages and are providing training to state officials to ensure the National Language Policy is upheld and also that they understand the importance of this. Furthermore, it is essential to use our free education system to strengthen reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Reconciliation and good governance are paramount for the betterment and future of the country. Freedom, independence of the judiciary, democracy and building the trust between ethnicities must be sustained in the country, and towards reaching this aim, the Government has completed many initiatives within the past three to four years and will continue to implement new programmes in the future.

In The Present Day The Main Two Political Parties That Formed The Government Had To Reach Consensus On Several Issues. Disagreements Are Frequent, But Healthy, And We Must All Maximize On This Opportunity To Advance In The National Interest. As The Head Of A Coalition Government, I Have Been Performing My Duties Without Enjoying A Majority In Parliament.

Some have tried to twist words like reconciliation and good governance, to weaponize them into divisive political slogans. This is not a surprise. These are people who have everything to lose in Sri Lanka where all communities live equally, united in harmony, with pride of place on the world stage. In such a thriving and prosperous Sri Lanka, such people would have no political future. This country's destiny is one of unity, reconciliation and good governance.

Today, the entire country is enjoying freedom, this includes the media, officials and politicians. We are independent. However, there is always the

tendency to complain, nothing is enough. People forget the past. What can you tell us about the freedom that the people enjoy today?

What has changed is simple. Law abiding Sri Lankans can exercise their rights and freedoms without fearing their Government. That was simply not the case before January 8th, 2015. This change was overnight.

I often fear that the true meaning of freedom is being lost in Sri Lanka. For example, when it comes to the use of social media, those who are educated and cultured, reject wrong and obscene material propagated through these channels.

Independent research has shown that falsehoods spread at least 70 per cent faster than the truth on social media. Social media channels are easily manipulated for character assassinations. Undue pressure, threats and false accusations are proliferated throughout. This is a challenge not only in Sri Lanka but across the world. While freedom of expression is an essential tenet of our Constitution, we must remember the old saying about how this does not extend to the right to shout "fire!" in a crowded theatre. Social media has changed this dynamic. Earlier this year, it was used to help extremists literally set a province on fire. That is why we took the unprecedented step of blocking these services temporarily to bring the situation under control. Only then did we get the attention of these companies, who clearly understand the dangers of abuse and fake news on their platforms and must do more to combat this scourge.

It must also be mentioned that with freedom comes responsibilities. I hope our country grows to respect and cherish these freedoms in the future. People need to understand the value of the rich culture where people use freedom with responsibility. Rules and regulations cannot control all behaviour. Culture and traditions are more important to a country than rules and regulations.

Spiritual growth is also paramount for social development. Discipline, upbringing and decorum are important. It is not possible to develop society with wealth alone. A country while developing its physical resources and human resources must also develop in terms of values, ethics and spirituality. Regardless of whether Sri Lanka has large wealth reserves, if there is no social growth, the country will not develop and move forward. Therefore, the freedom and democracy that has been provided for the people including the media and the state sector must be fostered to promote these interests.

After a long time, we have a leader who believes in himself, who does not have numerous advisors and other influencers surrounding him. You make your own decisions. You are also a very patient and calm person. Whatever the challenge, you will do what you believe is correct. What are your thoughts on this?

This is the 51st year of my political journey. I entered politics in 1967. In 1966, I was a member of the Peking Wing of the Ceylon Communist Party and joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1967, even before I had sat for my Ordinary Level examinations. In addition to learning through experiences, I focused greatly on reading books and studying, especially political subjects and philosophies including Marxism, Capitalism and Socialism. I have also studied Buddhism and firmly believe in the philosophy 'Dhammo Bhawe Rakkathi Dhammachari' meaning a person who lives by the Dhamma will be protected by the Dhamma.

I have always stood by my morals and ethics, and with 50-years of experience of working towards what I believe despite criticism, I have the capability to patiently endure while focusing on success. I am a very open and candid communicator, and often state my views bluntly. Some attack my candour as a sign of volatility and unpredictability. The truth is that by speaking my mind without question, my ministers, officials and the electorate always know where I stand on any issue. Mine is not a cloak and dagger approach to leadership and decision-making.

Managing a National Government has come with unique challenges not faced by any previous Sri Lankan Head of State. We merged the political visions of the two parties into one plan of action for the country. This is not like previous alliances between ideologically like-minded parties. In the present day the main two political parties that formed the Government had to reach consensus on several issues. Disagreements are frequent, but healthy, and we must all maximize on this opportunity to advance in the national interest. As the head of a coalition Government, I have been performing my duties without enjoying a majority in Parliament. Presently, no single political party enjoys a majority of votes.

My zero-tolerance approach to narcotics and corruption has also come with challenges from those whose livelihood depends on trafficking drugs and profiting from rigged tenders.

I have a handful of four advisors, each assigned a specific subject. I constantly engage with experts on various subjects to further my knowledge and ensure I can make informed decisions. For example, I converse with groups of engineers, have weekly discussions with professors of universities, meet with the Buddhist clergy and other religious leaders and engage in discussions with state officials and corporates. It is a learning process. I prefer to expose myself to a variety of perspectives than to construct one cabal or bubble of advisors.

It is important for me to regularly return to my home of Polonnaruwa. I need to see the landscape and reservoirs of this area. I prefer the village to the city. I am not focused on any one agenda but have prioritized on being close with the average citizen, empathising with their woes and delighting in their triumphs. Mine was never a wealthy or connected family. My parents were farmers. Considering my political experiences, I had also been consistently elected to Parliament over the past 27 years before being elected President. I am the first President to have never been Opposition Leader or Prime Minister before being elected. I was elected as President having only been a Cabinet Minister. I have worked with Presidents, Prime Ministers and Opposition Leaders during my 27 years in Parliament, which is not a short time. Therefore, I have the experience. No matter the criticism or political reprisals against me, I achieved success in a journey filled with obstacles and challenges and I am fulfilling my pledge to the people. When faced with a difficult decision, I simply recall this journey, consider a variety of opinions, and ultimately do what would be in the long-term best interests of the country.

You are the only Head of State who has visited all parts of the country. And, you travel regularly interacting and connecting with the people. Can you elaborate on this aspect?

As President, I must always be with the people. I have special projects in every district, some of which are new initiatives that have never been undertaken by any other Head of State. Projects to combat narcotics or promote environmental conservation and reconciliation, relief for kidney patients and the protection of children are carried out through the Presidential Secretariat. To implement these projects, we must move with the people. When I was the Minister of Agriculture I had special programmes for the farmers. As Minister of Health I directed Health Weeks and as Minister of Mahaweli Development I initiated special programmes. Similarly, today I have initiated many projects as President. As such, I travel across

the country to see the progress. In fact, there has been no other President that has visited the North and East as much as I have. I do not neglect any province in Sri Lanka. I travel to the South, West, Central, Uva, Wayamba, to all parts of the country encompassing the nine provinces. I travel to supervise the various projects I have implemented, including Grama Shakthi, which is a new initiative. As such I always move with the people along with politicians and state officials.

What is your vision for Polonnaruwa and the future?

As a President I initiated the 'Pibidena Polonnaruwa' campaign, and while I was a minister I also commenced many programmes such as 'Sujatha Daruwan' and 'Rajarata Navodhaya'.

During my political career, I have always given special attention to education and ensured that significant funding is provided for this sector. Every year when allocating funds as a Member of Parliament, Minister and today as President I have always focused on education. From 1989, when I first entered Parliament as a Member of the Opposition, I allocated a major portion of my funding to education. I will continue to maintain the importance of education. We will work towards the future betterment of the country with a focus and extensive study on each sector. Therefore, I believe we will reap positive results. This is the same vision I have for the country as a whole.

Looking back on your journey, you achieved something that no one thought was possible. It is indeed inspiring. What is your advice for the future generation?

Always be true to your conscience. The younger generation must also have determination. There are many universal elements to ensure the future prosperity and development of the country. These include eradicating corruption and increasing the efficiency of the public sector. In 2015, when my election manifesto promised the largest ever salary increase for the public sector, it was done to help increase efficiency of Government employees. Therefore, Government officers must be dedicated to serve with honesty and efficiency. In addition, politicians must not be corrupt.

My Advice To The Younger Generation Is To Garner Knowledge

And Wisdom, And Work With Determination, Confidence And Resolve. Always Be True To Your Conscience. You Must Take Risks... If All Politicians Work With Honesty And Political Principles Without Corruption Or Personal Agendas, Our Beautiful, Meritorious And Blessed Country Can Be Developed In A Very Short Time.

They must set aside their personal agendas and work together towards the betterment of the people and the country. Ordinary citizens must rise above party politics and hold their individual representatives accountable in elections. There are many politicians and over a hundred registered political parties in Sri Lanka, however we have only a few honest politicians who make a positive contribution and leave a mark on society. Politicians cannot guide a country, if they do not lead by example. The greatest misfortune to have befallen the country in the recent past and present has been the behaviour of Sri Lankan politicians. It is essential that those who govern this country are honest and dedicated. Capable political leaders must be identified and given an opportunity to shine.

My advice to the younger generation is to garner knowledge and wisdom and work with determination, confidence and resolve. Always be true to your conscience. You must take risks. I have taken many risks in life. I have resigned from posts whenever I have realised that I was not being allowed to work, to fulfil my duties to my satisfaction or because that post did not suit me. Even on November 21, 2014, when I resigned from the Government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, many felt that I had taken on a challenge that I would not be able to see through, or that would cost me my life. They likened that decision, to me beating my head against a rock. I took a big risk and accepted a great challenge. However, it was a risk that was taken for the betterment of the country. It is important to have confidence and faith in one's self and skills as well as to be honest. You must be ready to take on risks and challenges. This is important in all aspects of life. If everyone adopts these morals and habits, then we will together be able to develop our country. If all politicians work with honesty and political principles without corruption or personal agendas, our beautiful, meritorious and blessed country can be developed in a very short time.







