The Country needs a Political Culture that Prioritizes National Interests over Traditional Politics

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President Ranil Wickremesinghe with S. M. M. Muszhaaraff, MP; Jayantha Weerasinghe PC, MP; Premanath C. Dolawatta, MP; Ali Sabry PC, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Nimal Siripala de Silva, Minister of Ports, Shipping and Aviation; Sagala Ratnayaka, Chief of staff to the president and National Security Advisor and Dr, Susil Premajayantha, Minister of Education.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe emphasized the importance of a political culture that prioritizes the nation over traditional politics for the country’s advancement.

He underscored that all political leaders, both in government and opposition, bear

significant responsibility and must support initiatives to improve the national economy.

The President also emphasized that the responsibilities of all political leaders, from both the government and the opposition, are crucial and should not be underestimated. He underscored the importance of their unified support for the country’s economic upliftment program, free from political entanglements.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe made this statement during a recent meeting with a group of lawyers at the Presidential Secretariat.

The President emphasized that everyone has the right to engage in politics, but no one should undermine the economic framework essential for the country’s advancement. He highlighted that strikes, including those preceding the upcoming presidential election after the agreement with the International Monetary Fund was signed, were politically motivated.

“The political culture of our country has evolved over the past two years. A coalition was formed with the country’s interests in mind, operating outside traditional politics. As a result, we see individuals from various political affiliations, including those independent of any party, participating actively. The events of May 9, 2022, need no further elaboration. Due to widespread oppression, protests erupted among the public. Certain individuals sought to capitalize on these movements. As a result, traditional parties failed to regain leadership of the country.

In December 2021, I discussed a pressing issue in our country with the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, who urged me to convey this to the President for prompt action.

I subsequently informed the former President about this matter, which was also discussed during the visit of World Bank representatives. Around the same time, the President convened a meeting with political parties in Parliament to address the issue, during which each party put forward distinct proposals.

Only late MP Sampanthan and M.A. Sumanthiran from the Tamil National Alliance joined, and I was the sole participant of the United National Party. Other opposition parties chose not to join. It must be emphasized that it is an incorrect action.

During this period, the country faced a crisis, necessitating collective efforts to

determine the necessary measures. No one could evade this responsibility. The opposition leader serves as the alternative Prime Minister, not merely a bystander. Therefore, it was their duty to participate. However, none of the political parties took any action in this regard.

Following that, on May 9, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned. SLPP could not maintain government power at that time, and we must acknowledge this. Ministers also resigned. Given the British system, the alternative prime minister could have assumed leadership.

Many believed that, according to tradition, if Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned, the leader of the opposition should be given the first opportunity. I expressed my willingness to support anyone in this role, but he did not come forward despite being informed to attend on May 10. They had decided not to accept the post of Prime Minister and did not fulfill their duty, possibly because they focused on short-term political strategies.

During the budget debate, some proposed reviving the country but declined to take on the responsibility themselves. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna made no effort at all. However, we accepted this responsibility. At the time, the country was declared bankrupt. I was confident that we could recover from this situation. At that moment, it didn’t matter who the President was; my priority was saving the country.

We have encountered such challenges before. During the 1971 rebellion, the opposition leader, J.R. Jayawardena, supported Sirimavo Bandaranaike. His son was even arrested once, but their stance remained unchanged. In 1989, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Minister Ratwatte approached President Premadasa to pledge their support for restoring law and order in the country. The army commander then asked them to refrain from criticizing their actions once undertaken, to which both agreed. This illustrates our history of discussing and cooperating in different circumstances.

When the Indo-Ceylon agreement was signed, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Dudley Senanayake collaborated despite other times of conflict, which was not seen as problematic. Sri Lanka stands out in Asia for its practice of transferring power based on election results to the winning party.

Despite discussions on judicial independence, Sri Lanka’s judiciary operates uniquely. Issues faced by India’s Supreme Court under Indira Gandhi serve as a

notable example.

While carrying out these duties, we encountered the events of July 9. On that day, the former President vacated the Presidential Palace. Concurrently, I was also asked to resign as Prime Minister. I questioned to whom I should submit my resignation letter.

I stated that if I were to resign, I would need to nominate someone with majority support. The opposition leader said, “No, we need to appoint someone; therefore, you resign.”

There, I emphasized that the person present should be given priority. Then, they requested the Speaker to take charge. The Speaker responded that while he could manage Parliament, he couldn’t take on the responsibility of controlling the economy. This marked a breakdown in the country’s political system.

> The President emphasized that the responsibilities of all political leaders, from both the government and the opposition, are crucial and should not be underestimated. He underscored the importance of their unified support for the country’s economic upliftment program, free from political entanglements.



President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Eventually, there was an attempt to raid the Parliament. When the Army Commander notified that, all the party leaders were inside and they said the Prime Minister should resign. Shortly after, the Army Commander received word that protesters were approaching Parliament. Within five minutes, everyone evacuated the premises. I had to inform the Army Commander to safeguard Parliament and alert the Speaker.

During times of need, they chanted slogans without taking responsibility. Despite multiple invitations for discussions, none of them attended. Subsequently, a new political culture emerged in the country. When I assumed the Presidency, I received support from all parties, yet every party also voted against me. A faction, including the Chairman of the SLPP, moved to the opposition, while another group from SJB

supported me. Together, we formed a government, and I continued working with former ministers without intending to replace any of them, although some departed voluntarily.

Politicians from various parties united to work for the nation, receiving support from Members of Parliament regardless of party lines and external sources. Since then, this government has made remarkable strides, achieving success through collaborative efforts irrespective of party differences. We have emerged from bankruptcy and are now recognized globally as a country capable of repaying its debts.

We are implementing agreements with the International Monetary Fund, the Official Creditors' Committee for Sri Lanka, China Exim Bank, and private creditors. We cannot afford to make different promises; engaging in old politics is no longer an option, and we recognize that. Economic transformation towards a modern export-oriented economy is essential for the country to progress. Our goal is to increase the GDP from USD 85 billion to USD 350 billion by 2048, achievable through diligent efforts.

Countries like Singapore and Vietnam have developed by maintaining consistency in their policies. In politics, our focus should be on establishing fundamental stability.

Diverse opinions may arise in Parliament, but advancing the country's economic framework is crucial. Many today seek to undermine this framework. Despite recent strikes coinciding with the upcoming Presidential Elections in September and October, there is no need for strikes. If dissatisfied with one party, voters can choose another. The people opposed efforts to destabilize the economic framework. We must affirm the country's achievements and determine whether to chart a new course or maintain the current system.

It's important to acknowledge that your presence here today is a tremendous strength. Let's unite to advance the country. Let's set aside party politics for the next five years.

Our country needs a stable economic system. In the first round of the French parliamentary elections, there was an expectation that the extreme liberalized would dominate. However, the liberalized wing and lefties decided to unite against the third party in those seats without contesting each other. If the third person is

from my party, my party expels a member; if it is from yours, your party should also expel a member. Now, the situation has reversed. Therefore, there are opportunities to collaborate and move forward together. We should strive to create such a scenario in our country.

Let’s acknowledge the political changes in our country and work together to build our future. We cannot remain a nation reliant on begging indefinitely. It’s crucial to uplift the country economically and foster a strong economy. We invite everyone to join hands in fulfilling this responsibility.

Ali Sabry, Minister of Foreign Affairs President Counsel, said, “Many lawyers from different parts of the country are gathered here today. We reflect on our political roots, whom we represent, political history, and party affiliations. I am here representing the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). One might wonder why I now support President Ranil Wickremesinghe for the first time.

We all remember how, at the end of the Thirty Years’ War, President Mahinda Rajapaksa was allowed to lead the country again as the leader who ended that conflict, aiming to stabilize the nation further. A similar situation exists today.

> Under the President’s program, more new bills and amendments will be necessary. These past two years have been highly challenging. Throughout this time, the President has consistently provided guidance to all sectors.



President addressing the gathering.

You all recall the state of our country two years ago. By April 2022, there was no one to assume the role of Finance Minister, so I took on the position temporarily. Our foreign reserves dwindled to USD 20 million at that time, equating to less than a dollar per citizen. Queues were rampant, with shortages of fuel, gas, and electricity cuts lasting up to 13 hours. Inflation soared to 76 percent, and we faced difficulties servicing our foreign debts. Our international allies were deeply concerned about Sri Lanka’s situation.

Today, inflation has reduced to 1.5 percent, and our foreign reserves are nearing USD 6 billion. Achieving this milestone was a challenging feat. Unpopular decisions had to be made without regard for political considerations. We witnessed the consequences of avoiding those tough choices. Different individuals excel in other areas, and there was widespread acknowledgment of President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s ability to rebuild the country. Therefore, the SLPP decided to support President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Before that, the opposition leader was invited. I was well aware of this because I was the finance minister at that time. Before President Ranil Wickremesinghe accepted the challenge, I spoke with the former finance minister, the opposition

leader. He requested to talk to Harsha de Silva. Subsequently, I contacted Harsha de Silva, who inquired about meeting Central Bank and Ministry of Finance officials. I arranged for them to meet at the opposition leader's office. It was mentioned that Eran Wickramaratne, Kabir Hashim, and the opposition leader would also participate with Harsha De Silva.

Mahinda Siriwardena was the Secretary of the Ministry of Finance then, and he remains the current Secretary. Similarly, Nandalal Weerasinghe, the Governor of the Central Bank at that time, continues to hold that position. The group, including the opposition leader, held discussions with them. Later, Harsha de Silva remarked that the country's situation was more critical than anticipated. It was indirectly suggested that their assumption of leadership at that moment threatened their political standing. It seemed they were prepared to take charge after the country had collapsed and faced challenges on every front.

However, the President did not impose conditions. Even during my tenure as finance minister, he guided me without self-interest, solely focusing on the country's situation. Consequently, he has formulated an economic framework today that has proven successful, which is evident from the results we have witnessed. Yet, no one has stepped forward with alternatives beyond criticisms. It is imperative to safeguard the economic foundation laid by the President from collapsing. Therefore, I urge everyone to support this program and collaborate in nation-building efforts."

Dr. Susil Premajayantha, Minister of Education and Attorney-at-Law, said, "It should be noted that Parliament has not seen as many new bills and amendments in any other two-year period in its history as it has in these past two years. Under the President's program, more new bills and amendments will be necessary. These past two years have been highly challenging. Throughout this time, the President has consistently provided guidance to all sectors.

We endured a period when we couldn't print textbooks or provide uniforms, and teachers lacked the fuel to go to paper marking. Now, we have overcome those challenges. The severe economic situation has been effectively managed during these two years.

The opposition's stance on the Parate Law reflects their approach. They discussed it for a year and a half, but amending it then could have collapsed the banking system.

In contrast, the government took steps to provide relevant relief under the law. When we proposed an amendment, the opposition failed to amend ours and sought changes to the fundamental law itself. These actions highlight the opposition’s strategy. To move beyond this, we must establish political stability in our country, a goal demonstrated by the President over these past two years.”