

Sri Lanka: Radical change in political culture vital for transformation - Anura Kumara Dissanayake

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It is much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism - Slavoj Zizek

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek's quotation is quite apt to the situation in the country right now where the whole system collapsed before our eyes overnight. Yet who is modest enough to make the paradigm shift for a radical change against the corrupt, blood-sucking system is questionable.

The National People's Power led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has been one of the very few political parties which has vehemently criticised corrupt practices of consecutive Governments for decades although the party suffered a major setback in the previous Presidential election.

"The capitalist economy is destroying all human relationships and drowning them in icy water. All these frozen human bonds should be restored and it should start from the top. That is, from the ruler of the country. This transformation can be introduced only if the ruler is ready to set the example. A ruler who is subject to the law, does not have special privileges, and avoids waste, corruption, and fraud should be created. We strongly believe that this kind of radical change in the entire political culture can initiate many great progressive transformations," Member of the Parliament and leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, comrade Anura Kumara Dissanayake told the Sunday Observer.

Dissanayake also outlined the JVP's decision to assume the interim Government under certain conditions, allegations of hijacking non-partisan people's struggle, attitudinal and spiritual changes needed in the political culture and a number of other much-debated topics in his interview with the Sunday Observer.

Excerpts of the interview:

Q: You told the media recently that if the Cabinet, including the post of Prime Minister, is given to your Party, you are ready to lead the interim Government and the country would recover from the economic crisis within six months. Can you briefly explain the action plan?

A: There is an economic crisis intertwined with a political crisis in the country. We cannot get out of the economic crisis without getting out of this political crisis. Given the position of the Prime Minister and the opportunity to elect a Cabinet of our choice, I hope it will win the trust of the people of the country and Sri Lankans living abroad.

What is needed now is not a stable Government, because the existing Government is a stable Government in Parliament, but the people don't trust it anymore. Therefore, if we have Constitutional power for a short period of time, we are confident that we will be able to get the

necessary dollars to meet the basic needs of the country. Even now, the country receives a monthly export income of about one billion dollars. We used to get about 700 million dollars monthly from expatriate workers, but now it has reduced to US\$200 million due to their dissatisfaction with the regime.

We hope this money can be brought back to the country if we set up a Government that the people can trust. If political stability is established in the country, it will be possible to earn around one and a half billion dollars in the tourism season that starts in October. It is also necessary to bring about a constructive change in the consumption patterns that we have been carrying out for decades to recover from this crisis.

As a political party we are ready to provide an example and intervention for that. After resolving these fundamental issues in a very short time, the people must be given the opportunity to form a new Government through a general election.

Q: Various political parties are holding discussions for an all- party alliance. If you form an alliance, with whom will it be? Do you believe that an all-party alliance can bring a quick solution to the burning economic crisis?

A: Our proposal is not for an alliance between the political parties and we don't believe in that. There are several politicians in this Parliament who behave responsibly. If we are given an opportunity to appoint a Cabinet from among these parliamentarians, we are ready to take over the interim administration. However, a general election should be held within six months. There has to be a clear plan regarding the beginning and end of an interim administration. It has been clearly mentioned in the interim Government proposals made by the Ven. Mahanayake Theras and the Bar Association.

Q: Some allege that the people's struggle which was a non-partisan struggle has now been hijacked by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Frontline Socialist Party. What is your role in this people's struggle?

A: We have always spoken out against the oppression of the people, against frauds and corruption and also against the wrong political culture in the country.

Although the Galle Face struggle did not arise due to our intervention, it is contained in our political ideology of combating corruption, fraud and creating a modern State opposed to the wrong political culture. However, as a political party, we are of the view that the non-partisan struggle should remain the same. But as a rebellious political movement, we know that the defeat of any struggle anywhere will have an impact not only on that particular struggle but on all other rebellious movements. In that sense, we are of the opinion that the Galle Face struggle should be continued. Anyway, after the peak of the struggle, our youth movement and women's movement have been involved to continue it. As I said before, if this again becomes a large gathering of people, we are ready to withdraw our role immediately. But right now, our contribution to the Galle Face struggle is crucial.

Q: The economy before this recession was mainly based on welfare with liberal capitalist characteristics which has now come to its logical end. What should be its orientation from now onwards?

A: Capitalism in the world is run by capitalists and capitalist thinkers. But there are no capitalists or capitalist thinkers in our Parliament. Instead, there's a group of lumped businessmen. A highly developed, cultural man is a promise of the capitalist system and there are quite a lot of positive

impacts that can be gained from capitalism.

But the ideologically poor and backward bourgeoisie who have ruled the country have not given any of that to our society. Therefore, our country has lost even the victories that could have been achieved by the capitalist system such as technological advancement, developed management policies, social security and cultural advancement. Therefore, we have to carry out democratic reforms that the capitalist system should have done but has not done so far. Today the economic model of each country is linked to the organic lifestyle of people in the country. Therefore, the basis of the economic model that we propose is to develop an advanced, cultured human being who has an authentic link to the organic lifestyle of the country.

Q: How is the progress of the People's Farm, a community cultivation project that was launched as a solution to the ongoing food crisis?

A: Even though we as a political party with no Government support are unable to make the country agriculturally self-sufficient in this unprecedented food crisis, this community farm was started to direct the people towards agriculture as much as we could and to provide them with the facilities for it. We have identified several places and initiated this community farm concept. We hope to set up a number of model farms across the country through this project and provide some relief to the people to cope with the upcoming food crisis.

Q: One of the main political slogans of the JVP throughout its political history has been its opposition to privatisation. The IMF is proposing to restructure 32 loss-making State-owned enterprises, including SriLankan Airlines. Are you proposing an alternative to privatisation?

A: The main reason for the loss and collapse of many of these State institutions is politicisation. Also, there are many privatised State institutions. But none of them have achieved the desired results. If there is one State-owned company that has benefited from privatisation it is Sri Lanka Telecom. But that is also because of its competitive market value rather than the efficiency of its administration. We do not believe that the Government should do everything. But the Government should have all the key elements of the country's economy and national security. For example, power and energy.

The daily requirement of petrol and diesel in our country is 5,000 metric tons each and we need 44 megawatts of electricity. This is a very small quantity and any private company could acquire this. The one who owns the supply of energy will rule the country. It can directly affect national security as well as the country's economy. Therefore, we believe that the Government should have control of energy supply in the country. We are also against the monopoly of the private sector.

Q: There is an unaffordable public service in the country and it is at the forefront of the restructuring proposed by the IMF. How do you intend to restructure the public service?

A: Out of every Rs. 100 earned by the treasury of the country, Rs. 58 is spent on maintaining the public service. This is not affordable at all. However, it's paramount to identify the departments where there are unnecessarily large numbers of public servants. For example, in public universities there's a significant lack of academic staff yet there is an excess in the minor staff. Although the country has an unbearable number of public servants, there are a large number of vacancies in the public service for top posts.

The political parties that ruled the country are entirely responsible for the situation. In an age of such advanced technology, the efficiency of the public service has not increased and instead of reducing the manpower, it has continued to increase because of the short-sightedness of the rulers.

However, restructuring the public service will not be an easy task as the Government is responsible for the social security of all public servants. Any kind of restructuring has to be done with this in mind. It is very important to introduce small and medium scale entrepreneurship programs in the public service as well to promote private sector employment especially among university students.

Q: The Inter University Student Federation was a student movement guided by your political party and is currently led by the Frontline Party. Their contribution in the People's struggle as a student movement is commendable. However, we hardly see this student movement demanding positive reforms in university education. Instead, their struggle is restricted merely to the 'Mahapola' or for the renovation of hostels or against the privatisation of education. Isn't this a prejudice against getting used to living on subsidies?

A: The JVP has played a very positive role in the history of the student's movement. And we still believe that public education should be strengthened and expanded. Education is still the only tool for success for the children of the poor. However, we firmly believe and support a new modernist student movement. They should be the mirror of the future.

Q: No matter how much the JVP as a political party stands against corruption and no matter how much people praise it, election results have always been a setback. Do you think there will be a significant change in your voter base this time?

A: Although there is a correlation between the aspirations of the people and our political stance, when it comes to forming a Government, the people go back to their usual practice. The challenge for us is to build the confidence of the people that we too can form a Government. The main challenge we face in building this trust is that people cannot visualise a JVP Government in their mind because it has never existed. There are a large number of books, films, newspapers and songs that have been published against our political movement. A wrong picture of our political practice has been painted for decades. Therefore, most of the people who are afraid of us believe the opinions of others about us, not the firsthand experiences gained by studying us properly or working with us. Therefore, we invite them to come and work with us, study us and talk with us.

Q: Not only the politician but also the people who elected the politicians are directly responsible for the economic, social and political abyss we have reached as a country today. What is your view on the attitudinal, spiritual changes that we as a society need to rebuild the nation?

A: We need a positive transformation not only in politics, but in all fields including education, health, art and other areas to improve the spirituality of people. Our education system is based on competition, not on building a spiritually enriched human being. A child who does not take responsibility for his own actions, who makes decisions in life based on opportunity, which has no accountability or empathy for others, no matter how much he is equipped with knowledge, is of no use. This vicious system must change. The capitalist economy is destroying all human relations and drowning them in icy water. All these human bonds should be restored. This should start from the top.

That is, from the ruler of the country. This transformation will materialise only if the ruler is ready to set the example. A ruler who is subject to the law, does not have special privileges, and avoids waste, corruption, and fraud should be created. We strongly believe that this kind of change in the entire political culture can initiate many great progressive transformations.

Anuradha Kodagoda
Anura Kumara Dissanayake

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