

The Next Generation



He is the grandson of a National Leader, the son of a Minister and the nephew of the President. He carries with him a name that entails massive responsibility. The hopes and aspirations of the people he represents are entrenched in who he is. Shasheendra Rajapaksa is a leader of the next generation. He is the first third generation member to enter active politics from the family of the late D A Rajapaksa. He rose to the limelight with the Uva Provincial Council elections where he made history by acquiring 85% of the preferential votes as a newcomer to the political arena. He is the Basnayaka Nilame of the Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devale and the Private Secretary to the President while being the Chief Minister of the Uva Province. He is calm yet strong with a clear vision for the development of the Uva Province. Being the youngest member to hold such versatile portfolios, Chief Minister Shasheendra Rajapaksa is truly a leader of the next generation.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Who is Shasheendra Rajapaksa?

A calm person who is a good listener. This is one reason why I have been successful as the Private Secretary to the President during his numerous portfolios in the last eight years. I was the Private Secretary to the President when he was the Leader of the Opposition in 2002, Prime Minister and finally as the Private Secretary to the President for the last four years.

Listening to one’s subordinates is significant in two ways; one is I learn from them and the other is, it gives them relief and hope that their grievances are being addressed. The success of an office is you need staff who are happy. They need to be strong, mentally. My staff work about ten hours a day. Therefore to maintain a high level of efficiency is extremely difficult. However, I have successfully achieved a highly motivating working environment because I listen to them.

I completed my primary education at Mahanama College and my secondary education at St Thomas’ College Mount Lavinia. I obtained my BSc (Hons) degree in

Political Studies from the University of New Delhi. Upon returning from India, since I felt it was necessary to obtain a professional qualification, I started on the National Diploma in Human Resource at IPM and actually graduated recently. Due to my extremely busy schedule it took me almost four years to finish a one and half year programme. During that time I was able to complete my Postgraduate Diploma in Business Administration from the University of Colombo

You topped the preferential voting list, by obtaining 136,697 votes (85%) in the Uva Provincial Council elections contesting from Moneragala District from the UPFA; can you tell us how you achieved this?

As the Basnayake Nilame of the Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devale I have been working in the Moneragala District for almost four years. Though I spent my entire life in Hambantota with my parents and my uncle the President, with this opportunity of being in Kataragama, which is the religious heart of the people of Moneragala, I was able to win their confidence. Kataragama is the heart of the Moneragala district though it is at the furthest corner of the district close to Tissamaharama. Through my position as the Basnayake Nilame I had the opportunity to associate with the people of Moneragala and identify what was needed in the district.

The district is being developed and the President is guiding this process. The needs of the people have been identified and these are being addressed however at times, development initiatives have not been taken forward by the people themselves. For example when building a highway, people residing on either side of the road would not be enthusiastic about this because they will be losing their homes but I have seen how the President tackles these issues as his Private Secretary as well as his nephew. I have seen my father engaged in development work as well.

To come to that level of camaraderie and trust is not an easy task. Usually there is disparity and quarreling between candidates, not necessarily the opposition or any other party but within the party itself.

Therefore with all my experiences, I found many aspects lacking in Moneragala. Additionally through the Kataragama Perehera which is held for 15 days I was able to associate people not only from Kataragama but also from Buttala and other areas of Moneragala, Bandarawela and Badulla. Therefore I knew exactly what the people

of this area needed.

The President was elected to be the national leader from Hambantota, whereas I am the first person who has come from Hambantota and contested in Moneragala. I am well accepted because I am addressing their needs. I gave the people of Moneragala honest leadership. The people of Uva did not want a politician. There are many politicians in that area, however they wanted a leader who would take care of their needs. Due to my position as the Basnayake Nilame, they considered me to be very responsible and serious about what I say and do. I am 33 years old and for a young politician to gain respect is not an easy task. You can be an efficient and dynamic politician but respect grows with age. As Basnayake Nilame I earned the respect of the people. That is the number one secret in being able to take the highest preferential vote. The people in that area saw my behaviour with their own eyes. I can always give speeches and say 'who I am' and make promises but for the past four years they have seen my behaviour, which gave them confidence in me.

During the past few years I was not involved in any political activities. I did not participate in any political functions in the Moneragala District. I was only concentrating on the development of the Kataragama Devale. My first move as a candidate for the Provincial Council elections in the Moneragala district was to hold a meeting with all the people, including officers, friends and relatives involved and request them to refrain from consuming alcohol. Then I made another request asking them not to conduct any political campaigns in the night because it is during this time that brawls begin.

During the first few weeks people were very cautious, they watched to see if I would use any tactics. I have to mention that there were no reports of violence during the Uva elections. PAFFREL has stated in their report that this is the only election where there was no incidents of violence in the Moneragala District. I'm speaking specifically about Moneragala because it is my electorate. There was not a single complaint from the opposition or any other party or the general public against me or any other candidates from my party.

I was the leader of the UPFA group during the Uva elections. I spoke with each and every candidate very closely. I explained that this election was going to be an

example for the rest on how we can work as a team. If any of the candidates were having a problem I would take their side, which built their confidence in me. This in turn helped me. There were fourteen candidates including myself and all candidates believed me and trusted me. This was instrumental for me to obtain the highest preferential vote because each and every candidate said ‘first vote for Shasheendra Rajapaksa and then me’. To come to that level of camaraderie and trust is not an easy task. Usually there is disparity and quarreling between candidates, not necessarily the opposition or any other party but within the party itself. Obviously candidates need to fight for policies, which is not happening these days. However in Uva I was able to bring all the candidates under one umbrella. Even when there were problems I would make sure that I would meet at least one or two candidates because it was difficult to gather everyone together at once. I would talk to them and sort any problems or issues that they may have. This helped to have a peaceful election.

The people of Moneragala needed change. They are a people with a very proud history. But they have not been given the due respect for many reasons. Moneragala District has been neglected for a very long time because for those who come from the South, the furthest they will go up to is Kataragama. Beyond that there is no reason for people to travel up to Moneragala. From the other side they will come to Tanamalwila or Embilipitiya, never to Moneragala. If they come from the top the furthest they will go to, is Bibile, Bandarawela or Badulla. Therefore Moneragala has never been in the limelight and this has been neglected.

It is quite an achievement considering that you are not from that area, as it would have been more of a challenge, can you tell us how you overcame these challenges and what set you apart?

I will not accept that I am not from Moneragala, because I have been there for the past four years. It is obvious from the preferential votes that I received that the people of Uva do not consider me as an outsider. Otherwise they would not have given me over 136,000 votes.

I must say I did not face any challenges. If at all the only challenge was that I was not very close with the existing political structure in Moneragala. Therefore I spoke with the most senior Member of Parliament Sumedha Jayasena, I personally visited

her and since I was coming into politics from Moneragala District, I asked her to guide me, advice me and support me. I started from the grass-root level and moved on to the Provincial Council level because these are the most important. I made sure that I met each and every person though at times it was very difficult. I explained to them, my plans for Moneragala and they agreed with me. The entire political mechanism of Moneragala supported me. That's one of the secrets of my success.

Usually in politics there are problems even within the party. However I did not have to face any such issues. Even the Opposition did not cause any problems because I have known many of the Opposition members from a very young age. I have been going to Parliament from a very small age with my father. Therefore I know some of them as uncles, others as brothers and friends. Hence I did not encounter any challenges.

If you speak to them very sincerely and they know your religion, which they did in this case, then there is nothing to hide. That was how I won the confidence of all communities.

All three communities live in the Uva province, how did you manage to win the confidence of all three communities as each has their own specific needs?

I'm proud to say that I was able to win the confidence of all three communities. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities are predominant in Uva; there are very few Christians in the area. I met with every single Father from about seventeen churches and pledged their support to me. Even during the election campaign I made sure that everyone knew I would treat everyone equally regardless of race or religion. For example, during my election campaign, a Muslim friend accompanied me in the car. That was because of our friendship. I was not bothered about his religion nor was he of mine. Once at a Mosque, the Imam not knowing that my friend was a Muslim, advised me saying that I should have Muslim friends. I had forgotten that my friend was there and he stood up and said "no, no I have been his friend for almost 16 years and I am a Muslim". I feel that one can make a difference through small things; I did not do anything strategic.

If you speak to them very sincerely and they know your religion which they did in this case, then there is nothing to hide. That was how I won the confidence of the Hindus and Muslims. As the Basnayaka Nilame of Kataragama, I am heavily involved in religious activities and I have shown how I keep my word. I visited all the Mosques, Kovils and Temples. I selected a leader from each and every area. For example if I had one leader to coordinate one community in Uva Province, that would be the end of the story, he will become corrupt. Therefore I selected many who represent all communities from different sectors. We have two Pradeshiya Sabha members from the Moneragala District who are Muslims.

Api Hadamu Nawa Uva Wellassak was introduced by you during your election campaign. Can you elaborate on this?

Api Hadamu Nawa Uva Wellassak, the slogan itself describes what we want to do. Number one, we have to morally uplift the thinking of the people in the Uva Province. Number two is to motivate the officers to work towards this. I feel I have been able to guide the officers on to the right track during the past three months.

Government involvement in the area is very high. There are many development projects, in the District but none of them have been properly guided or given a clear mission and vision. If we look at water projects for example there are many who are doing the same activity, which is actually duplication of work. This is a waste of money and time.

Therefore my slogan implicitly means to develop a new nation, that is why I say Nawa Uva Wellasak. This entire programme is to develop the Uva Province not only the Moneragala District, in all aspects; agriculture, education, infrastructure, health and roads.

As the Chief Minister what are your plans for the Uva Province?

My number one priority is education for the entire Uva Province. My personal and political manifesto clearly stated that the Uva Province, both Moneragala and Badulla Districts can only be developed through education. Development of education is of the utmost importance, because whatever infrastructure or buildings we develop for schools or any other institutes and the resources we utilise, the next

generation has to be informed of why we are doing this.

My target is to resolve the teacher transfer issue at least by the end of 2009.

Let’s take the transfer of teachers; it is a major issue in the Province. Whoever comes as a teacher from another province, the very next day he or she wants to leave. The main reason for this is the lack of facilities such as accommodation and health. Therefore it is unfair to force teachers to stay in Uva without providing facilities. Furthermore by keeping them in Uva when they don’t like it, they will not work. The outcome will be zero. Therefore I’m in the process of securing funds to build teachers’ quarters. I’m also in the process of providing facilities such as health and insurance programmes for teachers who are coming to work with us in Uva. I will grant transfers for teachers who have come lets say from either the Southern or Central provinces, I have given instructions to my officers to immediately send them back if they are requesting for a transfer then they are not happy with us. If they are not happy that means they will be unhappy while working and in the end the student will be affected. There are many graduates within the Province. I will absorb them into the Uva educational system. My target is to resolve the teacher transfer issue at least by December 31, 2009 so that we can start fresh in the New Year.

My concept is that children should be guided not only by the school education system but they should be given more courage to participate in sports, cultural and religious activities. I am concentrating on this aspect as well. With the assistance of the University of Moratuwa and the private sector new initiatives have been taken in ICT. Furthermore Prof Sunanda Madduma Bandara, Dean at the Kelaniya University is my advisor on education.

The number two focus is on agriculture and irrigation, because if we say that we will bring industries to the district, it is not practical for Moneragala. With my experience and through the counsel I have received from sector specialists such as the BOI, Industrial Development Board and business community I feel that Moneragala is a district that cannot be developed by industrialisation. Development will come to the region only through agriculture. With my small budget as it is the end of the year I have started the rehabilitation of 56 tanks in Moneragala and Badulla.

There are approximately 18,000 reservoirs in working condition in the Uva Province.

During the past drought season, I obtained satellite images of water tanks that had water at that particular moment. That means if we develop these tanks we will be able to store more water. This is one of the major areas that I will focus on in the agricultural sector.

Then drinking water facilities. We are in the process of formulating a national master plan for Uva, how we could provide drinking water for each and every village. This entails a massive cost, for two water projects, which will take some time to get off the ground.

The health sector is the other priority. I am personally visiting all the hospitals including minor hospitals that are belonging to the Provincial Council in order to gather the true state of these hospitals. I always visit with the relevant officials. Now many of the hospitals are in good condition.

We see massive road networks coming up in the rest of the country. Will we see that happening in the Uva Province?

The Central Government has already begun work in this area and we have already developed all the major A and B roads in Uva. However there are many Provincial Council roads to be developed. We have received World Bank and ADB funding for these projects. The World Bank has allocated about Rs 6000 million for next year. That is to build all major roads, which connect two cities. At the moment I am concentrating on determining whether 10,000 to 15,000 families will benefit by these roads so that we can go ahead with the project. The only way to develop is through the development of the road network.

What about the provision of electricity?

Moneragala does not have a National Sub Grid Station in the District. We get electricity from Badulla. If something goes wrong in Badulla, the entire system is crippled in Moneragala. Therefore I have discussed with the Power and Energy Ministry and they have agreed to give Moneragala a National Sub Grid Station next year. This will be a massive project.

Additionally with the funds allocated by the Uva Provincial Council Electricity Department there is a project to put in place all incomplete electricity lines.

How is the development programme for the Uva Province in line with the Mahinda Chinthana Development Horizon?

The Mahinda Chinthana Ten Year Development Horizon clearly states how the Uva Province should be developed parallel to the development of the rest of the country; this is called Pubudamu Wellassa. Accordingly, the Provincial Council will have a specific role to play in the development agenda. Therefore my budgets for 2010 are aligned with the Mahinda Chinthanaya.

Throughout history, Uva has been developed through agriculture and that is what I aim to do as well… I have discussions with the farmers. This is very successful because we are giving them what they want not what we want.

Four of the poorest Divisional Secretariat divisions are located within this province. Unemployment and disparity of income are very high, what measures are taken by you as Chief Minister to overcome these issues?

As I mentioned previously, development through industrialisation is not suitable for Moneragala and Badulla Districts as we do not have a port in the vicinity. However once the Hambantota Port is functioning, the Uva Province will have great opportunities in the near future. Even with that my main target is to develop Uva through agriculture, because if everyone tries to develop through industries that will not work therefore we should concentrate on another sector. Throughout history Uva has been developed through agriculture and that is what I aim to do as well.

There are high prices for agricultural inputs, rural indebtedness is also very high. What is being done to relieve these problems of the farmers?

The main issue that farmers are facing is that they are not receiving a good market for their crops. I mean if you give them land and water, they will keep growing, but increased production will not help them in the end. They should have a fixed market and obtain the appropriate pricing for their product.

The Provincial Council Ministry for Agriculture does not come under my purview but I have discussed with the Minister and have initiated a process of sending our crops to other provinces. It is our responsibility to find the proper market. With the completion of the Hambantota Port there will be a huge demand for the provision of agricultural produce to the ships.

Another hurdle to overcome is the neglected irrigation channels. These have not been renovated nor rehabilitated for many years. I have initiated the renovation of the irrigation networks and that is a relief for the farmers in the area. Usually prior to commencing the renovation work of the tank I would personally visit each area and ask the farmer what they require from these tanks. Our engineers might give me various development plans and activities, but that may not be what they want. I have a discussion with them and I give the chance for my officers to listen to what the farmers want while I facilitate the meeting. In that way I can steer the engineers, the funding and the farmers at the same time. Practically this is very successful because we are giving what the farmers want not what we want. I feel this is a very good way of implementing development projects.

In addition to being the Chief Minister, you also hold the portfolios of Finance and Planning, Law and Peace, Education, Local Government, Cultural Affairs, Transportation, Land, Irrigation, Economic Promotion and Rural Infrastructure. Can you elaborate on what will be done in each of these sectors?

Finance and Planning is of course to coordinate the development of each and every ministry. We have four ministers in charge of the major sectors. For the first time in the history of the Uva Provincial Council I had a meeting with all the ministers, secretaries and heads of all the departments before the budget was to be presented because that would minimise any duplication of work. For example a couple of years ago there was a project to build libraries. The Ministry of Education was building libraries so was the Provincial Council, the Ministry of Health and NGOs.

Almost every town had a library but no one knew which one was good. Ideally all the funds should have been directed to build one good library. These are the practical problems that arise if there is no proper coordination. Therefore this time by having these meetings the Uva Provincial Council budget will be balanced and

there will be no repetition.

Transportation is a complicated issue in a Province like Uva because unlike in the Western or any other Province we have various systems of transportation. For example we have bus transportation and in the extremely rural areas we have old lorries that are used for public transport. Then there are tractors that transport people. I am in the process of formulating a code of conduct for the public transport sector. Since it is only three months since I took office, I need to discuss and obtain consent from bus owners, drivers and conductors before implementing the code of conduct. I have planned to meet them in January and February 2010 to discuss the matter.

Another area that I am focusing on is building a bus stand in front of every school. I've asked my officers to formulate an extensive plan to build a bus stand in front of all the schools, in order to keep our children safe.

I asked my line ministries to assist all Provincial Council and Local Government institutes to be self-sufficient and not to depend on the Central Government. For example, the provision of heavy machinery and equipment so that the Province can maintain it's own rural roads. In the same way the provision of bowsers to distribute water. Usually what happens is the Province will hire these facilities and spend a large amount of resources and depend on the Central Government. We need to make them self-sufficient.

I do not agree that the performance in the Southern Province was not impressive. If you compare with the percentage of the previous election, it is actually growing.

There are many land disputes in the Uva Province because people do not have legal deeds for their land and there is no such system in place. I have set up a committee consisting of members both from the Land Ministry of the Central Government, Land Reform Commission and Provincial Council Land officers. They are in the process of formulating a system where all people will have a legally authorised deed for their land. This will go a long way because without such a document it is impossible to obtain bank loans and such.

Looking at economic promotion and rural infrastructure; I have a very good team working on it. Dr Ranjith Bandara from the University of Colombo is heading this team. This team is in the process of formulating a concept paper on how to encourage economic promotion in the area so that I can see how practical it is, what are the segments and sectors we should develop as there is much variation within the Province.

To divert a bit, though the UPFA was able to secure 2/3rd majority in the Uva Province, the performance in the Southern Province elections was not as impressive, considering that this is the stronghold of the UFPA, can you tell us what happened?

I do not agree that the performance in the Southern Province was not impressive. If you compare with the percentage of the previous election, it is actually growing. The number of voters, the number of people who are accepting the President and his development plans is increasing. That is the number of voters for the UPFA is increasing. Now, the problem here is that people are comparing the percentage of the South with that of Moneragala District, because Hambantota District is our hometown, but we have increased from 63% to 68%. However no one talks about that increase because Moneragala has taken 82%.

That is a different story. I am still in the process of determining what happened there. I feel that people did not vote for me. In Moneragala, they did not vote for Shasheendra Rajapaksa, they voted for the President. They voted directly to the President. If I had contested from Hambantota District then there too I would have got 82%. It is because of the family and the name I’m carrying. Not my first name but my surname.

During the Presidential elections four years ago, people did not ask for development. I was personally involved in the election campaign in Kandy, Moneragala and Hambantota, and I visited each and every village. The people did not say ‘build our tanks or develop roads’, because they know that development is something that the Government obviously has to do. That is the responsibility of the Government. What the country desired was freedom, a free nation where everyone was equal. In Kandy, when I was speaking to the Tamil community they said, ‘Sir, we need a free country to live and for our children to have a safe tomorrow’, this

was the main issue in 2005.

The President fulfilled his promise and ended the 30 year long conflict. Everybody lives in peace, may it be Sinhala, Tamil, Muslims or Burghers. We can see the communities coming together. There was a time when even having a Tamil friend was a cause for alarm, which is totally wrong. This 30 year long war has crippled our thoughts and our love for another community has been destroyed. People have practically seen that the President will deliver on his promises. The President promised when he took over the country in 2005 that he will finish the war – he did it. This was done obviously with the support of the Defence Secretary, Army, Navy, Air Force, Police and Civil Defence Force.

I feel that people did not vote for me. In Moneragala, they did not vote for Shasheendra Rajapaksa, they voted for the President… that the direct guidance of the President will come to Moneragala through me.

People living in the rural areas are not like those who live in the city, they are different. They are very sensitive. The President has succeeded in gaining their confidence. The next step after the completion of the war is development; the people feel that the only leader who can achieve this is the President. That is why a neglected and underdeveloped Moneragala District started trusting me in that the direct guidance of the President will come to Moneragala through me, which will give them a better future.

The key to success is in selecting candidates. There were many relatives who contested in the Southern elections but the people wanted a direct Rajapaksa to be involved. If so, the results of the Southern Provincial election would be rather different. This is the first time that a member of the Rajapaksa family has been involved in the Moneragala District. I am new there – politically I was not involved in Moneragala. My entire campaign was about two months and in such a short time for me to gain that much of confidence is very difficult. My personal preferential vote was about 85.6%. Out of the total that had voted for my party only 21,000 did not vote for me – only. That clearly shows that it’s not me. Obviously there were those who voted for me, but the expectation of the people was that the President’s direct involvement in developing Uva would come through me. Therefore everybody rallied around me, even the candidates.

The President is personally visiting the area. Recently he was on a private visit to pay homage to the Kataragama Devale but he gathered all the officials and inquired from them the progress on each and every sector. I personally update the President on development issues, shortcomings especially to promote development agencies to do some programmes in the area. Being the Private Secretary to the President helps me as the Chief Minister. I can plan there, come here and take the decision. That's the advantage of having two portfolios at the same time. A Chief Minister alone cannot decide. We need assistance to implement the plan and acquire funds.

It is the confidence in the President, which reflects from my votes. I do not feel that the Southern Provincial election was a setback. As a party we are developing. The problem is when you start comparing districts. After the Southern Provincial council elections whenever I visit Hambantota people ask me why I did not contest from the South. Then I explain to them that there is no one in Moneragala and lets extend our hands. There is massive development happening in Hambantota, which is not happening in Moneragala even though there are many ministers, MPs, Provincial Council members who are very much dedicated to developing Uva. There with my contribution the Government will have a better hand in Uva.

You are also the private secretary to the President; can you tell us how you balance these many responsibilities?

I can balance all my responsibilities except my family. I am spending very little time with them. That is a major problem. I am extremely busy however I am managing because my staff is very efficient. They are very loyal to me and they know how I want my work done. It is not I who work, it is my staff, and I coordinate everything. My staff knows that if there is any problem I will always stand by them. I have very efficient staff at the Presidential Secretariat, Uva Provincial Council and Kataragama Devale. Usually on Saturdays I'm in Kataragama, on Monday I am in Colombo, then I am in Uva for the remaining four days of the week. The problem is I do not have any time with my family.

You are the youngest Basnayake Nilame of the Kataragama Devale, this entails totally different responsibilities from that of the Chief Minister and Private Secretary to the President, can you elaborate on this?

I do not find this as a different responsibility. If you take a responsibility – whatever the position, it is the same. The word responsibility is applicable to everybody. Whether it is the President, a Pradeshiya Sabha member, or just an ordinary person, a responsibility is a responsibility.
Youngest Basnayake Nilame, Chief Minister and Private Secretary to the President, yes, all my positions come with immense responsibilities, but one good thing is that they complement each other. As the Chief Minister, my electorate is Moneragala and then as the Basnayake Nilame, Kataragama is in Moneragala District. Therefore these two go hand in hand. There is much development to do in Kataragama, more than what a Basnayake Nilame can do. Now as the Chief Minister I have the opportunity to do much more.

I am currently in the process of rehabilitating a 141 year old bridge connecting Sella Kataragama and Kataragama. The entire cost of the project is about Rs 160 million. I am redoing the Sella Kataragama market, which includes about 183 shops. I am in the process of giving a total solution for the entire Sella Kataragama, including squatters who are doing small shops. Then another is to clean the riverbanks. Even within the Devale premises I have implemented many programmes such as the preservation of a 2000-year history by building a museum with the aid of the Government of Netherland. This was opened two years ago.

All my portfolios come together. The portfolio of the Chief Minister and Private Secretary to the President come together when acquiring assistance from the Government. I must say that the challenge itself motivates me and I do not find managing three portfolios very difficult. I will be completing my term as the Basnayake Nilame next year. Though I am trying to give up the position of Private Secretary, the President is not in favour of that.

To divert a bit, the Presidential elections are to be held in January 2010. Why should Sri Lanka re-elect President Mahinda Rajapaksa?

When looking back at the Provincial elections held over the past few months, Uva and Southern elections, it is evident that the people of this country have accepted the development plan of the President. The President and his team will take this responsibility and will develop the country and take it towards a brighter future.

I wish to serve my country to the best of my ability .

What are your future plans?

To serve the people of Moneragala, Uva Province and the entire country to the best of my ability.