

Sajin De Vass Gunawardena: The Fall Guy



Sajin De Vass Gunawardena has always stood by what he believes in. He has been loyal to his principles and has worked tirelessly to achieve the required objectives for the betterment of the country. He was known as

one of the most powerful personalities in the Rajapaksa administration and worked closely with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Yet, Sajin De Vass Gunawardena explains, he was portrayed as the biggest 'crook', by those whom he was most loyal to. After 2015, he faced numerous challenges, all of which he has faced head on with a determination to prove all wrong. And, he has done so successfully, showing that he indeed had been used as a scapegoat. He has strong ideologies in terms of addressing the crucial questions the country faces, especially in terms of the national issue, political and economic stability. While forging ahead, Sajin De Vass Gunawardena looks to the future of the country. He believes that now more than ever, the country requires economic and political stability and a united effort to push through much needed Constitutional reform.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe Assisted by Keshini de Silva
Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

After 2015, what happened to Sajin De Vass Gunawardena?

Many things have happened since then and this is the first time I am speaking about what happened to me during the past four years. We all worked hard to ensure that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was victorious in the 2015 Presidential Election. As we all know, he was defeated. From that point onwards, everything started turning upside down. To answer you in a gist, when the new Government came into power investigations commenced into various allegations. I am happy in one sense because they have not found anything on me. I was perhaps known as the biggest crook in Sri Lanka, some may still have that view. But they have investigated me thoroughly, since even before my birth, both in Sri Lanka and internationally through local and foreign agencies such as Interpol. I am happy to say that they have found that all I own is in this country, which is what I had been saying from day one. All my assets have been declared, except in one year. I declared my assets in 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014, but I had missed 2012 because I was outside Sri Lanka for over 120 days. I have been fully investigated, my family has been investigated, my wife and children have been investigated, and they have found nothing, except that all that I own is in this country and all are legal.

I was in remand custody for over six months from May 2015. The reason given was that I had been using Presidential Secretariat vehicles by force, without proper authority. I never used Government vehicles for personal use; I have my private vehicles. The security allocated to me used those vehicles, and certain MPs were also granted vehicles by the Presidential Secretariat. The records for the usage of the vehicles allocated to my security were not found at the Presidential Secretariat. Maintaining such records are not my responsibility; it is the director of transport who should obtain those records. Of course no one could say that I used these vehicles by force because insurance, repairs, fuel allocations by the Presidential Secretariat have been recorded for over eight years. I was granted bail in the second hearing of the High Court; in that judgment, the learned judge said that it was an illegal arrest.

I Understand That Someone Has To Be The Scapegoat. That Is Politics. We Governed The Country For A Long Time. I Was Portrayed By The Administration As The Number One Crook, And I Had To Pay The Price.

I understand that someone has to be the scapegoat. That is politics. We governed the country for a long time. I was portrayed by the administration as the number one crook, and I had to pay the price. Then came the second round, where I was remanded once again over a commercial dealing between one of my companies and a renowned corporate. They were renovating certain premises and civil contracts were signed to do the work. The CID investigated the matter, they seized files and computers from our offices and my residence. They called on people to ascertain facts in these contracts. One of the directors of that particular corporate had informed them that he cannot understand Sinhala or Tamil. The CID officers had however, written about four to five pages in Sinhalese as his statement stating that I had made them pay me by force. These were commercial transactions between two private entities, payments were made by cheque, contracts were in place and the work was completed. I must emphasise that this had nothing to do with Government funds. I was in remand for 14 days when the magistrate summoned this director to ascertain if I had actually threatened their company. In open court the director said there is absolutely no truth in the matter and further added that he cannot understand Sinhala and Tamil, and the statement was totally false.

The third case was filed by the Bribery Commission for not declaring my assets for 2012. But part of my declarations for 2011 and 2013 covers 2012 as well. Anyway, as I had not submitted for that particular year, I paid the fine of 1,000 rupees under existing laws. Some people thought that I had hidden my assets. That is completely incorrect. I have declared my assets; I had not submitted asset declarations for just one year. That case is now closed.

In terms of the other two cases against me, I have done nothing wrong in terms of the law. I go to court every three months, or whenever the courts summon me and the proceedings are on going.

I Clearly And Confidently State That There Is Not A Single Charge That Has Been Proven That I Have Misappropriated State Funds, Profited From A Government Contract, Misused Public Funds, Or That I Have Committed Fraud, Because I Was Never Involved In Monetary Activity As Far As The Government Was Concerned.

Then the Bribery Commission brought charges against me under Section 7 of the Bribery Act, which is corruption. The charge was that I had worked to provide profit for a private company through my actions. There is no quantification of the loss to the company or amount, or the exact offense I have made. Fundamentally, all private companies work for profit, unless you are an NGO. The case was filed and was in relation to hiring ground handling equipment for Mihin Lanka. However, in comparison to what we would have paid SriLankan Airlines for ground handling equipment, the contract for hiring out saved 1.8 billion rupees per annum. It is clear in black and white. We were paying SriLankan Airlines much more. In any case, this was a board decision, not my decision alone. At the time Peter Hill was the CEO of SriLankan and they arbitrarily stopped ground handling for Mihin Air. This necessitated us to be independent in terms of our operations. However, they filed a complaint against me. Bribery Commission law, as substantiated by the Supreme Court recently, dictates that charge sheets need to be signed by a magistrate under the Bribery Act and must also be signed by the commission. Now the commission is an interpretation of three commissioners. Recently, another private person had appealed to the Supreme Court against the Bribery Commission because the charge had only been signed by one commissioner. The current Chief Justice Nalin Perera, when he was a Justice, had given a judgment to say that as the commission consists

of three commissioners, for legal validity all three commissioners must sign the charge sheet. In my case, not a single commissioner has signed the charge sheet as there is no legal validity. Of course the trial started, and the complainant said he did not know why he made the complaint; and that someone had asked him to make the complaint. Court suspended my trial because there was no legal means to proceed.

Once they conducted the investigations, they realised that the companies had borrowed more than 1,800 million rupees within a period of eight to ten years from two private financial institutions. We were servicing our debts and the business was going on. It was proven and all realised that the assets that I possessed and how the funds were generated were all legitimate. It had been misconstrued as ill-gotten wealth. I can confidently say that I do not have single rupee of ill-gotten wealth. I have worked hard for all I have. The two financial institutions helped me. I am happy that despite being incarcerated, which I believe is part and parcel of politics, it makes you a man in a certain ironical way. But I am thankful that everyone appointed to investigate me, have now understood how I generated my income.

Therefore, I clearly and confidently state that there is not a single charge that has been proven that I have misappropriated state funds, profited from a Government contract, misused public funds, or that I have committed fraud, because I was never involved in monetary activity as far as the Government was concerned.

I always worked in foreign affairs. The legal process is continuing and I am confident that all my cases will be discharged because there is no way of proceeding legally.

As A Personality Who Was In The Forefront Of The Past Mahinda Rajapakse Administration, I Was Incarcerated The Most In Terms Of Time.

As a personality who was in the forefront of the past Mahinda Rajapakse administration, I was incarcerated the most in terms of time. I was in active politics with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2010 to 2015. For the General Election of 2015, Parliament was dissolved in June/July. I was in remand custody at the time and I wanted to contest. I was not the only person in remand custody who wanted to contest the election. However, I later found out that the party had not selected me for nomination. My wife worked tirelessly to find out the reason. In the

meantime, while being in custody I communicated with the then General Secretary of the SLFP, Anura Priyadarshana Yapa who asked President Maithripala Sirisena about my nomination. He said there was absolutely no issue as I was an existing MP and a strong candidate who could win in Galle. They issued a letter to court because when you are in remand you need a letter from court seeking permission to sign the nomination. The letter was submitted by Anura Priyadarshana Yapa.

An issue arose in terms of nominations within the party. The responsibility of making the decisions about the nominations was handed over by President Maithripala Sirisena to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. I heard that through a collective decision of the Rajapaksa family, not the extended family, perhaps including former Minister Basil Rajapaksa, MP Namal Rajapaksa and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, that I would not be given a nomination. I was in a quandary because I could not understand the reasons as to why they would oppose my nomination. I had been one of the closest aides of the former President and I worked hard in terms of fulfilling his political agenda, especially in terms of foreign affairs because I mostly concentrated on international relations. I have achieved greatly in that sphere, things that his administration could have never imagined to have achieved, about which I could speak volumes for days.

My wife met Susil Premajayantha who was the UPFA General Secretary in charge of putting the nominations together. He told her that the Galle list was complete and to see if she could convince someone to resign in order to accommodate me. She spoke to the candidate from the Balapitiya Electorate who did not have the capacity to win. He submitted his resignation. However, Susil Premajayantha met my wife and some of my supporters at 11.30pm and apologised saying that the nomination could not be changed because it was a decision taken by Mahinda Rajapaksa. That was it. Nominations were finalised and the campaigns started.

I Have Learnt A Lesson In Life. I Had Worked For President Rajapaksa Without Looking Out For Myself; I Was Beyond Loyal To Him. Anything And Everything That Was Assigned To Me I Handled Well. But I Never Crossed The Line In Terms Of What Was Right And Wrong.

On the same day the electoral nominations were signed, Manusha Nanayakkara, who I was instrumental in bringing from the UNP to the SLFP came to see me. He was in tears. When I asked him why, he said, "You brought me to this side, now I am contesting for the second time and they are denying your nomination." He had spoken to Dullas Alahapperuma, who had revealed that it was a decision taken by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and that it could not be changed. In Julius Cesar, Brutus stabbed Cesar, then in the story of Jesus, Judas betrayed Jesus. But this is the other way round, it was as if Jesus betrayed Judas and Cesar stabbed Brutus. That is what happened to me. I believe they took this decision to show that we were the rogues. The week after nominations were signed, Dullus Alahapperuma said they had shed all the pests and that they were clean, in a speech during the campaign. They thought that by crucifying four people who were strong, they had a chance. Never in the history of Sri Lankan politics, be it the UNP or SLFP, have sitting members been denied nominations unless they turned it down personally. Myself, Mervin Silva, Duminda Silva and Sarana Gunewardena, would have at least polled 500,000 votes. These votes would have given the party more than 100 seats with bonus seats as well. That is now water under the bridge.

I have learnt a lesson in life. I had worked for President Rajapaksa without looking out for myself; I was beyond loyal to him. Anything and everything that was assigned to me I handled well. But I never crossed the line in terms of what was right and wrong. People accuse me of many things, but when I ask them to name at least four things that I have done wrong, they cannot name them. They bring up the issue with Chris Nonis. It was a misunderstanding and no one hit anyone. I apologised to Chris the next morning and in all fairness to him he has never said anything and neither have I until this point. It was a person from the Rajapaksa administration itself who carried out the critical campaign against me personally propagating the false story on the internet and social media.

That perception or image of me was created in the media. I believe that many of those things were stage managed to keep the focus on me. Perhaps I was naïve or not mature enough in politics. Today, I am a different person. I have learnt from my mistakes, and I have understood how I was manipulated and used. I have a more intelligent and mature attitude towards how one should work towards one's country. For the past four years I have been busy with all the legal matters and now I am ready to begin the next phase of my life.

What are your thoughts on the present situation of the SLFP?

From day one I was against the split of the SLFP. In my view, if former President Mahinda Rajapaksa had an issue, then he should have fought from within the SLFP and not form a new party. The purpose for creating another party is different to what the common man has been led to believe. He should have remained in the central committee of the SLFP to continue in politics and fight from within the SLFP.

A fundamental mistake that President Maithripala Sirisena made at the beginning was stating that whoever wanted to remain in the Government should remain, and those who do not want to could sit in the Opposition. He should have strongly said that as he is the leader of the SLFP everyone must remain with him in Government. The SLFP constitution was changed by President Rajapaksa when he became the leader of the SLFP to state that whoever becomes the President or Prime Minister automatically ascends as leader of the party, until such time that the post is held by him. Those were the fundamental errors in terms of the SLFP.

I was a member of the SLFP at that time and chose to remain because I was elected to Parliament by contesting through the Party. President Mahinda Rajapaksa gave me that opportunity to contest and I have always been grateful and have never criticised him up until now. This is perhaps the first time that I am expressing a negative opinion. But I know my limits because I was a member of that administration. If you ask me why, I know deep down that it was he who denied my nomination in 2015. Therefore, how can I trust him after that? When you deny a politician his nomination, it is like denying him his oxygen and destroying his career. In all fairness to President Maithripala Sirisena, he was going to give me the nomination and I am grateful for that.

The SLFP Members Calling Themselves The Joint Opposition And Also Stating That They Are Members Of Another Party Must Have The Courage To Leave The SLFP And Also Resign From Their Posts As Members Of Parliament.

I continue my politics in the Galle district, because of the split, the SLFP barely has the support of the people; but we are hanging on. There was pressure from President Sirisena to remove me from the post as the Organiser for Balapitya

because I had been appointed by President Rajapaksa. I also made a fundamental error, when the Nugegoda SLPP meeting was planned, there were requests made to me to send the people from my electorate, further there was a huge pressure from within the electorate as well to participate in this meeting. Though, I did not attend, I facilitated over 50 buses of people to participate in the meeting. After that I was removed from the organiser position, justified by the leader of the SLFP, President Maithripala Sirisena. The action he took was totally justified, because here was an SLFP organiser sending crowds to attend a meeting of another party.

The SLFP members calling themselves the Joint Opposition and also stating that they are members of another party must have the courage to leave the SLFP and also resign from their posts as Members of Parliament. There is a law in this country. It is in the Constitution and the Standing Orders of the Parliament. With regards to this problem of all these MPs obtaining SLPP membership, I saw Hon Rauf Hakeem saying a Select Committee process should be initiated as per the Standing Orders of Parliament. My argument is simple; why would one opt to leave one's party for another? We believe and choose political parties based on ideologies – economic, political and social ideology. If you are a politician that is what draws you to a political party. We believe that the ideology of the selected party can be converted to governance. Yet, here is a group from the SLFP, who take SLPP membership after Parliament was dissolved arbitrarily. They now say that they did not take membership, but were considering whether to accept the membership requests. Do you think Basil Rajapaksa, who is the organiser of the SLPP, has to consider before accepting Mahinda Rajapaksa's membership? Do you think he has to consider to accept Namal Rajapaksa as a member? This is a joke. Who are they trying to fool? You must bear responsibility for your actions. What are they trying to protect? They must face the consequences. Someone should have advised them not do it now as the matter would definitely be taken up in court. Another week would not have mattered. But they did it anyway. There is an official notice from former President Rajapaksa's office saying that he had obtained SLPP membership.

Today, unfortunately it is not a fight between the SLFP and UNP, it's a fight within. The 52 days of no governance in this country was an unfortunate series of events. Why was he in such a hurry to become the Prime Minister? He should have stayed for another year; things would have been different. Today, 30-32 percent of their support base is lost. The lower middle class, people on the fence and the young

generation, all these votes have been lost. Politics in Sri Lanka is no longer ethical. How are you going to win an election in this country without giving due relevance to democracy in the country?

They Have A Different Agenda. They Have A Dynastic Illusion That They Are Pursuing. People Of This Country Cannot Be Used For That Purpose. I Am Standing Up Against That, Because I Have Been At The Receiving End Of Persecution In Which They Used Me For Their Benefit.

The No Confidence Motion brought against Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe previously was politically, a childish attempt. It only made the UNP stronger. It clearly showed that a greater part of the majority and all the minorities were with the UNP. To my understanding, the likes of Rauf Hakeem, Rishad Bathiudeen and all the other minority parties took their decision to reaffirm their confidence in Ranil Wickremesinghe or rather vote against the motion because they were looking towards 2020, that is looking at whom they are going to support for the Presidential Election.

What are your thoughts on the recent political crisis and how was it a reflection of the political system of the country?

Everything that happened during the 52 days with the arbitrary removal of Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe, has been ridiculous. All the decisions made were wrong. Where is this country heading in terms of politics? Hence, 2019 will be a year for reform. I strongly believe the Executive Presidency needs to be modified. This is not a question of personality of whether it is President Maithripala Sirisena or Ranil Wickremesinghe or Sajith Premadasa. I believe, if you look at the last five years of governance there have been many areas, which have been in a complete mess. We need a strong and clear Constitution. The 19th Amendment has brought about certain structural changes to the Constitution that have to be looked at and addressed. I believe the Westminster system maybe the best way to exercise the power of the franchise because it is transparent for the people.

We need a political solution soon. We have been toying with this for too long. The war ended in 2009, more than nine years have past and we have still not been able to address the National Issue. It is a complicated and cannot be solved in a day. But you must make an attempt to have a document on the table. We must start somewhere. The TNA agrees now in terms of the unitary state of the country. I was a member and secretary of the committee appointed during the then administration and we discussed with the TNA for more than one and a half years. Most of these issues were discussed and agreement was reached during these conversations. Land, finance, police powers, centre-periphery narratives; all of these matters were discussed and common ground was arrived at. Unfortunately, the next step was never taken.

Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe has made a statement stipulating that any election must be held after these issues have been resolved. I believe this is the correct way to move forward. If we do not make use of this opportunity before the next Presidential Election, all done so far will return to oblivion and the process will need to be started all over again. We have one year, and we must make use of it. Every single party and leader have agreed that we must abolish the Executive Presidency. Everyone has agreed that there must be structural changes in terms of the Constitution. Despite agreement, no one does anything about it. But the time has come, especially considering what has happened over the last few years and days, for everyone to get together. Unfortunately, dynastic illusions have hindered progress. For a small tree to grow into a large tree, it takes time. For a seed to grow into a tree it takes a very long time. You cannot stretch it and say this is a big tree now. The political atmosphere, political structure, Constitution and the people cannot be used as tools to stretch that tree prematurely. That is what is happening now. That is why they are failing. There needs to be a process.

The judgment by the Supreme Court on the dissolution of Parliament was far beyond the subject. The implication of that judgment and interpretation of the 13 plaints submitted to the Supreme Court gave the judges a massive ambit in terms of interpreting the Constitution. There is a paradigm shift in terms of Governance in the country. Many people do not realise this. That precedent will change the entire governance of this country. I do not think the SLPP is solving any of these problems.

They have a different agenda. They have a dynastic illusion that they are pursuing.

People of this country cannot be used for that purpose. I am standing up against that, because I have been at the receiving end of persecution in which they used me for their benefit. I do not speak in anger; though I felt hurt it is long gone because four years have passed. I only hope that what happened to me in politics will never happen to anyone else. I learnt that one must always have limits in terms of loyalty and what you have to do for your country. Never become too personal.

What are your thoughts on the economy?

There are many issues that we face in terms of the economy. We neglected industrialisation during our time. We also ignored employment creation. Infrastructure development alone does not create employment, because these are large projects where labour comes from China or overseas. We built the airport and port, which was good and there is nothing wrong in that. Of course, people criticise these projects because there is no return. Why couldn't we achieve this return; it was because of the people in charge. If you build a port or airport how do you make a return? Through commercial activity. You must invite the private sector to invest, open up and liberalise.

Economic policy is the fundamental that separates the UNP and SLFP, which is leftist economic management. Yet, we have to realize that there is no leftist economy in the world anymore. China and India are more liberal than our economy today. We say we are a liberal, open-market economy, but then the Government controls every single aspect of the economy.

The Macro Economy In Sri Lanka Has Been Stabilised During The Last Three Years. The Problem Is That The UNP Administration Always Stabilises The Economy, But They Forget To Do The Political Part.

The port and airport were infrastructure developments that we needed, yet perhaps the quantum of the project could have been reconsidered; such as completing the Hambathota project in stages so that industrialisation and commercial agriculture could be included in the equation. Then there would be a return on the investment.

But where did the port and airport fail? A good example is that when the port was being built, I met the top management of a renowned vehicle manufacturer in India. They wanted land to build a warehouse facility so that they can supply vehicles to the Indian sub-continent markets. At that time when I informed the Chairman of the Ports Authority, he said they were already doing it. He wanted to do everything by himself. I am not being critical of the personality, but that was the attitude of the Government. A Sri Lankan conglomerate requested land to build warehouses and perhaps start general cargo operations. This too, was refused stating that the Ports Authority was doing the necessary. Yet, what have they done? This was their mindset. It was the same with the Mattala airport. It was the same with Airport and Aviation. We lost an opportunity with Lufthansa who wanted to establish an MRO because they did not receive any cooperation. Once we develop assets, they must be given to the private sector to manage and make profitable. That is after all not the business of the Government.

We had to borrow money for all these projects, which is true. However much the likes of Bandula Gunwardena preach, the fact is that we borrowed three times our capacity to pay. How do you keep a country going? Why did we decide to hold elections two years earlier? It was decided because the economy was going to face a crunch. I am saying this with great responsibility. What the new Government faced from 2015-2017 was what we were going to face if we had decided to continue. It is elementary.

The Institute of Policy Studies has published a new book on the economy of Sri Lanka in 2018. It a revealing book that shows how the macro economy in Sri Lanka has been stabilised during the last three years. The problem is that the UNP administration always stabilises the economy, but they forget to do the political part. During our time, Budgets were 85 per cent politics and 15 per cent economics. That is what the people are used to. Over the last three to four years it was the other way around because the economy needed stability. Foreign reserves during our time was at seven billion dollars, but 6.5 billion rupees were borrowed. Whereas during the last four years, foreign reserves amount to 9.5 billion dollars; six billion dollars has to be paid this year, and we have the reserves for that. On one side, there was a lot of economic activity because projects were going on at that time. There was money coming in and the dollar was stable. The recent dollar crisis had nothing to do with Sri Lankan economy, it is all due to external factors.

As a whole we have to look at 2019 as being the most volcanic year, because there is going to be economic and political instability and perhaps a lot of unrest. This is because all factors have come to a point where they have reached the maximum and are exerting extreme pressure for a solution.

After the previous administration lost power, you were blamed for almost everything. Why was that?

I was basically involved only in foreign affairs and relations. Nothing else. I do not know how these perceptions have come about. Tell me four things I have done wrong, excluding the debacle with Chris Nonis. Considering official matters of the Government one cannot even name two things I have done wrong. I was made the focus. Someone purposely placed the spotlight on me as the rogue and crook. That is a Machiavellian capability of certain people.

During the war, obviously foreign policy and defense policy must be intertwined; there is no two words about it. This is because there is a military objective and we have a foreign affairs objective that the military objective vis-à-vis the war is balanced properly in terms of the international community. I am not talking about the alleged acts of human rights abuses. I am talking about the perception and the work that we had to do in terms of ensuring that the international community was with us so that we could end the war.

The war finished in 2009, therefore we could not continue with the same foreign policy or attitude. We could not have a defence policy dictating the foreign policy. That is where we went fundamentally wrong. We did not adjust ourselves. This was an argument we had with the Minister and other relevant people at that time. We needed to be more amenable to the international community. Obviously when it comes to Sri Lanka, geopolitics and geographical position vis-à-vis the Indian Ocean is the primary decision making factor, whether it comes to India, China, the US and the West. It is an ocean game at the end of the day and it is all about who controls the waterways of this world. Another thing that worsened the situation was the India and US defence pact. They were one and the same. There is nothing that we can ignore when it comes to India's foreign policy in terms of Sri Lanka. Perhaps with our victory in the war we forgot that. By 2015, the whole world was against us.

It Was My Work And Personality That Made Me Seem Powerful. I Do Not Allow Anyone To Treat Me Badly. If I Am Given A Task, I Will Perform And Deliver. But I Have Done Nothing Wrong.

I was only there to implement policy that had already been decided upon. I could not dictate my own policy. Decisions were a collective power of the defence and foreign establishments. My duty was international relations focusing mainly towards personalities. My duties were mainly to meet and lobby them, as well as ensuring that our embassies are geared to cater to them. But I never worked on policy, I was not a senior. Of course I used to argue and we discussed matters.

During my conversations with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa I clearly spoke my mind. I put the cards on the table as they were. But he directed us on how he wanted us to handle the situation. If we think they are wrong, we tell him. One thing that is wrong with the country, every decision is a political decision. Whether it is economic or social, everything has an angle to benefit the political party. We could have done much better in our foreign relations if we were not too strong-headed. By end 2014, the then President realised this and the process became more amenable. But then we lost the election.

It was my work and personality that made me seem powerful. I do not allow anyone to treat me badly. If I am given a task, I will perform and deliver. But I have done nothing wrong. Even my duties at the Foreign Ministry was investigated but nothing was found as irregular or illegal. Some seniors do not like me because I am a task master, because when I am given a task I will deliver. People are wrong when they say I steered the Government. I have never made business or investment decisions. If someone asks for my help, if it is a genuine issue then I will help. I had no such authority. I survived because I never got involved in any transactions. The others have faced problems because they were involved in transactions.

You were one of the key members in the negotiations with the TNA at that time. Can you elaborate on this?

For the TNA the contentious issues were land, police powers and finance. In terms

of finance, the provincial councils already have the ability to borrow under the monetary set up of the country. That was something that had been agreed upon in general. When it comes to land, there was a Supreme Court judgment during the time of Chief Justice Sarath N Silva, where alienation of the land was a subject that could only be decided by the Executive. It cannot be given to the periphery. We suggested that the TNA identify the land mass in the North and appoint a land commission and that we would provide a wide area of autonomy in terms of leasing. The alienation of land belongs to the Executive and Cabinet, but they would have complete control on how to use the land. Police powers cannot be given to the periphery due to the preferential voting system in the country and could thus be misused. Therefore, it is not practical in our country. But we offered the option of community policing. Unfortunately, due to Suresh Premachandran from the TNA these talks fell apart. We had a sub committee as well to look into the land mechanism headed by Rajiv Wijesinghe and M A Sumanthiran. They collated a document as well, but that failed from the TNA side. From President Rajapaksa's side he offered the Senate as a 13+ factor and the selection to the Senate to be district based, province based, nomination based or a combination of all three. I believe the Hon Sampanthan took this well, but when it came down to implementation, everyone was scared. I believe the time has come to ensure an all inclusive process.

The Ideal System Is To Do Away With The Provincial Councils And Strengthen The Prasadeshiya Sabha Because They Are The Direct Contact With The People.

Presently, the JVP has presented the 20th Amendment, I have not seen the whole document, but maybe this is a good starting point. Then I hear the committee that was appointed in Parliament has another document. This might be a good opportunity to commence a Parliamentary process. Maybe in the future, a referendum could be held to ascertain if the people of Sri Lanka want an Executive Presidency or whether they would prefer to revert back to the Westminster system. Personally, I believe the Westminster system is ideal due to transparency of governance. But maybe a President with limited powers could be appointed to maintain checks and balances if we are moving towards devolution to the extent that it is required. We must also decide on whether we are for asymmetrical devolution or symmetrical devolution. Symmetrical devolution might not be the answer. If you ask me personally, the Provincial Council system is an absolute

failure. The Southern Province receives an allocation of 20 billion rupees a year, of which recurrent expenditure amounts for 90 per cent; this is mainly salaries and maintenance. The ideal system is to do away with the Provincial Councils and strengthen the Prasadeshiya Sabha because they are the direct contact with the people. Moreover, devolution of power has to be defined. What does power mean to the normal man? Nothing. Will that propagate development? No. What they are looking at is more political power for administration. Then it has to be a combination of both. At the end of the day, if the man in the periphery, in the village, does not benefit then what is the use of all this?

The blame with regards to Mihin Air was also placed on you?

The blame cannot be placed on me because I had nothing to do with. The former CEO of SriLankan shut it down when the airline just started making money. That may have been one of their corporate objectives. What do you do after you launch an airline and then suffocate it without money? But Mihin Air was the brainchild of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. It was not my decision; it was an executive decision. When we visited the UK to meet Prime Minister Tony Blair, over dinner President Mahinda Rajapaksa asked me if I would start an airline if given the directive. I said yes, and first thing I did when I came back was look at the applicable laws. I sat down with Mr Weeratunga at the Presidential Secretariat, discussed with him on what was required and requested him to assist in terms of setting up the airline.

I Think It Is Time We Move Away From Personality Centric Politics And Look At Policies And Parties That Can Cater To The Aspirations Of All The People Of Sri Lanka.

On contract basis, through the Presidential Secretariat, we recruited staff who had been working at SriLankan Airlines. That is how we started Mihin Air. It was never my idea. But we needed an airline considering the issues we were having with SriLankan Airlines and the emerging low cost market. Mr Weeratunga was privy to this conversation. When I am given the task, I pursue it and complete it. Three months down the road, the first Mihin Air flight took off.

From that day, we never received funding for reasons best known to the administration. It is funny how the left does not know what the right is doing, or pretends not to know. Sometimes people become indispensable as well. I was only CEO of Mihin Air for eight months and after that the airline was managed by other appointees. I was investigated with regards to my duties at Mihin Air as well, and they found nothing on me in this regard as well.

You have strong support in Galle?

The allegations against me were perpetuated by the media campaigns orchestrated to portray me in a negative light. It is the people from within, our own people who did this to me. However, all of this is confined to Colombo. I have great support and strong base in Galle and one can witness the reception I receive there. I have more than 700 coordinators in the whole district who are with me. In each Grama Sevaka Division, I have one coordinator and with him I have 100 people. For the last four years, I have been active and I have been nursing my district. Wherever I stand at least 50 – 60 per cent of those people will be with me. And, I will take my stand very quickly.

Looking back on the start of your political career, what are your thoughts?

As you know, I started my career as a supporter and member of the UNP. I have worked on many campaigns for Hon Ranil Wickremesinghe when he was Prime Minister. Fate was such that I had to shift paths from 2000 onwards. If you ask me whether I took the right decision, I would have to say that perhaps if I had remained in the UNP, I would not have faced what I did in 2015. I am not speaking about being incarcerated or being in remand prison, because as a politician it is something to expect regardless of whether it is right or wrong. But it was what happened to me, after being so loyal and dedicated to be axed in the way that I was by the very person whom I was loyal to and worked tirelessly for, I would say that this would not have happened to me under the UNP. That is because decisions are taken as a party by the UNP and not as a person or family.

What are your plans for the future?

I will leave it to destiny. I will be candid in saying that the only stable political party that I see for the future is the UNP, due to the party's ability to amass the support of every single ethnic community in the country. Because of all that has happened, the SLFP is in disarray. Purposefully, the SLFP is being slayed over and over again, to the extent that it will take a long time for the party to raise its head. I do not know what the future of the SLPP will be because everything is personality centric. I think it is time we move away from personality centric politics and look at policies and parties that can cater to the aspirations of all the people of Sri Lanka. Amidst this perspective, I believe that it is the UNP that will bring stability to the country.





BUSINESS
TODAY
The magazine of the corporate world



**BUSINESS
TODAY**