

Vote Mahinda Rajapaksa Towards Sustainable Development

Posted on



Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka is the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. He is a member of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which is an alliance partner of the UPFA. Having played a pivotal role in holding Presidential elections in 2005, the JHU has been a constant support to President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Minister Champika Ranawaka expressed his views as to why Sri Lanka should re-elect President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the Country moves towards a brighter future and sustainable development.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Why should we re-elect President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the President of this country?

When President Rajapaksa contested in the 2005 elections, we supported him not as an individual but for his principles, which was the Mahinda Chinthanaya. Before the Mahinda Chinthanaya was developed, the JHU looked at the direction the country was going in and made a vital decision. It was the JHU that urged the Supreme Court to bring forward the elections to 2005, which were due in 2006.

Not only did we bring forward the Presidential election in 2005 but we also determined the focus of the election. At the time both UNP and SLFP had similar views on eradicating terrorism and that was through federalism and discussions.

Their debate was on how far we should devolve power or the extent of federalism. We understood that the terrorist forces ultimately determined these solutions; therefore we enabled change and suggested an alternate direction. JHU was adamant to achieve peace honourably that is how we were able to attain peace without yielding to anyone.

Keeping this in mind, we conducted a bikkhu convention where we came up with five principles; firstly, to achieve peace honourably by eradicating terrorism,

secondly to unite the country by persevering unitary character and moving from federalism, thirdly, to build the national economy, fourthly, to build a society of merit and finally establishing democracy.

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We were adamant to support a candidate who fulfilled these five principles. Until then the prevailing paradigm was federalism, power devolution, liberal economy, western culture. Not only did we put our principles forward but we propelled the political leadership also in that direction.

When we presented this to Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe he declined but when we approached Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, he agreed with us. It was then that we worked towards Mahinda Rajapaksa winning the elections in order to make that paradigm shift.

We were able to achieve our first principle of achieving honourable peace; now everyone including the Opposition Leader agrees that President Mahinda Rajapaksa has achieved this for the country. Today, any person in this country can hold their head high and live with dignity, especially the Tamil community. Even the Sinhalese people residing in the East and the Muslim community will not have to live in fear; they will be able to exert their right to vote at the elections. It was President Mahinda Rajapaksa who has given us that freedom.

We were also able to achieve our second principle, today there is no talk of a federal state but only the unitary state. Even the TNA does not talk beyond the unitary state. For the first time in thirty years, laws are being placed for the entire country. Now the term unitary is not just a word on a piece of paper but is a ground reality. That is one of the President's major victories.

Today, there are different stories about the war but if you look at our history, we're very much consistent in our standing. Twenty years ago we said the same thing but now we are saying this as winners, we are not saying this as losers. This was not just a principle it was an organic movement that evolved as we progressed.

Look at the National Economy, people have their own opinion about it however, President Mahinda Rajapaksa did not privatise any government institutions. In addition, he did much to increase the efficiency of the public sector as well. Now we can see a global crisis, it is a multi-faceted crisis. It's not an economic crisis, it's a fuel crisis or an energy crisis related to climate change, it is a global phenomenon.

The importance of the national economy is evident because when globally, the fuel and food prices increased, the Government of President Rajapaksa realised that it was time to move away from being depended on other countries. This is how we were able to absorb the economic recession.

The national economy has new meaning, new dimensions and when you look at it it's not only a financial crisis but also a development crisis. This modern development is based on fossil fuels. 86% of the economic activities are energised by these fossil fuels. Without these we won't be able to get the expected economic growth. We are expecting infinite growth based on finite resources. That cannot be done. There are three limitations; one is scarcity of resources, then pollution and limits to science and technology. Because of these three limitations we cannot go to the required development paradigm.

The first commercial oil well was built in 1859; the final oil well will be built by 2059, in another 50 years. after that we wont be able to use fossil fuel as an energy source. That is why we are forced to look for alternative energy sources. Those are definitely home grown solutions. These cannot be brought from abroad hence we definitely have to grow our own food, which the President aptly identified and named the programme "Api Wawamu, Rata Nagamu". In the same way we need to grow our energy. We cannot run the country from the energy we get from elsewhere.

Therefore our extended programme would be to grow our food, grow our medicine, grow our fertiliser and grow our energy.

One of the main problems that the world is facing is global warming, which is due to carbon emission this results in floods, droughts, wild fires, tornados, typhoons and various other things including retreating ice caps, rising sea levels and threat to

biodiversity. If we don't stop this now, we won't be able to live in this world, this is now a deep-rooted problem. If this civilization collapses and since this world is integrated unless we go to another planet we have nowhere else to go. Therefore pollution is worse than the scarcity of resources. Science and technology is another aspect, in the past when an issue was unearthed we would say that it will be solved by science but today because science has caused this problem there is no solution for them. We have to have alternative sources and knowledge systems.

Due to many reasons we need to have sustainable development, this is not something you do with the outside world but within the country and the national economy has to be strengthened. The neo-liberal camp was against our national economy debate, they said we were like frogs in a well but in this new context that is the global recession and the paradigm shift in development, the national economy is the only solution in the long term whether we like it or not. The Mahinda Chinthanaya focused on all these aspects and we are very proud of that.

Another very important aspect that President Mahinda Rajapaksa fulfilled was to build a society that has morals and values while giving prominence to our local culture. Throughout the years our local culture became shaded by the western culture, as a result we lost our cultural diversity. Something that is very important to human beings is cultural diversity; it is something similar to biodiversity.

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We believe there is nothing called universal science, no objective science all sciences are based on culture. This modern science is based on western culture. It is a euro-centric science; it's not universal.

There will be sciences and there will be sciences based on cultures. These new cultures, with cultural diversity, diverse knowledge-base and diverse sciences are essential for human beings.

During the time we spoke of democracy in this country, it was the norm that people from Colombo 3 or Colombo 7 were the decision makers. That is the elite. This country was democratised in two spheres. One is sports. If you look at our cricket team, it was once dominated by old boys from Colombo schools. Once this trend changed and Sri Lankans from other parts of the island entered the team, we reached a point where our team was able to win the World Cup. Thus, the cricket team became a democratic entity. Susanthika Jayasinghe and Damayanthi Darsha did not emerge from private schools. The sports sphere demonstrated that giving a chance to people from rural areas and democratising it, brings positive results.

The next sphere is the war. President Rajapaksa built the best Army in the world by democratising its ranks. We brought in meritocracy in place of bureaucracy. If we democratise the country and give decision-making powers to those other than members of the elite, the country will go forward, because that crowd is a selected crowd, a small crowd. President Mahinda Rajapaksa commenced democratising all spheres. As a result new cities emerged in Monaragala, Ampara, Trincomalee, and may be in the future in Maankulam. New education systems emerged. The student who obtained the highest results in the year five scholarship examination comes from Hambantota. A girl from Muttur obtained the highest marks in the Arts subjects at the A/L. We can see the democratisation process with this and as the saying goes, 1000 flowers will bloom all over the Island.

Even from that only a few families are privileged. “Janasammathawaday” is about democratising and that is our hope. This should happen in the business world as well. Entrepreneurship should be democratised. Entrepreneurs should emerge from the village. Engineers, doctors and professionals should emerge from the village and they should have the power to make professional decisions. We expected that democratisation from President Mahinda Rajapaksa. We gave him a chance to practice the five principals of ruling – Panchadharma Prathpaththya – preached by our Buddhist clergy while maintaining the identity of our party. We believe that we extended our support to the President at the correct time.

It was an aim of President Mahinda Rajapaksa to go beyond party politics and build one united front, would you say that he has established that?

This is a good example of democracy. Previously in our country it was about small

political parties, especially minority parties that controlled the Government asking for unfair demands. The end result was that everyone became frustrated. Under the direction of the Mahinda Chinthanaya, the alliance parties support his principles and he does not try to control the parties. There are personnel from the UNP, the LTTE and the JVP and this is a broad national alliance for the first time in the history of Sri Lanka.

Even internationally a broad alliance was formed. Today India protects us. They protected us especially during the decision-making period of the IMF regarding the loan. The new Asian hemisphere from Iran to Japan is the growth engine of the global economy. We are part of this new Asian hemisphere. The UNP always looked to the European Union or North America. That was their market and their knowledge centre. President Rajapaksa has changed the trend. We integrated well with the emerging economies of Russia, China, Brazil and India. Politically we stand together with them. This broad alliance within the country and internationally with the emerging hemisphere has been a key to countering the world crisis.

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At this time when President Rajapaksa is going for an election, he has fulfilled about 90% of the promises made in his 2005, manifesto Mahinda Chinthanaya, what are your thoughts on this?

Yes. President Mahinda Rajapaksa has fulfilled a majority of the promises he made in 2005. If we look at the economy, during President J R Jayawardene's time there was a 6% economic growth in 1978/79 at a time where there was no war. Then during Chandrika Bandaranaike's time in 1997 - 2000 we achieved 6% growth. However during President Mahinda Rajapaksa's four years, 2005 - 2008, we consecutively achieved 6% economic growth while the war was being fought. Due to the global recession growth fell to 4% in 2009, yet we will achieve 6% in the next year. This is a great achievement. There was an important detail in the Mahinda Chinthanaya regarding how we should utilise the advantageous global positioning of Sri Lanka to become a naval, aviation, commercial, energy and knowledge hub. We acted on this. When we talk about a global naval hub, we have to modernise our

ports. We have done that. We expanded the Colombo port to three times its original size. We are building a new port in Hambantota. The other ports in Galle and Kankasanturai are being rebuilt. We have developed the necessary infrastructure. We can build on that Mahinda Chinthana foundation during the next six years. We can take a leap forward now.

Focusing on airports, it is obvious to any one who visits the Katunayake airport that it is a different place now. We have developed facilities by three times and we are building a new airport in Maththala, Hambantota. There are about 20 airports used by the Air force. We will use these to build up the aviation industry in this country and region. We have created the political stability necessary for a commercial hub. We have stabilised the economy and brought down inflation to a single digit. We maintain the growth rate above 6%. We have brought the bank interest rate to a single digit level. There are US \$ 5 billion in foreign reserves. The public debt component has been brought to 80% from over 100%, unemployment rate has been brought to 5%. We have stabilised the economy. As a result we have the necessary infrastructure to become a commercial hub and we have the ability to bring international banks to the country.

Regarding IT, we hope to launch our own satellite in the near future. We will create a common user facility for all mobile users and build a telecommunication tower with modern facilities in Peliyagoda. This will enable us to use all the telecommunication facilities in the region. We can take Information Technology to the villages. None of the other South Asian countries are connected in such a way. Sri Lanka is a well connected society. Now we have IT literacy rate at 30% and hope to increase it to 60% within the next five years.

With infrastructure development we hope to become a centre of knowledge. Thus we can say that the promises made through the Mahinda Chinthanaya are more than 90% fulfilled. We identified around 600 activities and these were all fulfilled. We have developed roads and created a good network in the country. To solve the water problem the Government has introduced new international facilities. We have improved education. In our time there were only seven universities, now there are 17. We have improved all the areas especially in the North and East.

The most important thing is we are looking to develop our energy resources to become a centre of energy. Fossil fuel is not one of our indigenous resources.

We collected seismic data from the Mannar and Kavari basin and the southern plank. Our continental shelf was measured for the first time by the Government of President Rajapaksa. Forty years ago Law of the Sea was implemented regarding the continental shelf. Our Government has now submitted our claim for continental shelf. We trained ourselves to gather seismic data. We do not even know the quantity of resources hidden there. Within the last two years we have collected our energy data and built up the environment to build up an energy hub. There are many things that have been achieved that may not be even documented.

The first part of the Mahinda Chinthanaya addressed power shortage and energy distribution. The second part is about sustainability.

It is a well known fact that President Mahinda Rajapaksa won the war, but many programmes were done to develop the country simultaneously, can you tell us about this?

Primarily, from 1990 the CEB had a generation plan. We had to abandon that generation plan due to various political pressures. That is why our electricity cost was extremely high. Sri Lanka had the highest electricity cost not only in Asia but in the world as well. This affects our entrepreneurs, commercial and domestic users. Who is responsible for this? Politicians who were not able to take a political decision.

There were blackouts in 1997 and 2002. This is a country where we had eight hour power cuts. Now we are obliged to opt for a coal power plant in Norochcholai. We are late but we opted for a coal power plant. Currently, the unit cost is Rs 15, but we hope that the unit cost will be Rs 13 with the implementation of the coal plant in 2011. Further, the Upper Kotmale power plant project was abandoned due to political pressure. Now we have recommenced work on it. Another coal plant will be built with 1000 megawatts in Sampur area. In Kerawalpitiya we built a LNG plant. It will go up to 600 megawatts. Our capacity will be nearly doubled with just the completion of these three plants. We should not go for coal plants afterwards because of the emission and environmental problems.

The Government's next priority will be renewable energy. There we will use wind power. We have done good research on wind power. We used US energy experts. According to them our potential is 25,000 megawatts. Ten times more than what has been established here. Next is solar power. We have mapped the solar radiation pattern and accordingly we have 4.5 to 5 kilowatt hours per square metre of solar energy. We have a good solar radiation pattern. This country is blessed with constant sunshine.

If we take Giniseeriya, if we grow 400,000 hectares, we can generate 1000 megawatts. We don't have to especially grow Giniseeriya as a monoculture. We can grow these along with our coconut, tea and home gardens. Thus we can change energy generating patterns. That is our target for Green Lanka. Till 2015 we will carry on coal electricity generation. Afterwards we will be trying to reduce the growth rate. Thereafter we will introduce renewable energy sources as well. We have covered all of these aspects with the Green Lanka project. This is the second part of Mahinda Chinthanaya. The first part of the Mahinda Chinthanaya addressed power shortage and energy distribution. The second part is about sustainability and clean energy.

The village was not neglected and it was a priority of the President, as a JHU member this would have undoubtedly been a priority for you as well, your thoughts?

Actually, President Rajapaksa proposed a project by the name of Gamanagama (uplifting rural areas). President Ranasinghe Premadasa thought about the villages. He introduced the concept of "Gam Udawa" and he implemented a project called "Janasaviya" in 1989. When he implemented this concept the poverty level of Sri Lanka was 28%. He did this for three years until he was assassinated. However he could not reduce poverty by one single digit. In 1993 it was 28% and in 1997 it was 28%. However, President Rajapaksa brought this down to 15% within five years. We hope to reduce this to a single digit within the next five years.

Sri Lanka's per capita income increased from US \$ 1,000 to US \$ 2,000 per person within these years and we hope to double this in the coming years. Income within the village has increased and more importantly there is infrastructure development in the village. We carried out road development projects worth Rs 57 billion for a

year. Today, villages are better off than Colombo. People should travel to Ampara from Colombo and from Ampara to Batticaloa, to Siyambalanduwa, Buttala and Hambantota, or go to Trincomalee and Habarana. You can find better roads than Colombo in these areas. Take the A9 road in Maankulam and the road in Mannar, they are better than the roads in Colombo. We gave the necessary facilities to the village such as electricity. Our penetration was 68%, now it is 85% we will reach the 100% mark within the next five years.

There are better schools than Colombo in the villages, in Hambantota and Monaragala. With the Vidatha centres we have commenced empowerment of abandoned villagers. This is about altering immense injustice. From the time of Keppetiola, people in Monaragala and such areas were abandoned and referred to as chena farmers. Such abandoned people were uplifted. That injustice was rectified and village leaders were made part of politics.

Most of the Cabinet Ministers and other members of the Government are from rural areas. We should empower villages now and in the future, especially the less privileged people. Women should be empowered. Sri Lanka is at number 17 in the gender index. If we take ministerial secretaries, judges, lawyers, doctors and university students, they are women. 2/3 of university students are females. Such a condition cannot be seen in any other part of the world. It was a revolution that happened during the past few years. 50% of the Local Government positions are held by women. The President did not hesitate to appoint women to positions such as Governors. Some people say there is a lack of representation of women in the Parliament. However, in other areas women are well represented. Thus, Sri Lanka achieved the 17th rank in the gender index. US, Canada and France, are behind us. Within these five years we have achieved a significant change. We were ranked 57 or 58 but we have progressed rapidly. When we visit countries such as India, Nepal and Pakistan, we see the dire circumstances that women have to deal with. We empowered villages and women. There has been a big democratic revolution in Sri Lanka compared to other South Asian Countries.

The President not only unified the country, he also unified all those souls. He unified the Tamils in Batticaloa and Muslims in Trincomalee, unified all to a single nationalistic feeling .

Anti narcotics and campaigns against alcohol and tobacco have been

initiated by the President, this has been pivotal in alleviating poor people from the poverty trap and also to build values in society. This has not been a priority before, can you elaborate on this?

Our Buddhist priests from the JHU brought about the Mathata Thitha programme. Villages have collapsed because of their addiction to the narcotics and alcohol trade. It is not that people from the villages don't earn, they do, but those earnings fall victim to alcohol and narcotics. We spend Rs 10 billion for the "Samurdhiya" programme but we spend Rs 32 billion on cigarettes and we as a country spend at least Rs 100 billion on alcohol. What is the point of spending Rs 10 billion on reducing poverty if ten times of that amount is wasted on alcohol and narcotics? Alcohol and narcotics generate health and socio-cultural problems. Therefore, that was a courageous step taken by the President to curtail this. However there is much to be done in that arena because there are those who come from alcohol and narcotic related services to dominate the political arena. Also, because they are rich and therefore powerful, this is a challenge. There is a vicious cycle when a Kassipu Mudalali enters the Provincial Council, then he enters Parliament and then he becomes a Minister. Breaking this vicious cycle is another necessity in Sri Lankan politics.

The Government has been able to create new jobs for graduates during the past few years, can you talk about this?

President Mahinda Rajapakasa has given around 350,000 employment opportunities in the public sector. With that we have been able to keep the unemployment rate at 5%. For graduates we offered 42,000 jobs in 2004 and 17,000 now. The government will take in 17,000 new graduates, but they should be given jobs and should not be taken in as graduates as that would not be of any service to us or the country. Even the graduates should change their attitude. When we provided jobs for 42,000 graduates, 15,000 of those had been employed by the private sector. We have a few employees who are working in our Ministry for a salary of Rs 15,000, but had received Rs 30,000 while working in the private sector. This will lead to a set back in the private sector and vice versa. We need to change that attitude of the graduates. We need to implement courses that would suit the job requirements of the country.

During the past four years, the President has given a new lease of life to the Nationalistic feeling, can you talk about this?

The President not only unified the country, he also unified all those souls. He unified all communities, the Tamils in Batticaloa and Muslims in Trincomalee, unified to a single nationalistic feeling. That is very important. That kind of peace, that kind of unification, that kind of integration is important. Assimilation in to this single nation is very important to have leap forward, which is what we are looking for. We need a great leap forward. That kind of harmony and peace in national integration is very much important to do that, to achieve this goal.

Our sole aim is to achieve economic, socio and environmental targets based on equity and social justice. We should not allow those unpatriotic, unholy alliance to lead the country into political mess and chaos.

The Opposition has put forward their common candidate. Your thoughts?

Actually we need a very strong opposition. Now it is 30% in the opposition, but we need 49% . Otherwise like any government, this government might take the wrong direction. To prevent this we need a strong opposition and strong criticism, where they can guide us. That is democracy. Susanthika Jayasinghe could not have won the cup if it wasn't for Damayanthi Darsha. We need that competition. The government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa will definitely win the Presidential election. The foreign powers, especially western powers, will try to scuttle the democratic process. Therefore we have to be very careful. In terms of the common candidate, it's a group of opportunists. It is not a common candidate. It is an uncommon candidate. These opportunists only have slogans, and hate towards President Mahinda Rajapaksa. These are the only common things among these people. Their leader is gone now. It was Prabhakaran. His last will would be there common manifesto. This country, our nation will not allow this kind of conspiracies to be successful. We should not allow those unpatriotic, unholy alliance to lead the country into political mess and chaos.

What can we expect in 2010?

I feel we should have a new start. Our war heroes paved the way for us to take a great leap forward. We should regain what we have lost. We should have long term plans, short term plans and medium plans. Our sole aim is to achieve economic, socio and environmental targets based on equity and social justice. On the other hand we are trying to enhance our geographical position in this region to make it a

naval hub, aviation hub, commercial hub, trading hub, knowledge hub and energy hub. Sri Lanka could be a global centre for these activities. We are hoping to achieve this.

We are very much optimistic. We have to follow the path of the optimistic forces. They sacrificed their lives and many more for our freedom. Therefore we have to protect our freedom and we have to go forward and achieve a brighter future.