

Speech by President Ranil Wickremesinghe

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Ceremonial opening of the third session of the Ninth Parliament under the auspices of President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

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President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

I was elected as the President on the 20th of last month, as having secured the trust of the majority of the Members of Parliament. Today I am addressing you for the first time as the President.

This House represents the various communities of Sri Lanka. Whether you are Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher or any other ethnic group, you are gathering here as the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

Representatives of the Parliament were elected by people belonging to the various ethnic

groups. However we are all Sri Lankans, no matter which ethnic group we represent.

Today, I am addressing you as the President of every Sri Lankan citizen.

Our country consists of communities belonging to different cultures, following different religions and speaking different languages. I defend the right of all of you to maintain cultural practices, follow your religious beliefs and use your language. I am also constitutionally bound to give Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly protect and foster the Buddhasasana, while assuring all other religions in the country their rights.

We have been blessed with an ancient legacy not only religiously, culturally and socially, but also economically. It has been nurtured by different cultures. That is how the concept of “Satharawaram Deviwaru” is related to Buddhist culture. Today, we are entrusted with the responsibility of building the future-based on these ancient legacies.

I took over a country that was in disaster. Severe economic crisis on one side, massive public opposition on the other. However, I decided to accept this critical challenge, on behalf of my people and the country, based on the premise that it is my duty to light even one lamp for the country rather than cursing the darkness.

Today we are facing an unprecedented situation that our country had never faced in recent history. We are in great danger. The country could extricate and be secured from that danger, only if we all face this challenge together as one people. It is vital that the Honorable Members of this Parliament as well as the entire populace contribute with their own strength towards the effort of nation building.

The expectation of all the citizens of the country at this juncture is for all their representatives in the Parliament to work together in order to build the country. If we come together, we will be able to invigorate the nation. If we divide, it will not only harm the people’s representatives but the entire nation.

Therefore, I once again request all parties representing the people in this Parliament to unite in the formation of an All-Party Government. I respectfully extend the hand of friendship to all of you. I confidently invite you to put aside the past and come together for the sake of the country. I have already initiated discussions with political parties in forming an All-Party Government.

Certain parties had declared that they would consider my program and give their consent to form the All-Party Government. I wish to make my observations in this regard. An All-Party

Government is not a government that acts on the sole opinion of one party. It is a government that comprises the views of all parties within a common policy framework, and implemented after decisions are made.

I wish to reiterate to this House, the importance of an All-Party Government in order to resolve this crisis and establish stability in an expeditious manner.

Due to the collapse of the economy, our country also suffered a political crisis. Why did our economy collapse in this manner? We have been debating for two or three decades on how our economic system should be. In 1977, a new economic regime was introduced to our country. However, we failed to modernize and adjust with time. Without focusing on modernization of the economy, we were engaged in competitive, short-sighted and destructive narrow politics. Unfavourable international economic factors brought about by the Ukraine war and the collapse of the world's major economies due to the Covid pandemic exacerbated and complicated our crisis. Due to all these reasons, our country totally declined. The people have been suffering severe hardship. We have now initiated the process of revitalization. We have now minimized power cuts; we are in the process of bringing fertilizer required for cultivation. There is no shortage of gas, and soon everyone would be able to obtain it without queuing. Safety measures have been taken to avoid food shortages. Bringing essential drugs and medical equipment to the hospitals have been initiated. Schools have been re-opened. Measures are being taken to overcome the impediments faced by the industries and export sectors.

I wish to specially mention the assistance provided by India, our closest neighbour, in our efforts' economic revitalization. The Government of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has given us a breath of life. On behalf of my people and that of my own, I convey our gratitude to Prime Minister Modi, the Government and people of India.

Presently, the immediate requirement before us is fuel. While appreciating the international assistance in addressing the fuel shortage, it is timely that we now initiate a system for such importation from our own export income and foreign remittances. We also have to limit selected imports in order to balance the payments for fuel. On the other hand, fuel supply has to be curtailed. These hardships would need to be borne until the end of this year.

Due to the economic crisis, we are facing various difficulties. I look forward to the support of the nation to rid the country of these troubles.

We need to move towards long-term solutions in order to overcome these difficulties. A strong foundation needs be laid as not to repeat this kind of economic crisis in our country.

The economy should be modernized. Economic stability should be established and transformed into a competitive export economy. In this context, we are now preparing the necessary reports, plans, rules and regulations, laws and programs.

I now seek to explain the planning framework, which will be the basis for the country's future journey. Within this framework, detailed information about the programs we are implementing, will be presented through the Interim Budget and the 2023 Budget to be presented to the Parliament.

As a preliminary step, we initiated negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a four-year program. We would continue those discussions from this month. It is our expectation to conclude the staff level negotiations expeditiously and successfully.

The finalization of the debt restructuring plan has commenced in collaboration with Lazard and Clifford Chance, who are international financial and legal experts. We would submit this plan to the International Monetary Fund in the near future, and negotiate with the countries who provided loan assistance. Subsequently negotiations with private creditors would also begin to arrive at a consensus.

We are also looking at formulating necessary policies, rules and regulations, and programs, to strengthen the export economy. Our economic legacy is based on foreign trade. From the ancient times, Sri Lanka was known worldwide as a major economic hub located on the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), and was identified as the 'Granary of the East'. Sri Lanka was the center that distributed rice from the entire region across the world.

Our ultimate goal is to re-establish that past legacy to create a strong and developed green economy. It has been recognized that climate change is a monumental issue facing the future world. We need to create a strong economy that can address climate change. As King Maha Parakramabahu said, we should ensure that we do not waste even a single drop of water that falls from the sky.

As a result of the economic crisis we are facing today, the income disparity in the society is widening. The middle class is shrinking. On the other hand, businesses and industries are facing serious challenges, exacerbated by the loss of employment.

The amount of remittances sent by migrant workers to Sri Lanka has dropped, for several reasons. With the Covid pandemic, much employment was terminated, and people's travel abroad for jobs became limited. Due to the artificial control of the rupee, it became more advantageous to transfer money to Sri Lanka through other means. Presently, this situation

is gradually changing, and we are taking measures to encourage remittances to Sri Lanka through the banking system.

Tourists mostly come from the month of August. Necessary initiatives are being taken to attract more tourists to Sri Lanka.

We confirm the rights of the people. Freehold deeds are being granted to government licensed landholders. Ownership of the houses are granted to those who are living in government housing schemes. Programs are being implemented to solve the issues of the upcountry Tamil Sri Lankan community.

In the effort of stabilizing the economy, we pay close attention towards the less privileged of the society. Avenues for the entrepreneurs of the country to come forward through their skills are being expanded.

I am committed to making effective changes for the future of the society. The foundation is being prepared to rekindle the middle class. Benefits are distributed fairly to the entire society, through a social market economy. I am taking measures to establish a Social Justice Commission for this purpose.

Four or five decades ago, there was an economic concept of state enterprise. However, it is now widely accepted that this concept is ineffective. Even former socialist countries now encourage private enterprises. If our country continues to nurture state owned loss making enterprises the country will take a further downturn. Therefore, we have to make policy decisions on getting rid of such enterprises.

However, I am of the view that, before the end of the 21st century, the Indo Pacific Region will be the most powerful economic domain in the world. In this context, the strategic geographical location of our country is extremely important. We should make best use of this favorable position. Bearing this in mind, our future corporate laws and policies should be formulated. A country cannot be sustained by taking loans, and therefore should reduce the borrowings to the extent possible. Therefore, I am joining with you Hon. MPs in compiling rules and regulations and policies that will allow our country to get maximum benefit from the Indian Ocean centric new economic power.

I urge all parties to get rid of traditional thinking in striving to build the Sri Lankan nation. Some groups stand idle while taking commercial loans at high interest rates and oppose investments that are beneficial to the country.

The enormous loss caused to our country due to the opposition to foreign investments because of here say, without checking, cannot be qualified. However, people are aware of the losses caused to the country due to corruption and fraud. I will mention a few examples.

When we tried to develop the oil tank complex in Trincomalee together with India, it was stated that Sri Lanka would be a sell out of to India and this development project was halted. If at that time we were allowed to develop the oil tank complex, today people would not have to spend many days in queues for fuel.

Even when the 'Suvasarya' ambulance service was initiated, a similar objection was raised. Some doctors held press conferences stating that 'if the patient comes to the hospital by the 'Suvasariya' ambulance service, deaths will occur'. However we somehow initiated the 'Suvasariya' service and thereby thousands of lives have been saved.

When Japan offered to establish the Light Rail Transit (LRT) and develop the Container Terminal in the port, it was opposed by giving a number of baseless reasons. Therefore, our country lost more than 3 billion dollars in investments. Regrettably the traditional friendship between Japan and Sri Lanka has been adversely affected.

The Hon. late Shinsho Abe, the former Prime Minister of Japan, who was a close friend of Sri Lanka, took the initiative to offer us these projects. He sadly was killed recently. At this moment, I wish to transfer merit to Hon. Abe, according to our religious beliefs.

In order to strengthen our journey towards a developmental economy, we should examine the past. Why did our economy fall into such a low level? Why did we inherit negative results? Was it due to mistakes made by individuals? Or due to policy deficiencies? How were individuals allowed to manipulate the economy as they wished? Can the economic policy of a country vary from person to person? Is it favorable for the country or else harmful to change policies from time to time?

We have examined this situation in depth. As a remedy, we are preparing a National Economic Policy for the next 25 years. It lays the foundation for a social market economic system, securing development for the poor and underprivileged groups and encouraging small and medium entrepreneurs.

Our aim is to create a surplus in the primary budget by the year 2025. Our effort is to raise the economic growth rate to a stable stage, in order to establish a solid economic foundation by the year 2026. Currently, public debt is 140 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Our plan is to bring this down to less than 100% by the year 2032.

If we build the country, the nation and the economy through the national economic policy, we would be able to become a fully developed country by the year 2048, when we celebrate the 100th anniversary of independence.

When I draw long-term plans in this manner some ridicule me. Yes, I am not like other politicians. I have long term plans. My planning is not for my own betterment, but for the young generation of today. I clearly know that I would not eat the fruit of the tree that I plant. But tomorrow, our children of the future generations will enjoy the fruit.

I would also like to make special reference on the foreign policy of our country. Due to the instability of the foreign policy, we faced many disadvantages and setbacks in the international arena. I will change this situation. All countries of the world are our friends. We have no enemies. We do not belong to any group. I will ensure the adoption of a cordial and friendly foreign policy with all countries.

I have already emphasized that a number of social and political reforms should be made in parallel with the economic growth policies in order to build a prosperous Sri Lanka. The people of the country is looking forward to an extensive political reform process.

What has happened today? Reliance of people on the political system and politicians has broken. Expectations of the people regarding the state mechanism have been exhausted. This is the reason for the activists to demand a change in the system.

I will take measures to make the change required to build the Sri Lankan nation. I will implement social and political reforms requested by the nation, with the cooperation of all the citizen.

The struggle that started all over Colombo expecting system change was later centralized in Galle Face. This was expanded to several major cities in the island. This struggle was conducted on a non-violent basis and creative manner. These activists did not commit any act of violence. Therefore, families joined the struggle to express their protests. Parents were not afraid to even bring children to the places of protest.

Protesters once digitally illuminated the walls of the Presidential Secretariat, without any harm. Although, later this non-violence was suppressed and violence emerged, with certain politicized groups that became stakeholders. By indulging in violence the protests turned towards terrorism.

I do not allow violence and terrorism. However will protect non-violence and democracy.

Peaceful struggle is a fundamental right. I accept those rights.

Some groups are trying to spread a huge propaganda through social media that I am hunting down the protesters. But it is not true. I will not allow any kind of prejudice to the peaceful activists. I will establish an office to protect the peaceful protesters and support them.

If any injustice occurs to a peaceful activist, that person can call the 24 hour dedicated line and file a complaint. A Committee headed by a retired judge will examine the complaints and take necessary measures, accordingly.

If there are individuals who have participated in such illegal activities either unknowingly or due to the influence of others, a plan will be prepared to act sympathetically towards them.

However, if there are individuals who intentionally violate the law and engage in violent and terrorist acts, legal action will be taken against them. I will not allow anyone to act outside the law. The law is the same for you, me and everyone.

The law will be applied equally to the people who attacked the peaceful protesters on 09th May and those who are engaging in violence and terrorism under the guise of the struggle. I will ensure that there is no political intervention in this process.

There are groups spreading violence near fuel stations. Complaints are being received about people breaking the queue by force, without allowing the people who have been in the queue for days to obtain fuel. Such unruly conduct cannot be allowed. The limited amount of fuel that we can provide must be fairly distributed. I have directed the Inspector General of Police to strictly enforce the law against people who interfere with queues.

A number of major Buddhist and Hindu religious festivals are held in the month of August. These festivals are one of the reasons for increasing the tourist arrivals in this month. Although, some groups are trying to disrupt these festivals by creating a turbulent background in the country. The security forces are keeping an eye on such behavior. I request everyone not to fall into such traps that contribute to destroying the future of the country. Currently, places have been allocated by the Colombo and Kandy Municipal Councils for peaceful protests. Municipal councils are also acting in order to provide the necessary facilities for the activists who are protesting in those places. So I kindly request the people not to stay in unauthorized places anymore, and therefore, request the peaceful strugglers to vacate the unauthorized places and assist to maintain law and order. We look forward to your support in building the Sri Lankan nation.

A protest was held in Batticaloa in concurrence with the Galle Face Struggle. A walk to the Gandhi Statue was organized daily. A statement made by Tashi Chodap, a Tibetan Thero who joined this struggle, was quoted in an article written by a female activist in our country. I would like to quote that statement.

“You re-confirm your participation by joining this walk. Protest in a different way. Through the participation express your opinion about what is happening today. You have chosen to be alert in this moment of crisis. Not that suffering alone. We know that one crisis cannot be solved by another. The crisis can only be resolved through unity.”

As stated by Tashi Chodap Thero, I re-emphasize to this House that we all should solve this crisis together and in unity. Let's get together. Let's make the social, economic and political changes needed for the 21st century.

I would like to draw attention to several factors therein. How should we proceed forward by solving these crises? What are the responsibilities of political parties in that journey? Can we go on this journey, trapped our traditional political thinking?

We have to think anew about the political party system. The activities of the parties should be reorganized in a manner that suits the future. Should we continue to think of politics today, in the same way. Political education should be seriously considered.

In the year 1977, we were able to create a new economy that accomplished a number by our expectations and hopes as youths. Now, absolute contribution of our youth should provide to create a new economy appropriate for the future. Their skills should not be limited to a protest venue. We should create opportunities to utilize their creative skills for the future of the country. In the upcoming elections, more youth should come to this Parliament. The next election should be the term of the youth.

I consider that the creation of a new Constitution with new attitudes in order to provide space for youth, is one of the main priority tasks.

At present, the President has the full right to appoint the members of the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, Police Commission, Judicial Service Commission. I directly say that it is not a favourable condition for democracy. We should change that condition. Presently, it has inherited more power to the President than a previous king of Sri Lanka. It should be changed immediately.

The President of a country does not have to be a King or a God who is exalted above the

people. He or she is one of the citizens. Therefore, separate flags, separate logos, separate honour awards should not be consecrated. I have already taken some necessary measures and will continue to do so.

As an initiative of the political reform process, we wish to pass the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, including all the effective elements of the 19th Amendment. I expect the full support of this Honorable House in its adoption.

The Bill of the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution has now been presented to the Parliament. It is my view that discussing it and reaching a common consensus are most appropriate. We could not achieve everything we want through the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution. It is a fundamental to a series of reforms. It would be a constructive step if we adopt the reforms in one voice.

As I mentioned earlier, measures are being taken to establish the Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committees immediately. All the political parties will have the opportunity to work together, through those Committees. I have already submitted to this House the report forwarded by the National Movement for Social Justice in this regard.

Also, I am working to establish a National Assembly consisting of political party leaders. For the next steps, we will be able to arrange a program with a common minimum program with the consent of all, through the National Assembly.

From the past our country suffered disputes due to disunity. We were divided into ethnic groups. Divided into languages. Divided into religions. Divided into parties. Divided into classes. Divided geographically. Divided by castes.

Certain parties widened these divisions further. These divisions were used to gain power, and seek advantages from the distribution of power. They tried to maintain power by creating various divisions such as ethnic groups, religions.

Ever since I entered into politics, I wanted to create a society with a Sri Lankan identity without these divisions. To create a nation, where children of one mother can live in harmony. I suffered political defeats due to regular engagement in this exercise. It was criticized by extremists, because of my continued stand against racism and bigotry, some political parties slandered me as a racist.

However, I did not deviate from my principle. I will not deviate from that policy.

Today, the majority of the youth have accepted that they want to continue my policies. They chant slogans against racism and bigotry. Protests are being carried out mentioning the necessity of peace among ethnic groups of Sinhala - Tamil - Muslim - Burgher. Sinhalese youths say that all the ethnic groups including Tamils and Muslims should be treated equally. I am glad that the young generation understand the truth that I tried to explain to this society for about five decades.

Now we have the opportunity to direct the entire country towards that policy with the collaboration of these youths. Space has been created to eliminate all kind of disunity in race, religion, party, caste. Opportunity has been granted to end the sufferings faced by some community due to this disunity. Space has been arranged to ensure the basis of determining the advancement of an individual on talent and ability. The background has been created for an environment where every citizen can live in freedom.

It is also essential to provide a political solution to the issues faced by the Tamil community for a long time. They are suffering with many social and economic issues due to the hardships of war. There are many land issues that need to be resolved. We have to think anew about the development tasks in the North. We expect to get the support of the Sri Lankan Tamils living abroad by closely working with them, on the program of rebuilding Sri Lanka. We look forward to their visits and investments in their motherland.

Similarly, women, who are the majority of the population, still face issues of harassment, violence and other discrimination and inadequacy. We have to take necessary measures to change this situation.

It is essential to completely eliminate bribery, corruption and fraud from our society. I will implement a national policy to combat bribery and corruption. New rules and regulations and orders in this regard are being prepared by the Ministry of Justice. A consensus will be reached with the International Monetary Fund regarding combating of corruption.

A comprehensive series of political reforms are required to implement all these functions. I will carry out those reforms during my tenure. However, not based on my own opinion, but with the consent of the Parliament based on the views of the youth, women and other people.

I am taking measures to establish a People's Assembly in order to decide which social and political reforms should be implemented. A mechanism to obtain views of all interested parties is being prepared through the People's Assembly through the consultation of political parties, various organizations. I specially invite the youth engaged in activism and

youth who are not to provide their views.

All matters such as 'Should we continue to maintain the presidential system in our country? Which system is most appropriate for the country? How should the government system be reformed?' should be discussed by the People's Assembly, and ideas requested. After reaching a national consensus on the system that suits the country, it may be legalized and implemented.

It is essential to reach such a national consensus, on which I would explain. The major commitment presented during the Presidential Election campaign in our country is the abolition of the executive presidential system. However, no one who came to power delivered on that commitment. On the other hand, even if someone abolishes the executive presidential system, the next party that comes to power has the ability to change it. That is the reason we require to reach a common national consensus through a body such as the People's Assembly.

People's Assembly is a fully independent body with the Government only providing the necessary resources. The Government has no influence on its functions or decisions. We decide in consultation with various parties, regarding the composition of the People's Assembly.

Views and proposals in this regard have already been made by the National Movement for Social Justice.

The People's Assembly may seek from the nations in our neighbourhood and the wider Asian region together with the relevant international agencies their expertise in the respective areas. The responsibility of preparing a National Plan for social, economic and political reforms is assigned to the People's Assembly, by taking the opinions and advice of all stakeholders and acting with full transparency. The Assembly may wish to prepare this plan.

I came to Parliament as a young Member of Parliament in the year 1977, and held various positions in the country. I did what I thought was right for the country in the midst of honour-dishonour, grace-disgrace. In the past two or three years, I have experienced that the country has become unstable. Looking back at all of that, I remember the poem 'If' written by Rudyard Kipling, one of the world famous literary scholars, which I memorized while studying at Royal College.

I will quote a part of it.

“If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stood and build’em up with worn-out tools:
you’ll be a Man, my son!”

So, let us embark on a new journey with sincere hearts and noble expectations. Let’s plant the seeds of truth and freedom. Nowadays, many slanders and criticisms can be directed to us. However, one day in the future, we will be proven right, when the seeds of truth and freedom we planted sprout, grow, and bear fruit.

Concluding my speech, I would like to remind you of a teaching preached by the Buddha. It is mentioned in the Tripitaka that the Buddha emphasized this fact on many occasions.

“Attadipa Viharatha...”

Be a light to yourself.

Let us be a light to ourselves. Let us illuminate
Sri Lanka with that light.

Thank you.







