

Interview

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I regret the decision -Tissa

Former General Secretary of the United National Party (UNP), Tissa Attanayake who crossed over to support President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the presidential elections said he regrets the decision he took. In an interview with the Daily Mirror he said he took the decision within forty eight hours because of internal conflicts of the party [the UNP] and that he suffered its consequences. He also said that although he was not an ardent follower of astrology, some 'effects too may have contributed to take the plunge. Following are the excerpts of the interview

Q Did you leave the UNP according to your conscience or was there any pressure? If so what were they?

During the period of the presidential elections I was under a lot of stress. The party leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe clearly knew that. For months we had been preparing for the elections during which time there was no talk about a common candidate. I worked on the stance that either Ranil Wickremesinghe or Sajith Premadasa should be the presidential candidate from the UNP and that Sajith Premadasa was appointed as the deputy leader of the party to groom him for elevation in the party hierarchy.

I was actively involved in preventing a split in the party and there were people who disapproved my activities. As a result an opposition grew against me [within the party]. When it peaked I resigned. That decision was based on the internal conflict and nothing else.

QA few days before your resignation, at a press conference you said you would never desert the UNP. But you left few days after that. How did that happen?

I think I made that statement somewhere in November. But on 6th of December at the party congress I received information from the security personnel of the party leadership that a group of people were planning to disturb me during my speech. According to them this group was to be led by an MP of the Colombo District and, the party knew of the plan. It was at this point, that I decided to leave [the UNP]. Some said I planned this for months, which is wrong.

Q Did you object to Maithripala Sirisena being the common candidate?

I was not aware of Maithripala Sirisena being the candidate of the common opposition. For some reason I was not told about him. The party leader informed me later that they had arrived at such a decision. When I asked him why that decision was taken, he told me he was left with no choice but that some other parties had also backed the decision. He also told me he was subjected to certain pressures and influences as well in the decision.

Q Does that mean the party leader agreed in fielding a common opposition candidate due to certain manipulations?

Yes, according to what he told me. I got to know about the common candidate around the third week of November. But I prepared for it especially when the decision was questioned by the working committee of the party. One question was if Maithripala Sirisena was to be the common opposition candidate what is the guarantee he could give the party. It was then Ranil Wickremesinghe said that Maithripala would be joining [the opposition] along with around thirty members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) prior to the day of nominations for the presidential election and that the post of Prime Minister will be given to the UNP. Depending on that the working committee decided to support the decision.

However the common candidate failed to bring the numbers he promised prior to nominations though some joined later.

Q You were appointed as the Health Minister, the post which was vacated by Maithripala Sirisena. Don't you think you were used by the previous government?

As I said earlier I was under pressure due to internal conflicts in the party. When I joined former President Mahinda Rajapaksa I never requested for positions or anything else. I was pushed to join him owing to the circumstances I described. However, I told the former president that I cannot be a member of the SLFP. People take decisions sometimes that work; sometimes they don't. I am suffering the consequences of a decision that didn't work for me.

Q Do you regret about that decision now?

Yes, to some extent; but this is the nature of politics.

Q Recently you told a newspaper that your decision may have been due to a "star effect". Do you believe in astrology?

I believe in astrology to some degree, but not hundred per cent. [Astrologically speaking] there are good periods bad periods. For example the former president had two more years to stay in office. But he gave it up. This shows that although people granted him power he did not have luck to hold on to what he was given. This suggests he was going through a bad period. That is the reason I said that when some people take decisions they think it is best at that time; others say it is not.

Q After you crossed over you levelled serious allegations against the common opposition. you even produced a document which insinuated that Ranil Wickremesinghe and Maithripala Sirisena had agreed to give a separate state to the Tamil people. What can you say about that?

At the first press conference I held in this regard, I emphasised that I received that document on the day I assumed duties as the Health Minister. When I went through the document, I found that some parts were of general political interests while others were alarming to national security. That was the reason I said I received a document and that its contents were serious.

However investigations are being conducted over this and I have made a statement to the CID.

There are questions over this document. I remember the leader of the "Nawa Sihala Urumaya"; Sarath Manamendra told the media soon after I made the revelation, that when he asked Ranil Wickremesinghe and Maithripala Sirisena about the "agreement"; they told him there was such an agreement. I did not have an opportunity to seek confirmation because I had severed ties with the UNP by then. But Manamendra was with the common opposition. I also see certain inclusions in the document coming into force. Even today in a media report the Prime Minister has said he will implement the 13th Amendment.

Q As a politician with experience don't you think you were too hasty with regard to this document?

In politics these things happen. When I received it I thought it is a good political weapon. There were many people who received it, but since I was the first to receive it, I revealed it to the media.

QWhat were the actual reasons for you to leave the UNP at a critical moment like that? Was it the leadership?

I did not leave the UNP. I merely supported President Rajapaksa. There was no issue with regard to the leadership; the only issue was the party conflict.

QDon't you think you were selfish at that point?

As the general secretary of the UNP don't you think leaving for a personal reason was betrayal? Similar things have happened in the past too. I am not the only politician who took such a decision. There are pluses and minuses of taking such a decision. I have being in politics for thirty years and have being in Parliament for 27 years. But although I have ample experience and witnessed such instances, I too had to take a decision.

QDon't you think it was a betrayal of Ranil Wickremesinghe who gave you a seat in Parliament and the post of the party secretary of the party when there were many others in the running?

The decision I took was not a decision against Mr. Wickremesinghe. To make him the presidential candidate I have done many things. I am happy that he is the Prime Minister now, but he got protection to get there because of me . In 2006, seventeen members of the UNP joined the Government. I was appointed as the general secretary of the party that year and I worked for its betterment with the leader. Also when the time came to decide whether Ranil Wickremesinghe was to remain as the party leader or not there were many against him, I rallied people around him. I have being with the party during difficult times and the party leader knows that.

Q Now there is an island-wide public protest not to take people like you back to the party. If the UNP refuse to take you back, what is your plan?

I have not decided any future plans. But I still believe I am a member of the UNP. I have not obtained membership of any other political party. At the last parliamentary session I requested to sit with the UNP. Although the Government was established using executive powers, around forty members sit. Inclusive of the other parties only seventy people would sit. The rest is filled with members of the UPFA. At least nominally the majority of the Parliament comprises members of the UPFA. Therefore I requested that I am given the last seat where UPFA members sit. The Speaker of Parliament too agreed but I was not given the opportunity. I was told that the party leaders of the Government had objected. I do not know how justifiable that is. Everybody is supporting the hundred-day programme and they request UPFA members to support it. But even though I am a member of the UNP, I am not given the opportunity to even sit. Many with the UNP have not been in politics for long. And those who said they would support the hundred-day programme criticised the UNP and the leadership before the elections. If they can retain such people I do not know why they cannot accept me.

QWhat are your future plans in politics?

Are you going to support the current government or stay with the opposition. And if you are not welcomed by UNP, are you going to stop your political journey? I have not come in to any decision at the moment. But I will be taking a decision soon. Many people told me not to stop my journey. We’ll see.

- See more at: <http://www.dailymirror.lk/62257/tissa-regrets-his-plunge-at-the-deep-end#sthash.njzlu5dX.dpuf>