

The Political Centrist

Thusitha Halloluwa has donned many hats in his long political career. Rather not the typical politician but more a 'cornerman' for them, Thusitha has officiated as coordinating official to a former president and chief of staff to finance minister and a bevy of ministers in successive governments. He credits himself as one of the strategists that worked to bring the government of Good Governance to power in 2015, thereby breaking the decade-long run of the Rajapaksa clan in Sri Lanka. A close associate of late Mangala Samaraweera, with whom he played a strategic and pivotal role in ensuring election victories in 2004 and 2015, together they had forged a formidable team with Ranil Wickremasinghe to launch a game-changing program for Sri Lanka. Theirs claims Thusitha is a comprehensive and far-reaching vision for reforms to critical sectors. In an interview with Business Today, Thusitha, who was working with Ranil Wickremasinghe until his ascent to the country's top job, says that now is the time for a real "system change" that the country so envisages, which he knows Ranil Wickremasinghe is determined to implement during his tenure as president.

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Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.



Thusitha Halloluwa.

Are you a strategic thinker? What were the variables that you saw were favorable for a Ranil Wickremasinghe comeback?

When the Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led government came into power in November 2019, we knew then that the government would not be able to survive for too long. Together with the late minister Mangala Samaraweera, we launched a program for the youth as we knew that the subsequent uprising would emerge from the youth of Sri Lanka. That has been the trend all over the world. I have always maintained that people's political behavior is diverse and dynamic. The political wave we saw in 2019 is reminiscent of SWRD Bandaranaike's meteoric rise in 1956. Just like the Pancha Maha Balawegaya (the Five Pillared Force) led by the Buddhist clergy, physicians, teachers, farmers, and workers in 1956 that gave leadership to the so-called great societal transformation, we witnessed the same wave in 2019 with the same group leading and demanding new leadership. Bandaranaike won in a landslide in 1956, but the forces that swept him to power assassinated him. Today post-2019, we have seen that the parties that brought Gotabaya Rajapaksa to power were responsible for his downfall and the eventual end of his political career. I have read about the 1956 revolution and witnessed the strategy in 2019. Both political alliances had a plan to win power but not a comprehensive agenda for the country. SWRD Bandaranaike exploited nationalism and racism and subsequently passed the controversial Sinhala Only Act, which was his tool to power. There's no denying the tremendous fallout from his actions, whose repercussions we see even today. He introduced political strategies that would harm the country in the long-term.

Fast forward to 2019, we witnessed the same tools used to regain political power. Even today, I'd confidently say that the Good Governance government was not wrong because people had enormous freedom and a long-term plan for the country during that time. The Gam Peraliya program was late Mangala Samaraweera and Ranil Wickremasinghe's brainchild, which allocated 400 million rupees for every electorate, a first-ever in Sri Lanka. Enterprise Sri Lanka was a program specifically aimed at spurring the growth of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship among talented and skilled young people in the country who did not have adequate wherewithal to launch their businesses. It was a loan scheme of varied sizes and forms to encourage the emergence of new and dynamic businesses in the country. When the Good Governance government had a great lineup of programs for the country, we witnessed rampant racist and nationalist rhetoric and distortion of the

truth. For instance, in 2016, we introduced the 1990 Suwa Seriya emergency care services when the GMOA threatened to withhold treatment to patients transported in them and spread false stories about the condition of the vehicles.

The damage they did by spewing blatant lies was so intense that these vehicles had to be parked at police stations because they were not safe outside. We remember the chaos during the height of COVID-19 when people could not access a hospital under lockdown rules. Wasn't the 1990 ambulance service that overwhelmingly served people during COVID-19 emergencies? And then they opposed school children being given tabs and stopped it. Today people may understand the timeliness of Ranil Wickremasinghe's program for the country had the children received tabs because today's learning is virtual in Sri Lanka. Therefore, they distorted our long-term plans for the country to grab power.

Two things happened after the Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led government came to power in 2019. All the court cases against corrupt politicians and officials got tossed out; the second was a resurgence in corruption. So, now we understand that Sri Lankans cast their vote for a particular individual and political party with tremendous hope and expectations, which are personal. But governments that come to power on a significant vote cannot sustain themselves because people's hopes also crumble quickly, just like their dramatic rise to the top. That's what happened post-1956 and post-2019. Remember, sixty-nine lakhs of people cast their vote with tremendous hope, a mix of personal expectations and hopes for the country's future. But we witnessed their hopes crumbling in a matter of months. That is a historical phenomenon where governments that come to power on a large mandate fail to sustain themselves in the long-term.

The first significant reform that the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government introduced was to cut taxes in favor of Businesspeople/powerful Trade Union Official. However, they had no plan to offset that massive loss to the treasury by some other means. Therefore, as I witnessed the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa working without an economic vision, I realized that by 2020, the government would not go on for long. We warned them then that there would be queues for essential items and medicine shortages. Mangala Samaraweera, while alive, spoke to some high-ranking officials to warn them about the impending crisis. He requested them to convey the urgency of the situation to their leaders. However, none in power were willing to listen and change course, and we see how some of their political careers have ended.

There is a question of whether Sri Lankans understand Ranil Wickremasinghe, the politician. He has always had an excellent vision for Sri Lanka. When we consider his accomplishments since his days as the Minister of Youth Affairs, he established the National Youth Services Council, and many of today's veterans in many fields are a product of that. As Minister of Industries, he found industrial parks, and as Minister of Education, he launched colleges for tertiary education. Sri Lanka doesn't have a leader endowed with such a long-term vision. However, Sri Lankans have always been happy with any leader who provides their daily food requirements. They have always been pleased with a leader who satisfies their needs for the moment. They always regarded leaders with a long-term vision as clowns. So, it was always short-term for the people. That's why this country is in the doldrums. The people, just as much as the politicians, are responsible.

As voters, how did people embrace such a short-term vision for themselves and the country?

Let's look at our political history since 1952. People voted for a 'seruwa' of rice in 1952 and 1969. In 1969 Sirimavo Bandaranaike's election promises included giving the people two 'seruwa' of free rice. People voted for J R Jayawardena in 1977 because he promised eight pounds of grain free of charge. Election and political outcomes from the 1950s to the 1980s mirrored Sri Lankans' dependence on welfare and the dominance of the politics of freebies.

For the first time in Sri Lanka's political history, the people voted for something other than food in 1994 by electing Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, a vote against state tyranny that brutally repressed a JVP-led youth uprising. Subsequently, Sri Lanka voted against state corruption in 2015, followed in 2019 by calls to save the nation, a cleverly disguised racist slogan. The famous slogans at that time included protecting the country from outsiders. Creating fear accompanied the racist rhetoric. Therefore, throughout post-independent history, Sri Lankans have voted based on fear, for food, and out of malice. As a people, we have never voted for a vision. It has been an ongoing experiment based on a 'let's give them and see' attitude. But can we 'give them and see' and expect the elected leaders to leave in a few months? It's a five-year mandate that any party or alliance receives to govern, a considerable period.

Also, don't ever imagine that only the uneducated and blue-collar workers fall for false political party propaganda that emerges ahead of an election. Equally hoodwinked are scholars, intellectuals, and professionals. The entire country gets

duped by politically led false propaganda. For instance, during the height of COVID-19, when a local concoction was touted as the tonic to cure the coronavirus, was it only the uneducated who thronged to buy it? Equally, when the story of a cobra emerging from the Kelani River was peddled before the 2019 presidential election purportedly in support of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was it only the unintelligent that went to witness the phenomenon? Didn't the scholars and intellectuals endorse it as well? Sixty-nine lakhs that voted in the presidential election consisted of a broad stratum of Sri Lankans, from laborers to businesspeople, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and the intelligent. When has Sri Lanka voted for a vision or a plan?

Then, would you say that the problem lies with the majority race, that is, the Sinhala people of this country?

Absolutely yes. It's a problem with the majority race and level of education. The education system in Sri Lanka promotes memorizing for examinations, which has spurred a luck-based education system. That is, if for my luck, I get what I have learned for the exam, then I'll pass the exam. I may have a comprehensive knowledge of a subject, but I'll crash the paper if it doesn't ask questions based on what I have learned. After so long, none in power has tried to change the education system for the better. But I believe that Ranil Wickremasinghe as president, will be able to introduce necessary education reforms very soon. He has a keen desire to change the current system to amalgamate with global standards, which I think he will achieve. The main reason for our ills is our outdated education system. We have a book-based education system that allows individuals to pass examinations and one that doesn't produce true literati.

Isn't this the weakness that political parties have exploited throughout the decades?

Yes, they have taken advantage of this weakness consistently and are trying to do so even today. What have our so-called leftist parties been doing since the 1970s? The crux of the 1971 youth uprising was a class struggle between the haves and the have-nots. Their leaders convinced the youth whose aspirations were unfulfilled that the affluent were enjoying what was duly theirs, which they were encouraged to regain through a revolution. The same ethos governed the 1987-1989 youth uprising. If we analyze those individuals involved in today's struggle at Galle Face, don't you think they have a deep-seated hatred for society? For instance, their behavior inside the President's House following its capture demonstrated their anger against their leaders for enjoying the privileges of office while they were

suffering. My question is, isn't it better to help youth aspire to reach such heights rather than becoming individuals grudging their leaders? Likewise, rather than discouraging the Sinhala people from patronizing Muslim shops, wouldn't it be better to help them become as successful as other ethnic and religious groups? Name one political party that has tried creating a positive impact on youth. Even today, what we are witnessing is the misleading of young people.

But wasn't the behavior you described inside the President's House a demonstration of the inequality in Sri Lanka, which has become even starker with the economic collapse?

The President's House doesn't belong to an individual. It's the official residence of the president of Sri Lanka. It is a place visited by foreign leaders and dignitaries, which demands a certain standard. Why can't the president of this country sleep on a good bed? Shouldn't the President's House serve a decent menu when entertaining visitors? As a country, we must follow protocols when engaging with visiting heads of state. We must maintain our dignity and pride by treating visitors appropriately during official visits. It says a lot about the country. It is highly disheartening to watch people being encouraged to vent their frustrations in such ostensible places. The president made none of the accouterments and the well-kempt lawns outside. Neither does the president take away anything upon leaving office. Wouldn't it be more productive to show the youth how to ascend to such heights rather than deepen their hatred towards their elected leaders? If there are clever young women and men in this movement, indeed, they have the potential to one day become the leaders of Sri Lanka. I believe those who captured the President's House can also aspire to be the leaders of Sri Lanka one day. We have fallen into such moral depths because, historically, none of the political parties have attempted to augment people's political literacy. The voter's importance to politicians and political parties is limited to the vote. Political ignorance is to the advantage of political parties. Plantation workers are the best example of keeping people politically illiterate. Aren't we indebted to the plantation workers whose contribution to the economy is immense? But look at their standard of living. They are the same as they were decades ago, still living in line-rooms. Who was the political leader with the will and the vision to uplift their lot? None. Historically political parties have successfully harnessed people's anger against an imagined threat and the affluent and those in power, leading to destruction, loss of resources, destruction of the well-to-do classes, and ultimately the youth who fight for change. And that has sadly been Sri Lanka's plight since independence.

Do you think the momentum of bringing Ranil Wickremasinghe is sustainable amid the pressures of today's political reality?

It is the first time in his political career that Ranil Wickremasinghe is in a powerful position. Several times, as prime minister, he was under an executive president. The power vested upon a prime minister under an executive president is limited. He was like any other minister. The prime minister got an iota of power only through the 19th amendment to the constitution, which they removed with the 20th amendment. I am very aware of his objectives as president. He has already appointed people to introduce large-scale social reforms through changes to the constitution, electoral system, education, economy, and foreign policy, which he envisages designing to suit the next five decades. I believe that he will achieve his envisaged change before the end of his term. We initiated this program while Mangala Samaraweera was alive, to which I have contributed and am a part. Ranil Wickremasinghe continued to work on that agenda even after Mangala Samaraweera's death. I am very confident that the social reforms envisaged will be a reality.

You said that Ranil Wickremasinghe has the power to act now. But those around him are the same people with tainted political histories. Will they support his agenda?

A politician cannot discard those whom they have to work with. They are individuals who have been in the system and navigated it for some time. Politicians have been able to earn and strike deals because an established system enables criminal behavior. Had Sri Lanka had the mechanisms in place, there would have been no loopholes to strike deals and steal public money. Sri Lanka has been for a long time berating the deal makers and rogues in politics, but unlike other countries, we have failed to introduce the systems to stop corruption. Rather than strongly pushing for reforms, the trend has been for opposition parties to point fingers, accuse, and expose government corruption until they seize power at the next election.

But do you think the thieves already in there will help establish a foolproof system to stop corruption?

An honest leader can give leadership to a good program. Having worked as the chief of staff to Mangala Samaraweera, I know that the highest earning government institutions such as the Inland Revenue Department, Excise Department, and the Customs don't bring in even maximum revenue they could to the government

coffers because of corruption. Establishing systems will be easier to deal with bribery than trying to net the thieves. But the road to such reform will be challenging, and there will be mutiny and upheaval. However, a strong leader will achieve the desired outcome, and I believe Ranil Wickremasinghe genuinely wants to change the current political culture of corruption. He believes that rather than trying to catch thieves, it's better to eliminate the loopholes that enable corruption. I subscribe to the same view.

Speaking on bringing thieves before the law, when have we found anyone guilty of robbing public money? Has a single court case indicted any politician of corruption? The system not only allows them to steal but also enables them to escape justice. But we have plenty of petty thieves in prison. That has been the trend since 1948. Not a single individual has been served justice for robbing the public. So, we have to put the system right with the support of the thieves. There'll be much pressure when such changes come to the table.

Politicians are the common culprits of corruption. But corruption is rampant in all other work areas, institutions, and professions. Isn't the rampant immorality in politics present in the entire system? Don't we see corruption among doctors, teachers, engineers, and big business people? This depravity pervades not the political institution but society as a whole. Do our business people, so-called titans in the economy, work for the best interest of the people and the country? The responsibility rests with politicians, government officials, private sector business people, and the entire society serving in different institutions. Those who cannot steal despise the thieves, but if the former is also given the opportunity to rob, things will change. For instance, we know plenty in politics and outside who have shouted hoarse against corruption, even naming individuals. But when they team up with the so-called thieves, the trajectory changes.

What's more, some parliamentarians were one-time student leaders in university who stood against the status quo and led struggles for change to transform the country like other globally developed countries, similar to today's struggle. Aren't these the same individuals who come to society to take up various positions, but where are they later? Have we encountered a single student leader raising their voices for a system change once they pass out as professionals? Their grievances hold as long as they are on the outside. Once they enter the system, their struggle for change is forgotten and muted. They all navigate the same system. Society, in general, is corrupt. Corruption is in different forms, in large and small measures, in every aspect of life. Fundamentally people sell propaganda from time to time to

serve their agendas, similar to those who use nationalist and racist rhetoric to come to power. If those struggles were genuine, we wouldn't be witnessing the depth of social destruction we see today. They merely embrace a slogan for survival on the outside. However, their objectives and vision change once they're inside the system.

What role can independent commissions play?

I don't believe in independent commissions because there are no independent people in Sri Lanka. Everyone is aligned with some party or group, which is valid for every profession and institution. Independent commissions will replace individual decision-making with collective decisions that I think will still be biased. I have not come across anyone who is not aligned. Even those who proclaim that they are independent are not telling the truth.

In that case, how do you hope to navigate the vision to fruition?

It's not going to be easy, and we're aware of that. But we can do it with a strong leader, which I believe Ranil Wickremasinghe is. Also, if we fail to introduce the necessary reforms during Ranil Wickremasinghe's tenure, I think it may not happen for a very long time. Looking at the lineup of politicians waiting in the wings to take up future leadership roles, I don't see any capable leader who could pass a reform agenda as big as envisaged by Ranil Wickremasinghe. If those presidential candidates that came forward recently are the individuals waiting to take up roles as leaders in the future, what are their credentials? What have they achieved? What is their vision? I believe our current electoral system is responsible for our collapse and social destruction. Look at the quality of the current leadership in the districts that have replaced the old guard. We have poor leaders because the senior politicians never nurtured the emergence of a good line of succession. They always promoted individuals who were weaker than them.

As a result, we're looking for leaders in a leaderless country. In contrast, when J R Jayewardene retired, a group of capable leaders was waiting in the wings to take up leadership. There were so many with education, intellect, and vision that we couldn't decide whom to choose. The LTTE and the JVP eliminated those leaders, and we have ended up as a nation looking for leaders in a leaderless country. Can you show me a good leader after individuals like Ranil Wickremasinghe exit politics? I don't see any potential in the current parliament. That may change eventually if new individuals enter parliament.

Fundamentally, don't you think we have been bad at governance for more than seventy years?

Absolutely. Haven't we had protestors demanding good governance for decades now? Why are people protesting today? To change the course of this country and make it better. We have had strong university student movements demanding good governance for years. Where are those people today? Aren't those that protested on the streets in the 1980s today governing in various institutions? What change have they brought? Isn't it all a sham then? Think about it. By now, if we count the number of individuals who demanded change and good governance for decades should amount to hundreds of thousands.

Although they joined the system, they have done nothing to change it even when they could. They have all eventually become part of the wrong governance structure. And that's why I insist that we need an enormous social transformation where education is the place to start. Let's look at every stage of education, from the grade five scholarship to the GCE Ordinary Level to GCE Advanced Level. Every examination is hugely stressful and competitive, and the child that emerges at the end is remorseful and depressed. We have examples of sound education systems from around the world. Finland, for instance, has eliminated competition in education across the board. A child cannot withstand the immense competition for long. After all the competition, only a tiny percentage are eligible for university education at a state university. What have successive governments done to accommodate the children who fail to gain university entrance? The alternatives are technical colleges or computer courses that are not recognized anywhere in the world. If so, we require a skill-based education system, where we identify and nurture every student's skills so that by the time they leave school, they are ready to take the next step in higher education. In the Philippines, where a considerable number of women work as house keepers abroad, it is taught as a subject in schools so that by the time students leave school, they have the skills, the expertise, and the discipline to play the role effectively and efficiently in employment. Because of this, foreigners prefer to employ Filipinos over Sri Lankan women even though they have to pay much more to hire from the Philippines, which earns a sizable foreign exchange. In Sri Lanka, most young people who end schooling abruptly get employed in the apparel industry or operate a trishaw. But how many of them could have pursued higher education had they harnessed their skills rather than been allowed to slip away into obscurity? So, the need of the hour is educational reforms with a clear plan for the future.

What are your thoughts on the statement that bad governance is the root cause of failure to develop and attract investment, resulting in revolts?

The BOI is the apex state agency facilitating investments. However, it doesn't have an investor-friendly culture, which is evident from the time taken to approve an investor's request to set up business here. If Sri Lanka is genuinely keen on attracting investments into the country, then we have to create an agency that fulfills the requirements of investors within 24 hours. Do you think an investor coming to Sri Lanka will come a second time? Nearly 99 percent of investors that come to Sri Lanka leave in disgust after paying bribes at every point of approval, sometimes to the extent of officials and politicians demanding shares in the company. We can't ever implement the change that we envisage through the BOI. We are speaking of officers attached to state institutions responsible for dragging their feet when investors want to set up shop here. Why can't the officers serving in state institutions do the right thing if the politicians are corrupt? We need a good and efficient institution to attract investment to Sri Lanka. We desperately need state institutions that people can trust.

What are your thoughts on insurrections and revolutions?

I don't know whether they are genuine or how genuine they are. I say so because I had a personal encounter with the family members of a well-known leftist revolutionary of the 1970s and 1980s. There were five children in the family. Years after the death of this leftist revolutionary, his wife and daughter came to meet me because they were struggling to live. One daughter was married, but her husband threatened to leave her because she had no place to stay. So, I invited them to sit with me one day over lunch at a five-star hotel because I wanted to hear their story. That was the first time they had eaten at a five-star hotel. One daughter that I met hated her father a lot. They were clever children who could study well but couldn't have a regular education because their schoolmates and outsiders constantly harassed them for their father's actions, which affected their education and schooling. When I told that girl that we considered her father a hero for being a revolutionary, she counterargued that the revolutionary he was shouldn't have fathered so many children and orphaned them. His wife's life story is another tragedy. Through my contacts, I managed to send two children overseas for education. The married daughter received a house and is managing her affairs.

Listening to the wife's story, I realized that she was herself a victim of abuse. So, often we don't know the inside story of the so-called revolutionaries. Their story

made me think about the role of revolutionaries with much visibility. They create a survival path by selling their revolution to a larger audience. Today even the religious robe is sold for survival. I don't believe that any so-called revolutionaries have genuine intentions in such a society.

You seem to have much confidence in Ranil Wickremasinghe. But do you think the people share the same feelings about Ranil Wickremasinghe and the entire gamut of politicians?

You've often heard people rejecting the entire 225 in parliament. Now, who elected them to parliament? Lankans who were short of wisdom elected these people to parliament. Even today, people cast their vote for the candidate that visited them during a family bereavement, attended almsgiving, smiled on the road, or gave a pat on the back. Do people even consider whether a candidate has the intellect to do the job? So, whose responsibility is it? Who has the greater responsibility, the electors or the elected? I believe the people have a more significant onus when selecting their representative. Now, who brought Gotabaya Rajapaksa to power with an overwhelming majority of sixty-nine lakhs of votes. Did any of these people oppose when gimmicks like snakes emerging from the water were given wide publicity? Today they are shouting hoarse that it was all along a lie. Didn't a majority believe false allegations against a Muslim doctor forcefully operating on women so they wouldn't bear children? How about the food with mysterious tablets that made women infertile? Didn't the people believe and embrace those stories then? But now they admit they were all fake stories meant to sway their votes. Didn't they have the brains to find out the truth behind such absurd stories? Sri Lankans get swayed by trends that come and go as fast as they emerge.

Let's look at the Galle Face struggle. I am with them. But is it an independent struggle anymore? It's a party-centered struggle where there is external support. I know an individual with three children who has been living at Galle Face since the struggle began. I'm baffled by how many stay for so long without going home. I believe it has become a livelihood for some with the flow of money from outside. Many seem to enjoy their life on the Aragalaya grounds rather than at home. Some behaved inside the President's House as if they had not seen such things before. Suppose they are undergraduates who will one day be the arbiters of this land. In that case, they should have continued their struggle outside the President's House rather than going inside because public money will go into repairing the subsequent damage caused inside. While it would have given them great pride to capture such symbols of power, they also have a responsibility to protect them. All I saw was

malice in their actions. So, fundamentally this struggle is led by a political party, which is mobilizing young women and men to stay at the site. At the same time, they receive substantial funding to continue their struggle. People did take part in the struggle with genuine intentions twice. But the same people didn't join when undergraduates captured the prime minister's office because they realized who controlled the movement.

Another prominent narrative that has come to the fore in recent months is how for 74 years our elected leaders have failed us. They are held responsible for the current status of our country. In my opinion, it's not only politicians in power that have driven Sri Lanka to destruction but also politicians in the opposition parties, leftist parties, religious extremists, the media, and even student movements and professionals who are responsible for our current plight. A good case in point is the protests against establishing private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. Had we succeeded in establishing prestigious foreign private universities in Sri Lanka our children would have opted to pursue higher education here allowing great savings in foreign exchange while a large number of foreign students may have chosen Sri Lanka to pursue higher studies and thereby contribute to our foreign exchange reserve. The story has always been the same, that is, every time an incumbent government tried to introduce development projects they have led to widespread protests and condemnation led by those groups, resulting in their suspension. Therefore, our collective moribund mindset is responsible for 74 years of failure.

The political parties that give leadership to a struggle should, rather than fan the fires of envy in young people towards those in power and the privileges that accompany that office, which is official, guide them to reach such positions someday. Here we are today as a country suffering from shortages of many essential items. Those fighting for the struggle should realize that we're all fighting the same battles and needs, and the response to that is not damaging public property. We're a country that's fallen, so the struggle must be to uplift it and not to destroy it further.

I have tremendous faith and trust in Ranil Wickremasinghe. I have reasons for that. During the latter part of Mangala Samaraweera's life, I got the opportunity to associate with Ranil Wickremasinghe closely. Ranil Wickremasinghe has an honest vision of everything. I also believe that he will have a good team around him to implement his vision. If he gets the opportunity to implement his desired reform agenda while he has the power, I believe this country will rebound. In their first year of office, we have had leaders groping in the dark, trying to figure out their work,

learning about it, and spending the rest of the years planning their comeback at the next election. Who thinks about the country, the ministry, or has a vision? I believe that every elected leader should implement the most challenging and crucial decisions and tasks in the first year. That doesn't happen in Sri Lanka, where the leaders spend their first year learning the work and then work at retaining power or grooming their offspring to take over.

Sri Lankans have always been happy with any leader who provides their daily food requirements. They have always been pleased with a leader who satisfies their needs for the moment. They always regarded leaders with a long-term vision as clowns. So, it was always short-term for the people. That's why this country is in the doldrums. The people, just as much as the politicians, are responsible.

Tell us, what did you envision before 2015 with a good governance platform? Where did it all go wrong? Was it too naïve?

Our agenda got aborted by the leader that we helped come to power. The individual we selected to lead the government of Good Governance was a different individual before he ascended to power. However, once that individual was firmly seated in the top seat, he forgot his roots and mission. Moreover, that individual got some very unsavory elements like fraudsters close to him who could manipulate him to suit their whims, where family members also became involved. We achieved many good things during the Good Governance government. But had this individual given good leadership, we could have earned much more, and we feel the consequences of those failures even today.

But befriending fraudsters and unsavory elements by Sri Lankan leaders is not new.

While it's not a new thing, we came on a Good Governance platform pledging to make a difference. There were fraudsters and unscrupulous business people always close to leaders, but here was a leader who spoke powerfully of his humble rural farming roots and ended up just like everyone else before him.

You also said that the Good Governance leader had changed from his

earlier demeanor. Can't that happen to the current leader as well?

The way leaders respond to their newfound position and power will vary from one individual to another. In the past, individuals ascended to the throne through the royal lineage. When we could not find an heir apparent with royal blood, we brought princes from abroad rather than compromise the position by electing an unsuitable individual to kingly status. Now for someone like Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, whose parents were prime ministers, and J R Jayewardene, their leadership positions were not significant statuses that changed them and made them pompous because they came from illustrious families. But for some other leaders becoming president is a big deal and a reason to change. Such individuals take pride in boasting about their self-importance on the world stage and the special treatment by other world leaders and even the queen of England. But for someone like Ranil Wickremasinghe, who has been in parliament for 45 years, being in either Temple Trees or the President's House is no big deal. I am not promoting that only individuals from a specific social class should aspire to be leaders. Instead, I believe people from any class that desire to come to leadership should have the maturity to handle the pomp and the pageantry that comes with such an office. Without that, the country spirals into destruction. It happened before when Ranasinghe Premadasa became president. There is a big difference in how individuals respond to their newfound status.

How do you see the role of the media in all this?

Just as much as the leaders and officials are responsible for Sri Lanka's downfall, equal blame goes to media institutions in this country. They not only elevated empty characters into greatness but successfully hoodwinked the rural masses into believing them and voting them in. All media institutions have always worked toward fulfilling a personal agenda. They help themselves continue their shady subsidiary business interests. I firmly believe that from now on, if we are to change this country truly, there has to be a tremendous transformation in the media culture in the country. The developed world auctions its frequencies annually. Frequencies belong to the people, and those in media are not allowed to have other business interests. They impose limitations because such individuals can become too powerful and domineering. Just as we envisage large-scale reforms for the country, we must include an overarching media policy to bring discipline into that culture. Look at the social media space. It's akin to the wilderness. Anyone can become a star overnight. An individual who posts a poem becomes instantly crowned a poet. The individual who posts a comment on the poem becomes a critique immediately.

That's the level it has descended to. Social media can destroy individuals and businesses in a day by exposing what shouldn't be exposed. Unless we have specific controls, all this can lead to social annihilation.

This media culture indeed exists in the west, but I find they have a mature audience who will choose wisely, but we in South Asia go with the trends. There was a time when the rave was to decorate walls with paintings. That eventually died a natural death. Even the 'Aragalaya' was like a trend where people felt inadequate if they hadn't visited the site and posted a selfie on Facebook. Some of those trends can be destructive. The role of the media should be to show the correct path to the people, to stop them from wandering into the wilderness, but the media and politicians together lead the masses along the wrong way. Media institutions have a social responsibility beyond being a business. In the event of a violation, an individual can only complain to the Press Council regarding an article in the print media. At the same time, there's no institution to complain regarding any derogatory content on electronic media. The only redress is to go to court. It is unfair that the people have no recourse to complain against electronic media reporting when the frequencies used by media companies belong to the public.

Some leaders have managed to introduce reforms that their successors have changed. That's the problem in a country that doesn't have a national policy that allows every leader to do what they desire.

Religion and religious leaders in Sri Lanka influence the political and public domain. Do you think they have always done the right thing by the people?

I am a Buddhist, so I shall confine my remarks to Buddhism only. The problem with the Buddhist clergy in our country today is that they assume their primary duty is to build this country. But where in Buddha's character, do we read him getting involved in matters of the state? Buddha, as Prince Siddhartha before, was the heir to the throne. His father was the king. Had Prince Siddhartha wanted to build his country, he could have quickly done so with his father. But he renounced the world and walked away from his family and people to pursue the truth because he knew he couldn't achieve his mission with his father. Then why do Buddhist monks leave their core mission on the back burner to influence government making? They have

been affecting people and aligning themselves politically since the 1950s. Although we like to exalt the historical role of the Buddhist clergy since the days of kings, their role was different. Kings sought their advice in those days, if there was anyone with a degree of literacy, it was the Buddhist monk. In recent times people go to the village monk at the birth of a child to prepare the horoscope and do the first reading of letters for the child. As we have evolved as a society, we have many literate people among the laity while we see a decline in scholarly monks.

So, what is the role of a Buddhist monk? Is it to get involved in politics and be part of nation-building or show the people the path to denial, the truth on impermanence, and nirvana? I believe our Buddhist monks are doing the opposite of Buddha's teachings. In that case, how can we build a just society? Had we had Buddha's philosophy in practice and not the brand of Buddhism preached by the monks, Sri Lanka would have been more progressive. The Buddhist philosophy is a comprehensive guide to living under all circumstances, whether in marriage or business. When do they ever teach Buddha's philosophy? Nowhere, in my opinion. Instead, they design their version of the Buddhist philosophy, which they preach to the people. Through their political involvements, monks have destroyed the dignity and trust in the Buddha Sasana. Who is the monk who focuses on denying the world? Some Buddhist monks have a horde of titles before their names, and you wonder why the Buddha, who was in charge of a great monastery, birthed a great philosophy, and was heir to a great kingdom, hadn't embraced such show. Aren't some of them aligning with politicians for titles? Title bestowing is also a business.

I propose that future constitutional amendments include a clause barring all clergy from doing politics. In some countries, the clergy doesn't have voting rights. Moreover, some prominent temples make humongous revenues while others have a large extent of land from which they earn tremendously. Now, do they even utilize such income to develop a village or to uplift a rural temple where the Buddhist monks barely have the basics to survive? Isn't this also a type of mafia and utterly corrupt like politics? By distorting a great philosophy to serve their ends while turning their robes into a business, aren't some monks causing social destruction? Just think about the Buddhist monks who frequently spoke to the media during the 2019 presidential election run-up. What damage did they do in the process? Could you think of the lies they spewed then? But where are they now? They have probably gone into obscurity after being lavishly repaid with vehicles and other privileges. There may be monks who see to people's needs under challenging circumstances and inquire into children's education and more, but the majority

beginning with the Mahanayakes, have turned religion into a business. Have the Mahanayake priests ever launched an investigation into clergy members accused of fraud? Do any of these prominent temples audit their incomes? If anyone tries to audit their revenues, there'd be a huge uproar accusing the government of attacking religion.

The Buddha rejected the caste system in India, but that's what pervades the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. Where is the genuine Buddhist philosophy that people deserve to know in such a structure? The only recourse to learning about the original philosophy that the Buddha propounded is in the books. Foreign Buddhist monks are more faithful followers of Buddha's philosophy than those in Sri Lanka. They gain an acumen from reading ancient books over listening to preaching. Today, monks preach politics and not the Buddha's philosophy. When I speak about social reforms, it also includes changing the role of religion and the clergy in this country.

But aren't they tools for politicians to come to power over their shoulders?

Political radicals use monks to further their agendas. And that's why I insist that the constitution should dictate a separation of the state and the religion where it bars the Buddhist clergy from the political domain. A good leader will be able to do it. When the economy of Thailand collapsed, the Buddhist temples stepped up their role by contributing their income to the treasury. But when has a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka done that? If the Buddhist monk receives his robes and food and the people undertake the temple's upkeep, all he has to do is be a guide and counselor to the people. Siddhartha realized he could not achieve his goal by remaining in the layman's realm. That's why he renounced earthly life, whereas our monks, rather than denying worldly life, get together with the political authority to run the country, and that's the very reason that the people of this country have nowhere to turn to in their time of distress. Even in this economic morass, when people are under tremendous pressure and stress, they have nowhere to turn. Trust in the clergy is eroded. The clergy of this country is responsible for the depths that we have fallen into as a society.

Who is Thusitha Hallolulwa, and what role can we expect in this administration?

I am from Baddegama and have been a youth activist since my school days playing an active role in student unions. I started my political career at a very young age, as

a culture secretary in the Baddegama youth movement. Politically I have always stood for what is right. I have served under different ministers. I began my political career very young, working for Anuruddha Ratwatte and Amarasiri Dodangoda. Subsequently, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Mangala Samaraweera, Anura Priyadharshana Yapa, Dilan Perera, Nimal Siripala de Silva, and Susil Premajayantha often serving as their coordinating secretary. I have been closest to Mangala Samaraweera. Having worked with many, I can say that Sri Lanka has come this far not because of the ingenuity of its elected representatives in parliament. I have witnessed how they work and their decision-making skills. Mangala Samaraweera had a big vision for Sri Lanka. He intended to retire from politics in 2027 but passed away before that. He had a very genuine vision for a better Sri Lanka. We discussed his idea in the presence of Ranil Wickremasinghe. Following the demise of Mangala Samaraweera, I aligned with Ranil Wickremasinghe because I believe if there's anyone capable of resurrecting this country from its current mess, then it is Ranil Wickremasinghe.

I played a significant role in forming the United People's Freedom Alliance in 2004 with Mangala Samaraweera. I was, at the time, Chandrika Kumaratunga's press secretary. The precursor to the April 2004 parliamentary election was the alliance with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which was ceremoniously unveiled together with the manifesto at the Sri Lanka Foundation. I was also the director of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party media information unit led by Mangala Samaraweera as its chairperson. An exciting story unfolded two weeks before the election that almost derailed the dreams of a future government.

Contrary to what we had designed earlier, a different manifesto to the original was in circulation. As a result, the JVP threatened to leave the alliance. He asked me to do what I could to avert a crisis. Tilvin Silva, Nandana Gunathilake, and Wimal Weerawansa gave me the ultimatum to revert to the agreed manifesto, or they would leave the alliance at noon that day and hold a media conference at one o'clock in the afternoon to announce their withdrawal from the coalition. The entire responsibility of salvaging the crises had fallen upon me, which was a dilemma for me because I was, on the one hand, Chandrika Kumaratunga's coordinating secretary, and stopping the manifesto would mean a fallout between us. If I didn't stop it, that would end the alliance and the future government. I had to wage a personal battle with Kamal Ratwatte, the party's administrative secretary, and another gentleman called Seneviratne to stop the new manifesto from circulation.

I succeeded in my mission. But when I turned up at the office the next day, they had

fired me from my post and sealed Mangala Samaraweera and my party office. I conveyed all this to Mangala Samaraweera. Subsequently, the media began making inquiries about the sealing of the party office. Having been fired from my post, I sent a press release from a friend's office warning the public about a separate election manifesto by the opposition purportedly under the alliance's name. In the end, people couldn't gauge, which was the legitimate manifesto. Even at television debates, the opposition argued that we had printed a different manifesto to the one agreed with the JVP, but we argued that they did. In the end, we formed the alliance government. Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of ports, aviation, and media, invited me to his office one day, consoled me over what had transpired, and acknowledged that the government was in power because of me. I kept my neck on the track to save the alliance and the future government. Had the JVP withdrawn, the SLFP would have lost at that election.

In 2011 when the Rajapaksa government was in power, I was media and coordinating secretary to ministers Susil Premjayanth and Nimal Siripala de Silva. I met Mangala Samaraweera on November 11, 2011, when BT Options had their Business Today awards at the Cinnamon Grand, where Ranil Wickremasinghe was the chief guest. My meeting him at this event was after a considerable time. Upon our meeting, I asked him whether we could topple the government. He smiled and asked me, 'can you?'. I replied in the affirmative. We organized to meet later. He visited my house in Nugegoda, next to Mahinda Rajapaksa's and his sister's and Basil Rajapaksa's house, but none knew that Mangala was seeing me. I spoke about how we could topple the government and its strategies. A week later, we met with five cabinet ministers of the Rajapaksa government. Mangala Samaraweera was convinced that we could topple the government at that meeting. Many other individuals and movements joined hands with us in the process, such as Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha. We set the foundation for this change in 2011 because we believed we could change the government. For that, we had to do much campaigning through the media. It was a team effort that resulted in the victory of the Good Governance government.

In 2005 when I was Mangala Samaraweera's coordinating secretary, he told me that he had decided to support Mahinda Rajapaksa in the forthcoming elections. I was also friends with Mahinda Rajapaksa because I used to be the go-between and mediator when Chandrika Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapaksa had issues. I knew then that if Mahinda Rajapaksa were to become president, the eventuality would be a family-centered political dynasty leading to huge problems. I warned Mangala

Samaraweera not to get involved in an act that I dubbed “sinful” and warned him that he would be Mahinda Rajapaksa’s first target of elimination. I said the same to Sripathi Sooriyaarachchi, requesting him not to allow Mangala Samaraweera to align with Mahinda Rajapaksa. Mangala Samaraweera got angry with me when I withdrew from lending my support to the election over my principles. He wouldn’t even speak to me even if he were to see me because he was so deeply involved in that campaign as Mahinda Rajapaksa’s campaign manager. In 2006 Mahinda Rajapaksa threw out Mangala Samaraweera over an issue, and that night, he called me to say, “I was wrong, Thusitha. What you said has come true”. He asked me why I had warned him before the election and why I hadn’t given him the reasons behind that warning. I explained that he wasn’t in a mindset to listen and make sense of my wisdom. I narrated this story to drive the point that I will align with a political leader I believe will do good for the country, even if I have to stand alone. I have done that before and will not hesitate to do it in the future.

Ranil Wickremasinghe has an excellent economic vision. Earlier, the dynamics for him to implement his vision were not proper. We did see how they pushed him to a corner during the Good Governance government. Now that he is president, I firmly believe that he will push for substantial reforms within the next two years, and by the time of the next presidential election, all these reforms will be in place. Some leaders spoke of reforms only until they got or came into power.

You have been with various political leaders for years, hoping they would deliver. But haven’t they all been switching sides for so many years?

True, but they have done something in their own right, maybe not hundred percent as envisaged. Some leaders have managed to introduce reforms that their successors have changed. That’s the problem in a country that doesn’t have a national policy that allows every leader to do what they desire. Subsequent leaders have destroyed institutions that we built. Every appointed institutional head must be given targets and a deadline or terminated. Some directors have brought down institutions to zero but have not been held accountable, and there’s no one to question their actions. Who pays for the fallout? The people of this country. There are many such institutions in this country. Every political appointee should bring results and not merely occupy a seat. The president or the line minister must give

targets. That doesn't happen in Sri Lanka. Not a single minister gets a target upon assuming office. So then, where do we see the results?

You have worked with many politicians. What if someone were to accuse you of being a dealmaker?

Yes, of course, I do strike deals. But I do so for the people. An agreement doesn't have to involve money. I also play games, but I'm on the people's side. I have succeeded in many ways. The 2015 victory was a gamble that succeeded and averted great destruction. Some prominent people in the Rajapaksa government were happy about their loss because they felt another five years would have led everyone down the rut, given the behavior of the new generation of Rajapaksas. The 2015 victory broke the momentum of their excesses. The Good Governance government introduced several progressive reforms, the RTA being one of those. Mangala Samaraweera had an excellent foreign policy. Enterprise Sri Lanka was another advanced program. Striking deals are about identifying the best and bringing them into our program for the country. Although my strategies are for the people to save them from the consequences of politically naïve decisions, I don't have much faith in our people who will always subscribe to and get swayed by political trends. Had the people been mature enough to see through the lies in 2019, we wouldn't have had 6.9 million people voting for a single candidate.

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What Ranil Wickremasinghe spoke with me extensively is still on his plans. He had given over his agenda to a broader group to be prepared, which he did before becoming prime minister and continues to date. He is firm on his plan and shows that he has not changed with power. I firmly believe he will do it. People accuse him of safeguarding the Rajapaksa family. But weren't some people pointing fingers at him today through near courts and prisons in support of Rajapaksas when their cases were taken up during the Good Governance government. The people who came to save the Rajapaksa family are today accusing them of being rogues. However, the crucial role of Ranil Wickremasinghe should be to ensure that people can access essential items such as fuel, cooking gas, and milk powder rather than focusing on

his first few months in office trying to catch and punish thieves. The most pressing need is to put the economy right. The 7.8-billion-dollar foreign currency reserves in 2019 are empty today. There's so much to focus on before catching the thieves or what action are we taking against officials who gave the bad advice that has brought the country to its knees?

People are talking about the robbery at Central Bank. Where did that happen? Where is the money thus stolen? The narrative floated for a long time that the country's downfall resulted from the central bank bond scam. If people allege that the bond deal was illegal, there is a case pending in court, and in the meantime, 14 billion rupees seized from the suspected fraudster is in the state's custody. The racists ran a false propaganda machine of lies to take power. The consequences of their actions are being felt by one and all. The case is pending in court. Depending on the verdict, the money will be returned to the individual or given to the government. If there had been any wrongdoing in the bond deal, we have the courts to decide the outcome.









