

Sri Lanka: “The NPP’s journey will not end with an election” - Anura Kumara Dissanayake

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On August 18, at a colossal rally held in Colombo, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna’s firebrand leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake was revealed as the chosen candidate of the National People’s Power (NPP) movement. It had been an obvious choice for the NPP consisting of 28 other groups and organizations in search of an uncorrupt and suitable candidate to champion their cause.



Known as a gifted orator, Dissanayake took over the JVP’s leadership in 2014 at the age of 46. Since then, he has been vociferous on corrupt practices of consecutive governments while leading the party’s fight for social justice. In time, he has proved to be the most active parliamentarian in Sri Lanka and is currently ranked number 1 by the independent MP appraisal site manthri.lk

The NPP’s ‘Candidate of hope’ Dissanayake, in this weeks interview, discussed the need for social transformation which he hopes to herald in through the NPP. Claiming he is unconcerned about the candidacy of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his only other opponent currently, Dissanayake said the NPP is instead focused on building a movement able to bring about real change.

Dissanayake also explained the JVP’s decision to support many unpopular causes, the UNP’s internal power struggle and a number of other much-debated topics in his first interview with the Sunday Observer as a Presidential hopeful.

Excerpts from the interview:

The JVP last fielded a candidate at a Presidential election in 1999. Why did the NPP, led by the JVP, feel the need to put forward its own candidate for the upcoming election after a lapse of 20 years?

In the past Presidential elections, our country was faced with certain circumstances. Taking these into consideration at the time, the JVP decided to take certain political steps. Today the country is facing yet another critical situation.

The main parties, the UNP and the SLFP have failed and are now merged into one camp. It has been proven continuously that they have been dragging this country down the path of complete annihilation. Therefore, we collectively decided to field a candidate at the upcoming election to

provide the necessary leadership to ensure the future victory of an alternative power in the guise of the NPP.

Q: Do you believe your candidacy has a chance at victory at the upcoming election?

We have entered into this race with the determination to win. On what basis can either the UNP or the Rajapaksa camp be brought back into power? They are not able to stop fraud or corruption. In fact, they are experts in corruption. Likewise, they cannot protect the rule of law or take the economy forward. They have been the causes for the breakdown of the rule of law and have entrapped us in debt causing a severe economic crisis.

The JVP in the last decade has done its utmost to reveal their facade and we have noticed the people have taken an interest to bring about a change. It is now time for the people to take the correct decision so that a destructive state will not pass on to future generations. Those with a real necessity must contribute to this effort and we strongly believe that they will.

Q: What was the thinking behind the tagline of your campaign 'Apekshawe Apekshakaya' (The Candidate of hope)?

Since time immemorial, the hopes of voters and their leaders have been poles apart. The hopes and needs of the country's leaders have always been self-serving. But it is evident that the people of this country continue to have their own hopes and expectations. They often cast their votes in good faith with numerous expectations such as growth, curbing corruption and upholding the rule of law. Our intention was to finally field a candidate and ensuing governance that will reflect these hopes of the people.

Q: During your inaugural rally, you openly spoke about LGBTIQ rights among a number of other unpopular causes in the political arena which other politicians often avoid. Why have you bravely taken the risk to champion these rights-based issues which might be to your detriment at a critical election?

We strongly believe that no individual should face harassment based on his/her sexual orientation, gender or faith. If I were to peddle racism and communalism, I could easily gain a larger voter base. But our proposals are for national unity, though it's a tougher path to take.

But for us, winning also means fostering better ideologies in society. Therefore, we have openly presented our views on this to the country as we believe the governance of a country should not be dishonest or destructive. Our aim is not only political and economic reform but societal reform as well to change the mindsets of the people. We have taken up this ideological struggle and will use our political platform to be the voice for the downtrodden and to bring about the necessary change in society.

Q: In recent times the Muslim marriage law reforms have been a much-debated topic. What is your policy stance on this matter as a Presidential hopeful?

No child should be deprived of his/her childhood due to one's faith or culture. I believe that we must all submit to an accepted law common to all. However, this common law should not be introduced to undermine and tread on another community's faith or culture. The true intention should be to safeguard the rights of children belonging to every community. It is with this intention that we propose that a fair and common law should be introduced that would apply to everyone.

Q: Since the formation of the NPP, both bouquets and brickbats have come your way. You have been accused of diluting the JVP's original policies to gain the support of the other

organizations in the NPP. What is your response to this?

The expected social transformation is not a need only for the JVP. Many activists and groups have been working towards this end for many years in line with their own ideologies. But these expectations were voiced in separate platforms. The need was to gather all those with similar expectations to a common stage. It is for this purpose that the NPP was created. The NPP's journey will not end with an election. It was created to struggle for long term social reforms and to rally the people around these common ideologies as the JVP alone cannot bring about social transformation.

As a result, the JVP has had to change some of its policies. When you are building a common movement, all parties involved must make certain sacrifices. But any changes in our policies or ideology has not been for the detriment of society but instead for its betterment. Likewise, other groups supporting us have also had to make changes. We have therefore chosen a common ground that we all can agree on.

Q: The only other Presidential candidate named at the moment is Former Secretary of Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa. In your opinion, is he suitable to be the President of Sri Lanka?

He is not a solution to the crisis we are facing today. The Rajapaksa camp is in fact a manifestation of the crisis itself. They have sacrificed the safety of the people to create a communal rift and now claim they will ensure national security which in fact has been threatened by the very crisis created by them. Therefore, no one in the Rajapaksa family is a solution to the crisis. Only the NPP is the answer to the plight of this country.

Q: Gotabaya Rajapaksa was embroiled in yet another controversy recently where he has been accused of possible voter fraud through the Mulkirigala electoral register. Why has the JVP not spoken out against this?

Deceitfulness is inherent in the Rajapaksa genes. This is just yet another revelation of these tendencies. The JVP has continuously raised its voice against the Rajapaksa camp and their corrupt practices. We are now exhausted from talking about them. If we are to say anything new it will only be about more corrupt activities such as forged documents or crimes committed by them.

Q: Since around 2012, the JVP worked tirelessly to break down the fear psychosis surrounding Gotabaya Rajapaksa. As a result, what will the JVP's future be under a Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidency?

The JVP is not concerned about his victory or any action he takes following a possible victory. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is the weakest link in the Rajapaksa family. The inability to tolerate another's point of view and the lack of restraint is a sign of the weak. When something is written against him, instead of patiently responding, he resorts to murder. He is a weakling and is the individual with the most allegations of crime and corruption against him within that family. Therefore, we are unperturbed and are set on building a movement that can face any situation.

Q: The current government has been accused of protecting the Rajapaksa's. Do you agree with this premise?

Up to 2015, all signs led to the possibility of the Rajapaksa regime becoming a dictatorship. The change which took place on January 8, 2015, was merely a temporary push back of this. Delivering a decisive defeat was the responsibility of the new government, but they failed miserably.

Ranil Wickramasinghe and the Rajapaksa family continue to be the best of friends. They have an

understanding that they would protect each other. It is due to this protection that those who should have been punished for crimes have instead been bathed in saffron and anointed as a Presidential candidate.

Q: While the SLPP and the NPP have named their Presidential candidates, the UNP has still failed to reach a consensus. Is there any UNP candidate you would consider backing or feel is suitable to be a Presidential candidate?

No. We see no suitable person in that camp. Many of them have been defeated and faced failures time and time again.

The power struggle within the UNP shows it has no policies and that the mechanism to implement any party policy is now extremely weak. The Sajith versus Ranil battle is not about what is beneficial to the people but is instead about who gets to sit on the throne. This power struggle itself is sufficient for people to understand the reality of these political parties.

Q: Many other alternative candidates are cropping up ahead of the elections. What is your take on this?

Other alternatives are merely a flash in the pan! They will not survive in politics in the long run. The existing crisis in Sri Lanka was created by politicians. Therefore the answer to this also lies with them. When we are misdiagnosed by a doctor, we do not go in search of an engineer as an alternative. But professionals too have a duty in nation-building. Only through uncorrupt politicians and support of professionals can a common movement be built, which we have done through the NPP.

Q: Following the Easter Sunday attacks, some political parties appear to be stoking communal sentiments in the lead to elections to increase their voter base. Why do voters get attracted to such movements?

Sri Lanka is fully submerged in communal politics. It is the most popular type of politics among all communities in the country.

This is because, when we are born, certain communal sentiments manifest within us according to the background we come from. By stoking these sentiments, failed politicians often try to gain the support of these communities. A miscreant's last resort is racism. But, no matter how popular, this type of political culture is destructive. JVP will, therefore, continue to be the flag bearers of national unity and will bravely stand by these beliefs.

Q: Your promises to the people at the recent rally have been different to the usual political promises delivered on political stages. Do you think the people will gravitate towards these lofty long term promises?

The promises delivered to people from reducing the price of necessities to providing one million jobs have proven to be fallacies. Same goes for more noble promises such as creating a righteous society.

While people need to be given promises, our main promises have been to create and implement mechanisms needed to fulfil the expectations of the people. That journey may be long but we will educate the public and we believe they will respond positively.

Q: The JVP has always pushed for the abolition of the Executive Presidency. If appointed, will you be the final executive President of Sri Lanka?

Definitely. But, it does not mean it will be abolished in a matter of three months since my appointment. Often a government which supports the winning candidate is elected after a President is appointed. This alternative government we hope to get elected will have its own set of responsibilities among which they will be entrusted to protect democracy and abolish the Presidency to achieve this end.

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