

INTERVIEW: Ceylon Today

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Only a Common Opposition, Can Oust MR....(Interview)

General Secretary of the United National Party (UNP), Tissa Attanayake feels the most suitable candidate, for the next Presidential Election, is party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. However, in an interview with Ceylon Today, he firmly believed only a common Opposition alliance could oust incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Q:

Are you confident of winning the next Presidential Election?

A:

This Presidential Election is very decisive. We see a clear need for Opposition Parties to come together, to form a joint front, with a strong plan to defeat incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the forthcoming election. When you take the vote percentage of UNP alone and add what other parties in the Opposition would poll at an election, there is a 100% possibility of us winning. For example, the latest statistics show that the Tamil and Muslim voter percentage has increased to 26%. Also, the non-Buddhist voter percentage has risen to 5%. According to these statistics, there are only about 69% to 70% of Sinhala- Buddhist votes in this country now.

Q:

How are these statistics going to help the UNP in an election?

A:

It is common knowledge that President Mahinda Rajapaksa polls an extremely low percentage of Tamil and Muslim votes. Therefore, what our party or the common Opposition should focus on is to come up with a strong plan to give good competition to President Rajapaksa in polling the Sinhala-Buddhist votes.

Also, with the conclusion of Uva Provincial Council Election, the UNP is now confident that it can give a good run to President Rajapaksa in an election. The step taken forward by the UNP at that election is as big as 19%. Therefore, I believe now the time has come for us to win rather than lose. Yet, I must emphasize, in order to defeat Rajapaksa, we must join hands with other parties and forces.

Q:

Now, you are emphasizing on a joint Opposition. But why does it seem

that the UNP is not involved in this whole discussion on a common candidate?

A: No. We are involved in the process. Our argument is that, we are the largest party in the Opposition and one cannot ignore that. As a whole, a share of the UNP votes in entire Opposition amounts to 85% and all other parties together have around 15% of the votes. So what we say is let's agree on one plan first and then decide on who is going to contest from the Opposition. Now, Ven. Maduluwawe Sobhitha Thera, from the beginning, insisted that we must go for a strategy to ensure that democracy is established soon after the executive presidency is abolished and the 17th Amendment is reinstated. We are completely in agreement with Ven. Sobhitha Thera's opinion and there are various other parties who are of the same view. Therefore, we must come up with a common agenda where all of us can work together on one platform to achieve a common goal. Once we come up with this common agenda, we can decide on the person who is most capable of executing the plan.

However, until such time, as a political Party, we have decided to prepare for an impending Presidential Election. While the discussions on a common candidate continue, we are engaged in reorganizing and preparing our Party membership for the election. We have made sure these reorganizations will not hamper possibilities of working on a common agenda. We are however, emphasising on the fact that none in the Opposition can defeat President Rajapaksa by going for a plan that completely ignores the presence of the UNP. Therefore, they must flock together with the UNP.

We are still open for a common agenda.

Q: But your actions seem to contradict your statements?

A: It's like this. The UNP's tradition is to field its leader as a candidate for any decisive election. Accordingly, our national leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, is travelling around the country to prepare the Party for an impending presidential and general election. There are instances where the Party acted contrary to this tradition. For instance, if you take 2010 Presidential Election, we were compelled to field Sarath Fonseka as the common candidate. Also, we have had the same experience in 1994. At that time, since President D.B. Wijetunge decided that he was not going to run for the presidency, the party decided to field Gamini Dissanayake, even though he was not the Party Leader. Therefore, we are of the opinion that Wickremesinghe should become the candidate if the UNP is contesting the forthcoming election. However, we have not completely dropped the idea of working for a common cause.

Q: Political analysts are saying that the chances of UNP winning are low if Ranil Wickremesinghe contests. As the Party's General Secretary are you going to ignore these analyzes?

A: Actually this is an idea that was embedded in the society and in the minds of voters for a long time by certain people.

This is completely an unfair judgement. What one must consider is who the most suitable person is. Anyone in this country would admit that Ranil Wickremesinghe is not a fraud, a cheater or robs or misuses public property in order to lead a better life. Also, there are people who say that he has the necessary experience as he held the office of Prime Minister twice. On the other hand he, for two decades, gained vast experience as the Opposition Leader. When it comes to international affairs, his capabilities and relations are far ahead of others. Despite all these, some are still chanting 'Ranil can't win' like a mantra out of habit even now. I believe that this has come to a sudden end in the past few weeks.

Q: What made you believe that people have stopped thinking so?

A:
If you take other Parties, it is Tamil National Alliance that is the next largest group in the Opposition next to the UNP. Then we have the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Sarath Fonseka's party. On the other hand, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Congress have also indicated to us that they are willing to join us in the event a presidential election is announced. Incidentally, a considerable number of government members have expressed solidarity.

Q: Who are they?

A:
I don't think I can reveal the names at the moment. But I can assure it is not a small number. About 30 to 40 UPFA members have expressed their willingness to work with us on a common platform at the next Presidential Election against Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Q: Are you telling me that all these parties have agreed to back a UNP candidate?

A:
We are in the process of discussing with these groups. They are especially ready to join a front that we are forming. It is not that the UNP can't win this struggle alone. But we can face Rajapaksa, in a more confident manner, if we face him together. We have no hard and fast rule that all should contest under our party symbol. We are focusing on contesting under a symbol that all of us can be comfortable with as there are concerns and reservations about backing or contesting under the 'Elephant'.

Q: Why are you

so adamant about UNP taking the lead in forming a common platform against the incumbent President, when it is clear that Wickremesinghe would still become the Prime Minister even if Ven. Sobhitha Thera contested as the common presidential candidate?

A:

I can't give you a direct answer as things have not been finalized. But we have a practical problem when it comes to UNP members and its supporters. Because, as a person who works with all levels of party members in the country, I have had first-hand experience that our supporters need to feel that the candidate belongs to them. That is because; they have an attitude that it should be 'our leader', 'our party', 'our symbol' and 'our colour', in order to vote. Therefore, it takes an immense effort to make up their minds to vote for an outsider. It was a struggle we had in 2010 to convince our party members to vote for Sarath Fonseka. We had to face lots of problems when asking them to vote for someone else.

Q: From all what you have been saying so far, it is clear that you are giving priority to Wickremesinghe's candidacy?

A:

Yes. I believe he is the most suitable person. UNP is the decisive factor in the forthcoming election. I even saw that Ven. Sobhitha Thera also had said there is no point in talking about a common candidate if the UNP is not supporting. On the other hand he has not made a public statement that he is opposing leader Wickremesinghe's candidacy. Ven. Thera also has said that he has no intention of contesting if Ranil Wickremesinghe also comes forward as a candidate. Therefore, we are in a process of discussing and finalizing this matter before the Presidential Election is announced. The majority have expressed their willingness to contest with the UNP, but they have also said it would be better if we can form an alliance and to go for a common symbol. We are taking all these suggestions into serious consideration.

Q: Do you still think the JVP will give its support?

A:

That is one of the main reasons why we are thinking of a common symbol because we want to get the maximum support without hurting anyone's feeling.

Q: You were successful in reuniting Ranil and Sajith. What were the issues or challenges you faced when brokering this 'marriage'?

A: Before talking about challenges, I must insist that this reunion was what people wanted to witness more than anything else. There was a time the party was broken into various factions and it is during this time the suggestion of appointing a leadership council surfaced. We decided that before taking a final decision on appointing a leadership council we must

conduct a full-day workshop to familiarize our members on the UNP's vision and policies. This was held at Hotel Taj Samudra in Colombo. Inaugurating this, I said it will be futile even though we spend days and days in discussing our policies without addressing two core issues.

The most important thing that we must keep in mind is that what people expect from us is nothing but to see that the Party is united in every sense-where all leaders come together and work in unison. While talking about these things I clearly told the leadership council and those who were present that if we cannot make Sajith Premadasa once again an active participant in party affairs we must also forget about winning elections. The second point I made was on the media, because I felt that we have opted for a wrong strategy of picking fights with media institutions. There is no doubt that we cannot expect anything from State media like Rupavahini, ITN or Lake House.

But if we do not act in a manner that we can work in cooperation with the private sector electronic and print media, we will not be able to achieve our target. If one thinks that we can get the message to the people simply by putting an advertisement or a poster, that is being naive. We have given up the support extended by these privately owned newspapers, radio and TV institutions merely on petty issues. No one opposed this at the time it was taken up for discussion.

Actually, it was not an easy task to bring these two together. It is true that I kept these negotiations in low profile even though I knew things will soon be out in public one fine day. But I completely reject allegations that I was operating without the knowledge of the party. Each move by me was made after discussing and getting the approval of Leader Wickremesinghe.

I don't know why, but certain people did not want to see this reunion happening and the Party being united. I think they were simply driven by their personal agendas and gains, but it was the party and partisans that suffered for almost two decades due to their petty needs.

Q: Do you sincerely believe this 'marriage' will last?

A: Well... there's a lot to do in order to make sure this union will last. There have been a lot discussed and there are a number of agreements reached. But the issue is that we cannot attend to some of those at once when working as a political party. I too admit that there are practical difficulties in maintaining this reunion. What we must keep in mind is not to jeopardise the trust that has been built. If it is risked it will ultimately affect the efforts put into winning the Presidential Election. Therefore, we must immediately handover the responsibilities of the deputy leader to Sajith Premadasa for him to activate the grassroots level members.

Q: If by chance Wickremesinghe loses this election too, who do you think should take the reins of the UNP?

A:

The right and powers to choose the next leader is with the Working Committee and the general convention of the party. That's what our party constitution says. What I believe is we are winning the next election. Irrespective of whether we would win or not the second layer of leadership must be groomed by then. I am not saying it is only Sajith Premadasa who is qualified for the post. But since he is already appointed as the deputy leader, none can stop people from recognizing him as the next UNP leader.

His image will be built in that way no matter how others would think. The leader will be decided and made by people. There are two types of leaders. The other type is those who held posts but are not recognized by people as leaders and the others who are living in the hearts of the people as leaders even though they are not given any posts. When the time arrives the Working Committee and the general convention will decide it. What I am saying is Sajith Premadasa has a good chance for being appointed.

Q: What will happen to the leadership council now?

A:

The main objective of the leadership council was to ensure the party's unity. However, the members of the leadership council seem to have forgotten why it was formed and they were busy criticising party leaders. However, we have now appointed an operational committee and it will begin its operations once our leader returns from his UK tour on Sunday (5). It is this operational committee that would take all decisions with regard to the presidential election. So, all executive powers will be transferred to this committee till the end of Presidential Election. Ranil Wickremesinghe is the chairman of this committee and we have suggested to make Premadasa and Karu Jayasuriya as vice chairmen of this committee. The final decision on this matter will be taken after Sunday (5).