

How can there be freedom without discipline ? - Gotabaya

By Kelum Bandara

Since the defeat of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa four years ago, there has been speculation in the political circles that his brother and Former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, known as an efficient administrator, would come forward as the next Presidential candidate.

His Viyathmaga movement was seen as a launching pad in this direction. Recently speaking at one of its meetings he publicly stated that if the people were ready for a Presidential election he was ready too.

The following are excerpts of an interview done with him.

QYou said that if the people were ready you were ready for the presidential elections. Is it an indication that you will contest the Presidential election at the end of this year?

The most important person to decide on it is Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, many requests have been made from me and that is why I said so.

QMany people are talking about your US citizenship which is a barrier to contesting the Presidential Elections. Have you renounced it?

That is finalised. No worry about it.

QIn case, you become the candidate, what are your plans for the country?

Today, it is very clear that the whole country is disgruntled with this Government. The Government has failed to produce results, be it in security, development, economy or even reconciliation among the communities. What people want is a person who can really work. A stable country is of paramount importance. It is fundamental to everything. Stability is very important. We have to ensure that there is a disciplined, stable and secure initial base for development. No investor, be it local or foreign, will invest if there is no stability. Stability in a society is very important. A lot of people talk about the rise of underworld criminal activities in the country today. It is happening in a big way all over the country.

The freedom to live is the most important thing. Northern people did not have the opportunity to live like people in other areas because of the 30-

year war. After ending the war, our Government initiated infrastructure development, roads, irrigation etc

I read in newspapers about the extremist groups organising themselves in the northern and eastern areas. I do not know whether it is the LTTE or any other group. It is not a suitable environment for development. We need a secure, stable country. That is one of my priorities.

The Government has failed in bringing about economic development. The next priority should be that. As for reconciliation, what people really need is an environment to live happily. A lot of people talk about freedom. The freedom to live is the most important thing. Northern people did not have the opportunity to live like people in other areas because of the 30-year war. After ending the war, our Government initiated infrastructure development, roads, irrigation etc. The next step is to give that opportunity to people who live there.

QIf you want to win at a Presidential Election, some people say that you have to get sufficient minority votes. Would you be able to?

We need to win over the minorities-Tamils and Muslims. But if somebody says we lost in 2015 because we did not get the minority votes, I do not agree with it.

Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa lost only by 400,000 votes. If we had got 250,000 votes more, he could have won. Look at the number of votes we lost in Colombo and Gampaha districts alone! If we had got these votes, we could have come through easily. It is true that we lost our traditional vote base within the Muslim community although we did not usually get a majority of votes from the Tamil and Muslim communities right throughout. However I think we have recovered our traditional vote base within these communities. Either I or any other candidate from the opposition will get that amount anyway.

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What is more important is to get the floating votes. These voters comprise professionals, youth and academics. We lost a fair amount of these votes last time. That is why we lost. We have to get it back. Last time, President Maithripala Sirisena, as the UNP-backed candidate, created a different picture. There was much propaganda regarding corruption and nepotism. They campaigned heavily on the promise to bring good governance. The middle-class, professionals and youth got carried away by it. We lost a fair amount of votes as a result. There were electorates in the Colombo District, which we used to win by a huge margin. Last time, we won only by a narrow margin. Homagama, Maharagama, Kaduwela and Kesbewa are these electorates. We used to win Gampaha by a majority of 200,000 votes. Yet, we lost the district last time.

QDoes it mean that the minority votes are not a factor as long as you win these electorates in Colombo and Gampaha by huge margins?

Of course, we have to win over minority votes. That is important. I think the Muslim community too has realized certain things by now.

Q If I say there is a fear psychosis among the minorities regarding you, is it correct?

This is only propaganda. I have not done anything wrong to the minorities. So, there is no need to fear me. I was Defence Secretary at a time when everybody wanted to end terrorism. I acted on it. I did not have anything against the Tamil community. Unfortunately, 99 percent of the LTTE happened to be Tamils. There were certain things we had to do to counter terrorism. We did not create the war. When Mahinda Rajapaksa became the President in 2005, there was terrorism in the country. The majority of the people expected him to end the war. For two and half decades, this war was going on. Terrorism started in the late 1970s. The military operations against terrorism took place under all previous Governments. What I did was execute it in a correct manner, so I was able to finish the war. When there is a war situation, there are certain things you must do. When the war ends, you do not repeat the same. You cannot judge a person by what he did during a war situation. I was assigned with certain responsibilities by the Government. I acted accordingly. When that situation was over, I was assigned urban development. I was concentrating on it at that time. I gave the system a new vision. I did that in a proper manner. I even developed the Jaffna Town. I have not done anything against the minorities. They have nothing to worry about.

If you look at the history we can ask who created the infamous ethnic riots in 1983? It happened under the UNP Government. It was under the UNP Government that the Jaffna library was burned down. The rigging of the District Development Council Elections also took place under the UNP.

Q There is a serious allegation against you regarding white van abductions?

I did not bring about the concept of white van abductions. Now see after the 9/11 incident, the United States tracked terrorists all over the world. They caught them and brought them to Guantanamo Bay base. There was one Malaysian citizen who was living in Sri Lanka. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) traced this man. They did a lot of things to take this man. They gave him a passport and got him admitted to a private hospital here. They took him out of Sri Lanka afterwards. They did not adopt the normal procedure in doing so. This was done before we took over the administration.

We need to win over the minorities-Tamils and Muslims. But if somebody says we lost in 2015 because we did not get the minority votes, I do not agree with it. Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa lost only by 400,000 votes. If we had got 250,000 votes more, he could have won

The intelligence agencies, be it in Sri Lanka or anywhere else, adopt certain methods as counter terrorism measures. In Sri Lanka too, they have used some of these measures for a very long time during the war as well as when there were the JVP insurrections. When there was a suspect, he was taken in for questioning through such means. It was not something introduced by me. These methods have been adopted all over the world. May be our intelligence agencies used Hi Ace vans which are white. I did not introduce it. It happened under all the previous Governments. If you take the violence during the JVP era, everybody, barring the very young people, knows how youth were

whisked away by unknown people all over the country. We all know stories about Gonibillas at that time. I do not know why I am being pinpointed today. During our time this had never been done to abduct any political opponent, which was not the case in the 88/89 period. Most people above 30 years of age remember what happened during that time. What happened during our time was only to counter the activities of deadly terrorists. By 2005, there was a huge network of the LTTE in the south. They had infiltrated the south in a big way. They were able to kill so many people like politicians and military personnel as a result. They were fighting all over the country. They had an intelligence network and armed caches in most places in Colombo and the suburbs. We had to trace them including suicide cadres, spies etc. When you fight terrorism, you cannot stick to the normal procedure. They were fighting in a different way using clandestine guerrilla methods. We had to counter that in a similar manner. That is the way that the intelligence agencies work. However the UNP -led propaganda has put everything on me.

I did not have anything against the Tamil community. Unfortunately, 99 percent of the LTTE happened to be Tamils. There were certain things we had to do to counter terrorism. We did not create the war. When Mahinda Rajapaksa became the President in 2005, there was terrorism in the country

QAlthough you say it was only terrorists that were targeted, there are allegations levelled against you for the assassination of media personnel such as Sunday Leader Editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the assault on journalist Keith Noyahr as well. Your comments?

This is another thing. We were not involved in any of these things including the disappearance of that person Prageeth Ekneligoda. We did not want to do such things. These were done purely for personal reasons by two individuals. I do not want to name them. Immediately after Lasantha's killing, the then Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former MP Joseph Michael Perera categorically said in Parliament that it was the work of the then Army Commander.

After that when the Army Commander joined hands with them and decided to contest elections in 2010, they did not talk about it. Thereafter, they put the blame on me.

QWhy didn't you look into these cases as the then Defence Secretary?

When there was a war going on. We concentrated fully on it. That is true. Under such circumstances, we cannot stop the war to devote ourselves fully on various investigations. The CID and the intelligence authorities had a task assigned to them. With bombs going on around the country and killings by terrorists happening everywhere we had to direct our resources to counter them. That was the reality.

After the then Army Commander sided with the other side later, we never hunted him for personal reasons. We went after him with proper charges only. I asked the CID to do proper investigations regarding these matters. And they carried out such investigations with proper evidence.

If the present Government is genuine, it must target people on legitimate charges. It is unjust and unfair to put the blame on anyone sans a legitimate basis. True to my heart, I know I was never involved in any of these murders.

QHowever in a recent newspaper article written by Lasantha Wickremetunga's daughter in connection with his death anniversary, she had drawn a link between the murder and the articles carried in the newspaper regarding the MiG deal in which your name too was implicated. Your comments?

I have to tell you that whatever he (Lasantha) wrote was wrong and I went to court on that.

He also wrote even worse articles criticising the then Army Commander. At that time, if anyone wrote anything against the then Commander, some incident took place. On the other hand what happened during the time of former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga? Lasantha wrote extensively against Chandrika, Mangala and others as well. Why aren't those things brought out? Why is there reference only to this particular article?

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What I did was to take the proper course of action and go to court against that article. I did the proper thing. In the history of the war, the MiG deal was the most transparent transaction. We have proven it. In short, the Air Force asked for MiG attack aircraft. That request had been made since the time of Chandrika's Presidency. It was a genuine requirement. The selection was done by them. During purchasing, the Air Force was involved. It is not that I got involved. It is the whole process. It was one of the earliest purchases we made. I followed the exact procedure, examining financial evaluation and appointing tender boards and negotiation committees. It is not a one man operation. There were a whole lot of officials involved. The negotiation committee chairman became the Auditor General later on.

The Ukraine Government submitted proposals. A team from the Air Force visited Ukraine. They had discussions in Ukraine. Two Air Force commanders were involved.

If somebody says that Lasantha was targeted because of this article, then, what about other articles written by him against other people? On one previous occasion, much before we came to power, Lasantha and his wife were attacked. Once, Mangala Samaraweera called Lasantha an unpatriotic person as well.

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QAnother contentious issue is the strained relationship between you and the Muslim community. How is it now?

I have had discussions with various sections of the Muslim community- youth, professionals, business leaders etc. There is a perception that the Bodu Bala Sena is a phenomenon created by me. This is the issue. I told them that it was not so. I had done many things at that time to prevent these incidents from happening. As for Aluthgama incident, I immediately instructed the Senior DIG to reach the location after I got wind of the events unfolding. I asked the IGP to go there. I took immediate steps to deploy the Special Task Force (STF). At that time, it was actually a Minister in our Government, who was writing books on Muslim expansionism, and had conducted seminars. They were the people behind all these incidents. He is in this Government now.

When communal riots break out, it is very sensitive. It is not easy to control. People get emotional and react. It cannot be compared to a normal war where armed forces fight against terrorists. Here, emotionally charged ordinary people fight with each other. You have to handle it very carefully. However, we did our utmost to contain the situation and it did not spread beyond that area like what happened when the Digana incident took place under this Government. When the Digana incident happened normalcy could not be restored for a number of days. In Aluthgama the military rebuilt the damaged houses. We did all that immediately.

On the other hand, when I was in charge of the Urban Development Authority (UDA), President Rajapaksa instructed me to build houses for low income families as a move to eradicate shanties. It was my effort. I floated debentures. I found money. I started building high rise housing buildings.

If you look at the houses I built, a lot of them have been distributed among the minority communities. Yet, the then opposition accused me of trying to settle Sinhala people brought from elsewhere to alter the demographic pattern of the city. Instead, I addressed the housing needs of shanty dwellers. Most of the beneficiaries are Muslims and Tamils.

A lot of Muslim Ministers in our Government did not take action to counter such malicious propaganda against us. That is unfortunate. Finally, 95 percent of Muslims voted against Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa.

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Q You stressed the need to attract middle class voters and professionals. They are concerned about concepts such as good governance and democracy. There is fear that you would become more and more authoritarian?

That is a misconception. I will tell you why some people are spreading this misconception. As I said, even the middle-class and professionals have realised that discipline in society is an important aspect along with stability for the social well-being and development. They have realised it. Without discipline in a country, how can there be freedom? In a democracy, what is considered most important for people is freedom. If there is no discipline in a country with underworld crimes increasing by the day, how can people have freedom? How can people have freedom if they cannot walk on the roads properly?

There are killings taking place today in the country in broad daylight. Freedom of an individual cannot be guaranteed when the situation is such. If you cannot drive safely on roads and run businesses without giving extortion money to gangs, how can you have freedom?

The next step is economic development. If you cannot earn for your daily upkeep maintaining some standard, how can you expect freedom?

There are a large percentage of people in the country living under the poverty line. I want to be very clear that in our Sri Lankan society the values, the idea of family, village and the nation are very important. That has been our culture for thousands and thousands of years. We are not living as individuals. We live as families. We live with our neighbours. We work with each other. We look after each other. That is the Asian culture. Unfortunately, certain people are trying to undermine these family values. That is wrong. They try to do so by promoting neoliberal ideas.

QIt means you are opposed to neoliberalism?

Even the United States has realised it. Nationalism is gaining ground there. US President Donald Trump is talking about making America great again. It is nothing, but American nationalism. Some people are trying to devalue our cultural system. For a society, culture is important. Religion, be it Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam, is important. Our national values are paramount. Nationalism is very important. Individual freedom has been misconstrued today.

QWhat is the economic model you are proposing for the country?

Now, we cannot isolate ourselves from the world. We have to be conscious of our local business, industries and entrepreneurs at the same time. The open market economic system is everywhere today. While doing all these things, we must have a system in place to protect the poor. We have to empower these people. It is only by empowering them that we can alleviate poverty. There should be a social safety net. We cannot do it by giving free handouts only. They are poor because they are not educated enough or may be without a proper educational background. We have to develop skills in them. We must have a system to educate the children of those poor families. Then, the second and third generations of those families can rise.

The private sector plays a very important role. We can encourage the private sector and public – private partnerships. The Government can create an environment for the private sector to grow. Today, there is too much interference by the Government. Today, business people fear politicians. They are so much dependent on the Government. They even fear to speak to an opposition politician. That is not the way it should be.

There should not be so many rules and regulations and bureaucratic red tape to control businessmen and entrepreneurs. When there are such rules and regulations, it leads to corruption. When we managed things we were able to act quickly and effectively. That is how we were able to attract many new investments. Sadly after this Government came to power things have stalled.