

Proceedings  
Eminent Persons Lecture Series (EPLS)

# “RECONCILING DIVIDED SOCIETIES, BUILDING DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE: LESSONS FROM SRI LANKA”



**H. E. Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga**  
Former President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

BISS Auditorium, Dhaka  
Tuesday 23 May 2017

Organised by



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# Introduction

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a lecture in its Eminent Persons Lecture Series (EPLS) titled, “Reconciling Divided Societies, Building Democracy and Good Governance: Lessons from Sri Lanka” on Tuesday 23 May 2017 at BISS Auditorium. Her Excellency Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, former President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, and a Member of the Global Leadership Foundation, graced the occasion as the Guest Speaker. His Excellency Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs, was present in the programme as the Special Guest. Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS commenced the session with his Address of Welcome. Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS introduced the Guest Speaker, chaired and summed up the session.



Eminent Persons Lecture Series (EPLS) is one of the major regular events of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) where eminent personalities, distinguished scholars and dignitaries around the world are invited as keynote speakers to deliver speeches and share their thoughts and ideas on contemporary issues of common interests which bear great significance in the present context.

# Address of Welcome



**Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc**

*Director General, BISS*

*Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*

H. E. Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Member of Global Leadership Foundation and Former President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Friends from Media, Ladies and Gentlemen,

*Assalamu Alaikum* and a very Good Morning,



It gives me immense pleasure to welcome you all to the Eminent Persons Lecture Series (EPLS) of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). As you are aware, BISS has been regularly organising these lectures.

Today, we are privileged and honoured to have among us H. E. Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, a Member of Global Leadership Foundation and former President of Sri Lanka, who despite her busy schedule has kindly come to this institute to deliver lecture on “**Reconciling Divided Societies, Building Democracy and Good Governance: Lessons from Sri Lanka**”. I, on behalf of all members of BISS and on behalf of all of you would like to express our sincere thanks and gratitude to H. E. Mrs. Kumaratunga for being with us this morning.

### **Distinguished Guests,**

The word reconciliation consists of three-part-process which involves Heal, Repair and Transform. In order to heal the impact of tribal or ethnic division, civil war and violence, ‘a process of acknowledging the evils that have been committed is essential’. History has proven that grievances ignored will eventually destroy the potential for a sustainable peace. Authentic reconciliation and healing is not possible without justice and equality and this is a fundamental requirement for reconciliation. Repairing the structures involves ensuring that those wounds do not re-occur and ensuring resistance towards structural violence. Transformation lies in the process of creating a national identity and a sense of belonging for all. An environment where no one is placed in a situation in which they feel they are ‘second class citizens’ because of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or socio-economic standing.

One of the major challenges that a country faces after any civil war or ethnic conflict is its post war reconciliation. Sri Lanka witnessed a deadly civil war between its Sinhalese-dominated government and the separatist Tamil Tigers which lasted for more than 30 years and claimed approximately one hundred thousand lives. The war ended with the death of Tamil Tiger rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran on 18 May 2009. Since then Sri Lanka has taken a wide range of initiatives to establish peace, reconcile its divided society and strengthen its loose ethnic bonding.



## Learned Audience,

Today, we have among us **H. E. Mrs. Kumaratunga**, a highly regarded leader of South Asia whom we feel the most appropriate person to shed light on Sri Lanka's post civil war reconciliation process and the country's current state of democracy and governance. We would also like to hear from her the key challenges being faced by the government and how the country is moving forward in its endeavour to create a peaceful, unified, stable and prosperous country and how other countries with similar problem can learn from it.

Before I end, I must mention that Mrs. Kumaratunga's association with BISS is nothing new and can be traced back to 1995 when she visited the institute as the President of Sri Lanka. I consider myself very fortunate to be her host of this visit. We all hope that she will make every endeavour to visit us in future also to share her experience with us. May I also mention about Mr. Amitav Banerji, Director of Global Leadership Foundation, who had been the linchpin of arranging and coordinating the visit of our today's Guest Speaker. Thank you Mr. Banerji.

## Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I formally welcome all of you at BISS and at the same time thank you all once again for taking time out of your busy schedules and making this august gathering a success. Wish you all a meaningful proceeding and good health.

Thank you very much. Allah Hafez.

# Opening Remarks



**Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**

*Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS*

Your Excellency **Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga**, Former President, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Your Excellency **Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

**Major General A K M Abdur Rahman**, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning and warm welcome to you all at today's Eminent Persons Lecture titled, "Reconciling Divided Societies, Building Democracy and Good Governance: Lessons from Sri Lanka". Our Guest Speaker today is no less a person than H. E. **Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga**, former President of Sri Lanka. For almost all of her political career, she has been striving to achieve everything embodied in the topic of today's lecture. We are truly honoured that she has accepted our invitation and joined us here today to share her experiences and insights on these crucial issues with us. We are also deeply honoured to have H. E. **Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs with us this morning as the Special Guest.

## **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

By their very nature, societies in almost all countries, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, are divided. There are often different ethnic, religious, linguistic, social, economic and occupational groups of people existing side by side within a broader society, while maintaining their distinctive characteristics. The success of a society lies in accommodating, recognising and celebrating these differences, on one hand, and mobilising them to strive together for common prosperity and shared values in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, mutual respect, equality and dignity, on the other. The more a country can accommodate diversity, the richer and more vibrant it becomes. Many countries, who witnessed bloody conflicts or instability owing to racial, social, political, ideological divisions, subsequently dealt effectively with those situations

through reconciliation and have successfully returned to the path of development. South Africa, where apartheid/racial segregation existed from 1948-91, successfully undertook reconciliation. The resource-rich Republic is now a respected member in the comity of nations. However, tensions sometimes do still flare up. This only reminds us that the process of reconciliation or peace building is not a one-off project. It requires sustained vigilance and continued efforts.

Sri Lanka has been the victim of a lengthy civil war for over a quarter of a century. The war ended with the defeat of the LTTE insurgents but left deep chasms and scars within the Lankan society. The country suffered enormous loss of lives and properties. After the war ended in May 2009, the government engaged the “Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)” to boost institutional, administrative and legislative measures aimed at preventing future recurrence of conflicts and for promoting national unity and reconciliation among all communities. The limited success achieved so far reminds us that such efforts call for unprecedented degree of compassion and generosity to the vanquished community, if we are to succeed.

## Distinguished Guests,

Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga served as the first woman Executive President of Sri Lanka from 1994 to 2005. Born into one of Sri Lanka’s most distinguished families, her father, SWRD Bandaranaike, was a senior minister of the government and later became the Prime Minister, while her mother, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became the world’s first woman Prime Minister in 1961, serving three terms as Prime Minister for a total of 18 years.

Renowned for her energy and intellect, President Kumaratunga inherited the liberal political philosophy of her father. A political activist from her early youth, she established grass roots contacts far and wide throughout the country. Greatly influenced by the radical student movement of the 1960s, she has always been deeply committed to the welfare of the deprived, the underprivileged and the disadvantaged. Her unshakable commitment to the imperatives of a plural society is the other consistent strategy in her approach to politics. During her 1994 election campaign and while in power, President Kumaratunga moved rapidly to accelerate the process of economic liberalisation in Sri Lanka and worked to find a solution to the long and bloody civil war with the Tamils.

Educated at the University of Paris, she graduated with a degree in Political Science, and obtained a diploma in Group Leadership. While studying for a PhD in Development Economics, she was called on to serve her country, where her mother’s government had launched a wide ranging programme of reform and development. In her foray into electoral politics, President Kumaratunga was elected to the Western Provincial Council with an unprecedented majority, and was appointed the Chief Minister of the Province, the country’s largest. As a member of the People’s Alliance party, she was elected to Parliament by an overwhelming majority, and was appointed Prime Minister in the newly formed People’s Alliance government in 1994, ending 17 years of rule by the United National Party (UNP). She was then elected as the President of Sri Lanka with a record 62 per cent of the vote. Despite her astounding successes in life, she experienced many personal tragedies, including the assassination of her father, and of her charismatic husband Mr. Vijaya Kumaratunga by political opponents. In 1999, she herself was injured in a suicide bombing during a campaign rally before she won the second term. She went on to serve as President until 2005.

Since retiring from active politics, she continues to work towards her vision of a more inclusive and democratic Sri Lanka through the CBK Foundation for Democracy and Justice (FDJ) and the South Asian

Policy and Research Institute (SAPRI), two non-profit and non-political bodies she established after leaving office. Mrs. Kumaratunga is also a member of the Global Leadership Foundation, a group of 40 distinguished former leaders who are available to share their experiences with the leaders of today. Through this forum she now serves to promote friendship, peace and development across the world. As an economist, President Kumaratunga has authored research papers, including "The Janawasa Movement: Future Strategies for Development in Sri Lanka". She has also published books titled, "Co-operative Movement in Sri Lanka," "Land and Agrarian Reforms in Sri Lanka," "Food Policies and Strategies in Sri Lanka from 1948 to Date," and "The State and Social Structures in Sri Lanka".



Let us now hear from H. E. Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga about her experience of the civil war, how the war ended and what efforts are being made to address the issues of reconciliation and peace building. We would also like to hear from her whether she thinks the postwar reconciliation process has been adequate and effective and what more could be done in the days ahead. May I now request H. E. Mrs. Kumaratunga to kindly deliver her much anticipated lecture. Thank you.

# “Reconciling Divided Societies, Building Democracy and Good Governance: Lessons from Sri Lanka”



Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS

Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS

Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to the Prime Minister on International Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning. I am grateful to BISS for the invitation to address you today. I have had the pleasure of speaking from this platform before, but it is nice to be back here again more than 20 years later.

It is always a pleasure to be in Bangladesh and to experience the warmth, friendship and generous hospitality of this beautiful country. It is also a country that deserves to be congratulated for the impressive

and sustained economic growth it has experienced in recent years. I am called upon to speak today about “Reconciling Divided Societies, Building Democracy and Good Governance: Lessons from Sri Lanka”.

But before I speak to you about the recent Sri Lankan experience, I think it would be useful to dwell upon the reasons for the existence of divisions in society more generally, and especially in our South Asian region, and on the actions we need to take to build democratic governments practising good governance. South Asia is one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world today. We know that to end conflict we need to understand the root causes of the conflict and then engage in resolving it. For this, we need to build democratic governments, practising human rights, the rule of law and transparent governance. We also need to engage in short and long term programmes to reconcile divided societies.

I speak to you today at a momentous period of human history, when humankind has traversed two millennia AD and arrived at the third, hopefully moving forward. The last century of the second millennium has seen many radical changes.

First, politically – the process of decolonisation and the end of colonial domination of one nation by another, led to the subsequent emergence of independent nation-states.

Second, economically – for the first time in human history, the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced the spread of a single economic system throughout the globe, spreading into nations with diverse socio-political organisations and even more diverse cultural practices.

Third, we have seen the continuous rise of movements of various political, ethnic and religious groups within nations, demanding expression of their own specific identities, together with equal political and economic opportunities, often with the use of violent means and at times with the demand for separate states.

Fourth, we have seen a quasi-total breakdown of accepted traditional, spiritual and moral value-systems with their connected social and cultural practices. The increasing isolation of the individual from this collective group, consequent to the spread of the value-systems specific to the free market economy,



has given rise to a situation where the individual seeks solace, not in spiritual or human relationships, but in the spiral of blind consumerism and in excessive indulgence in drugs, alcohol, tobacco and, alas, the unrestrained expression of violence.

With the birth of new, independent nation-states, diverse hopes and aspirations were generated in the various communities and groups of people inhabiting these states. Different communities, even though living within one state, had experienced differing types of social and cultural practices and even different sub-economic systems. It is natural that the expectations and aspirations of each of these groups would differ somewhat from each other.

An effective vision was required to weld together the separate sets of aspirations into one collective, national dream, taking on board the multi-faceted aspirations of each community living freely and proudly with its own separate identity, which could co-exist symbiotically with the other communities, to compose a harmonious, united and stable entirety – the nation-state.

The lack of such a vision and the failure to build such nations has caused the majority community in many countries to attempt to establish hegemonistic and exclusivist regimes, in order to arrogate to itself a disproportionate share of political and economic power. This in turn has given rise to movements of minority groups demanding, often by violent means, the recognition of their specific identities.

The challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for many countries and quite certainly for South Asia, will remain the enterprise of building pluralist, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation-states. For this, we would certainly have to manage the existing diversity within our nations and direct the richness of this diversity towards positive change, whilst controlling and finally eliminating the conflicts generated by it. Recognising and celebrating diversity has proved to be the best recipe for reconciling divided societies and to resolve conflict.



The failure to have achieved this during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in conflicts of the most horrifying violence, on a scale hitherto unknown in human history. Here I speak of the post World War II era, which is our period of history, the period in which most of us here have grown up. During this period, insurrection in its ultimate form – terrorism – has come to establish itself as a political strategy, commonly used by groups challenging the authority of the state.

In the dying years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cold War and military conflicts between states ended, giving way to intra-national conflicts within nations. These first took the form of revolutionary or insurrectionary movements and have now been transformed into guerrilla type terrorist organisations. Today, terrorism has become the most dehumanising and politically destabilising phenomenon of our times. Our region presently faces a major challenge from terrorist organisations.

My country has suffered terrorism for thirty years. You are no stranger to terrorism here in Bangladesh. And last night we saw the latest manifestation in Manchester, in the UK, after earlier attacks in Western Europe and the USA.

The goals of terrorism differ from those of revolutionary movements. Revolution seeks to effect radical changes in the social and economic structures of the country and also in its power structures. It enunciates a new vision and programmes of action. Terrorist movements are not revolutionary; they are



destructive and stem usually from conservatism and the desire for revenge. Terrorism has become endemic to modern society. It continues to be generated by recurrent social crises, arising from the increasing marginalisation of some sections of society caused by the indiscriminate spread of the so-called free market economy, through the much vaunted process of globalisation.

It is said that this modern phenomenon of terrorist movements is born out of frustration and despair, caused by social marginalisation, economic deprivation and political defeat. Someone once said, "Young hope betrayed, transforms itself into bombs". Perceived injustice, if allowed to continue unresolved will also transform itself into despair and then violence. Leon Trotsky once described the two emotions central to terrorism as being despair and vengeance.

We must adopt a holistic view of conflict, its genesis and causes. In recent times, scholars hold that the main cause of dissent and violent conflict is the existence of inequalities among different groups and communities living in a country. Inequality, deprivation and discrimination should be looked at not only in economic terms but also in social, cultural and political terms.

Professor Frances Stewart of Oxford University, writing on Horizontal Inequalities, based on her study of several African and Asian states, affirms that the exclusion of some communities from an equitable share of the benefits of prosperity, causing cultural, economic and political inequalities, has resulted in violent conflict.

Studies hold that violence in multi-religious and multi-ethnic nations is not caused by the presence of diversity or by the “clash of civilisations” as stated by Huntington, but is due to the exclusion of the less powerful groups. The marginalised groups then mobilise around their group identity – be it religious, ethnic, linguistic or ideological.

Your own Professor Rehman Sobhan has affirmed that poverty, injustice and inequality and their relationship to conflict may be measured by the difference in opportunities for the excluded. The denial of rights to those of the excluded who have a common identity becomes the bedrock of dissent and violent struggles.



“Identity” has become the most potent source of violent conflict. People feel that discrimination occurs due to their specific identity, which is different from that of the ruling majority. Perceptions of discrimination have led to conflict all over the world.

I strongly believe that the solution to conflict lies in ascertaining the root causes and employing the “weapons” of reconciliation and peace-building, rather than military arms. Sustainable development, prosperity and peace necessarily require that the “other” be brought in and included fully and honestly in the processes of economic development, and as full and equal partners in the process of government and power sharing. To end conflict, we must end the violence of poverty, hunger, unequal access to infrastructure, education and health facilities. All citizens must be accorded equal development opportunities as well as political power-sharing within an inclusive society. In an inclusive society, all citizens are aware that they have equal opportunities and will contribute fully to nation-building. Political and social stresses in such a society will be minimal.

We must understand that governments have often actively engaged in discriminatory policies against minority groups. History is replete with examples of them employing the concept of the “other”, conjured up as the “enemy” of peoples who belong to different ethnic, religious, caste or political groups. For a large part of human history the “enemy” has helped entrench weak rulers and governments in power. Governments whip up hatred by maintaining the myth of the dichotomy between “us” and “them”, which requires the oppression of the other and the denial of their rights. Such exclusion takes place not only through outright hostility but also through simple neglect of minority groups. Differences among diverse communities living within a country have been exacerbated by rulers to their advantage.

Violence – social, political or physical, whether perpetrated by the state or the agents of the state against other states or its own peoples – is said to be the womb of terrorism, humiliation is its cradle and continued revenge by the state its mother’s milk and nourishment.

At this point it would be useful to remind ourselves that it was not terrorism or terrorists that divided Ireland, nor caused the Israel/Palestine problem one hundred years ago. They did not impose white rule in South Africa, nor overthrow the duly elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile. The terrorists did not separate India and Pakistan. To come closer to home, nor did the armed Tamil militants create the circumstances for the marginalisation of the minority communities of Sri Lanka. It is perceived injustice that has engendered violent or terroristic responses from those who feel victims of that injustice. May I venture to say that the two major factors that have bedevilled South Asia are:

- Firstly, the failure to build a strong and stable, pluralist society, where due recognition and power would be accorded to the specific needs of the diverse communities and groups which comprise our nation-states; and
- Secondly, the failure of the state to adopt policies and create conditions to uplift all their citizens from economic poverty and lead them towards the dream of a fully developed society. I need hardly mention that the first is intrinsically linked to the second.

The resolution of the problem requires, first, the political will and, thereafter, scientific and objective vision and programmes of action. This would, of course, require visionary leaders, with the ability to manage both these operations efficiently. This is not to say that successive governments of our region have not attempted to achieve these goals. Yet, for various reasons we have not been able to complete the process.

Our governments need to guarantee democracy and good governance, including credible elections, the rule of law, respect for human rights, accountability and transparency. Oppositions need to hold governments constructively to account and parliaments need to play their important role.

South Asia is presently witnessing a frightening rise in radicalism and extremism. This is alien to the ethos of most of us and we cannot afford this. I am sure you will all agree that we must have zero tolerance of terrorism. There can be no justification for terrorism and for the destruction of innocent lives and valuable national assets.

However, as I have reiterated today, I strongly believe that the solution to the scourge of terrorism is to understand and deal with the root causes of dissension, exclusion and marginalisation in our societies. Rather than deal with just the symptoms, we must build inclusive societies where every one of our citizens enjoys equal rights and opportunities. We must respect and celebrate diversity.

The governments and peoples of South Asia need to engage urgently in this exercise. South Asia has failed to emerge, even after more than half a century of independence, from cataclysmic intra-national

divisions and conflicts. The persistent assertion of emotional attachment to traditional beliefs may prove unhelpful in the present context. We may have to shed some of our traditional sectarian attitudes to acquire a freshness of mind and spirit, in order to manage the transformations that have propelled us at extraordinary velocity into the modern world: new value systems, accompanied by new attitudes and new systems of managing change, would have to be formulated and adopted if we are to cope with and benefit positively from the marvels of modern science and technology.

However great and precious our heritage may be, the time has come when the old world must give way to the new. This process will not be without pain – that must be endured if our nations are to achieve the renewed greatness they deserve.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has rightly been called “the age of extremes”. That century, the century of our generation, has rapidly propelled the world into new situations which at other periods of human history took several centuries to unfold. We, South Asians, who can boast of a history and civilisation that go back several millennia and into the mists of time, now find ourselves in Alice’s cave, in a modern wonderland, entirely alien to the one we have known. What do we do? Do we run away from it? Or should we take proper stock of the situation and adopt what is good in it, for the benefit of our peoples, whilst rejecting whatever appears to be disadvantageous?

Today, there is a pressing need to study and understand the deep-rooted causes that divide groups of people who inhabit the same land and form one nation. The causes of this conflict and the form they take, whether it be terrorism or otherwise, must be studied and understood in a scientific and objective manner.

## Sri Lanka

Let me now turn to my own country – and a lot of what I have said so far can be applied to our island – with its 2,500 year old civilisation and an equally old Buddhist culture, known for its doctrine of Peace. I would now like to talk of the strategies Sri Lanka has employed in the past few years to reconcile our divided society, strengthen democracy and build good governance. I shall spare you the painful details of the trajectory of conflict in my country since independence, as most of you probably know our recent history. The constant economic, social, cultural deprivation of the Northern and Eastern regions is clearly related to the violent conflict we have witnessed. Low levels of development of infrastructure, relatively little opportunity to access quality education and employment, political marginalisation with minimal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes in the political and administrative superstructure and the consistent rejection by the state of the demand of the Tamil movements for language parity and for power sharing through federalism are undoubtedly the root causes that gave rise to the terribly violent conflict and the demand for a separate state.

Whilst the country faced terrific challenges caused by the ethnic, and more recently the religious conflicts, the country’s political leaders only exacerbated the divisions among the people by adding political conflict to the existing ones. They were totally incapable of placing country before individual and party political interests, in order to attempt to construct a united front to fight extremism, the destruction of democratic governance and human freedoms, with its attendant consequences of rampant corruption and breakdown of law and order.

The arrival in power of an authoritarian government, led by leaders practising extreme corruption, nepotism and political assassination as a tool of governance, gave cause to the people – the civil society –

to organise themselves, independently of political parties, to demand regime change. And I speak of regime change not in the sense of coups d'état but by democratic and constitutional means. We were fortunate that the political parties, or most of them, recognised the importance of this movement, and the main opposition party decided to give leadership to it by bringing together a coalition of all opposition parties, groups and civil society in a massive anti-regime movement. It is noteworthy that an important section of the governing party, which was opposed to the destructive policies of the government, also played an essential role in this process.

May I venture to state that in South Asia this may be a unique instance where the two major opposition parties joined together on a common platform to achieve a Common Vision and then form a government of consensus. The exercise was certainly facilitated by:

- First, a very evident common adversary in the form of a totally unacceptable Government, indulging in every aspect of bad governance. All the participants in the opposition movement, including the political parties, big and small, successfully managed to set aside their diverse views, policies and ambitions to give of their best to the struggle against a strong and dangerous common adversary.
- Second, the fact that we were able to agree on a Common Vision, as well as a Common Candidate for the Presidential Election.



The Common Candidate was a relatively unknown Government Minister of the ruling Party, who broke away with a small group of second-level leaders of his Party, without a single Cabinet or Provincial Minister, to achieve a near impossible victory over the Leader of his own Party – the incumbent, all powerful President.

Another surprising and unique achievement was the formation of a coalition government between the two main political parties, with the President from one Party and the Prime Minister from the other.

The two main parties, that were in terrible conflict with each other for nearly seven decades, managed to come together in an extremely short time of six weeks and effectively cobble together a wide coalition of

50 political parties – big and small – as well as other groups and civil society organisations. They launched a massive campaign for the Presidential Election that ensued for only five weeks – and won that election.

Political leaders, friends and associates from the academic world have told me this was “a miracle”. I dare not think what part the Almighty played in this unique achievement! However, I would like to enumerate the main reasons for this, as I see it and as one who was involved in this “operation” from its inception, lived with it and engaged in it day and night.

All the leaders know that we had undertaken a “do or die battle” against a ruthless, murderous and very powerful leader and his regime.

Let me assess the reasons for the success of the ‘January 8th Movement’:

Firstly, the majority of the people had decided that they had had enough of the incumbent regime and:

- Its violations of human rights and basic freedoms with impunity, leading to assassinations by the government of its democratic opponents – elected MPs/journalists;
- Its extreme corruption, at all levels of government, right from the top to the bottom;
- Its unbridled nepotism;
- All this leading to a total lack of national vision, resulting in misgovernance on a scale hitherto unknown in Sri Lanka.



Secondly, the two main minority groups were completely alienated from the government:

- The Tamils, due to inhumane and illegal treatment of civilians during the last phase of the war, as well as assassinations and harassment of Tamil civilians outside the war zones; and
- The Muslims, because of a pogrom carried out against them by an extremist group working closely with the government.

- Also both minority groups were frustrated and angry with the inaction of the government to commence reconciliation even six years after the end of the armed conflict.

Thirdly, the democratic opposition forces were decimated by assassinations, grave intimidation or with pecuniary advantages. They also lacked strong leadership. Apart from weak criticism, the opposition parties seemed incapable of opposing effectively the dangerous slide towards a severe economic downfall, destruction of the rule of law and all democratic institutions.

Finally, faced with these challenges, the people began gradually to organise themselves with movements and to adopt actions opposing specific harmful policies of the government. The government, true to form, responded with violence – the military shot and killed several young students who were engaged in 'satyagraha', demanding clean drinking water for their village, fatally wounded peacefully protesting fishermen, and assassinated dozens of journalists.

This was the context in which the coalition of opposition forces was born. The existence of a dangerous common adversary largely facilitated the formation of the coalition. We kept the widely diverse groups together, successfully working towards a common goal by agreeing to a common National Vision – which was greater than the interests of each partner of the coalition. That Vision, as you may by now imagine, comprised of re-establishing democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms, good governance including mainly the fight against corruption, and inefficiency in government.

The formation of a Coalition Government and the adoption of procedures to promote consensual government was also a critical part of the strategy.

The present government came into power in January 2015, through a democratic revolution defeating an authoritarian government steeped in corruption, nepotism and mis-management of the country, at a Presidential as well as a Parliamentary election. The vision statement of the common candidate, supported by an alliance of opposition forces, was comprised of the following main elements:

Firstly, strengthening of democracy and establishing democratic institutions and practices. The new government has successfully achieved this by strengthening existing institutions of government and by setting up several commissions to guarantee the independent and transparent functioning of the pivotal institutions of democratic governance.

- The Fundamental Rights Commission
- Police Commission
- Judicial Services Commission
- Public Services Commission
- Procurement Commission
- Bribery & Corruption Commission
- Audit Commission
- Elections Commission
- Media Freedom has been completely established.

All these Commissions were first created by my government in 2001 but were abolished by the subsequent government after 2005.

Secondly, the new government is taking action to curb corruption. It has set up special units to investigate and take legal action against corrupt politicians and officials of the past regime and also created institutions, systems and procedures to minimise corruption in government, especially at the point of award of tenders for government procurement.

Thirdly, the Government has a comprehensive National Policy on Reconciliation in place, involving a multi-pronged strategy with several Ministries and Institutions dealing with the subject.

- (i) There is a Ministry of Resettlement responsible for giving back lands to their rightful owners who were displaced during the civil war and assisting them to build their houses.
- (ii) The Ministry of National Languages and Dialogue focuses on language as a means of building national unity.

The issue of Transitional Justice is handled by the Secretariat for Co-ordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM), which deals with the implementation of mechanisms for transitional justice including aspects of truth seeking, protecting the rights of interests of families of missing persons, reparations, as well as war crimes. The issue of war crimes has become a thorny one, with fierce opposition being drummed up by the former President who managed war operations during the final stages of the conflict.

Despite this, the work of the SCRM is progressing slowly in the required direction. The government is in discussion with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, which has agreed to a two-year extension of the period to resolve the problems of transitional justice.

The Office for National Unity & Reconciliation (ONUR) is a semi-independent institution, under the President of Sri Lanka, which is responsible for ensuring non-recurrence. ONUR is engaged in the implementation of a wide range of programmes, with the objective of building unity between all the ethnic and religious communities living in the country. We work with school children and separately with adults, to change hearts, minds and attitudes. About 250,000 older school children have actively participated in our programmes and will continue to do so. With each year a larger number of participants will be brought into our programmes.

We also use the Performing Arts extensively to take the message of reconciliation and peace to the people.

We have identified that low levels of infrastructure development in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, where the majority of the two main minorities communities live, has been the major contributing factor to the conflict that prevailed for several decades. We have hence formulated five-year District Development Plans for all eight districts in the North and East. This covers almost all the infrastructure essential for the lives of the people, such as education, health, roads, power, drinking water, irrigation for agriculture, fisheries, livelihoods and employment, and so on. We plan that the essential infrastructure requirements of the people of these areas would be met at the end of the stipulated period of five years. ONUR leads and co-ordinates the implementation of these development projects by the Central Government, the Provincial Councils as well as other agencies of government.

The National Policy of Reconciliation has been prepared and is now the state policy in this regard. Priority is being given to provide livelihood support to women and young people who have lost families and are affected in various ways by the conflict.

ONUR implements most of these programmes either with national or provincial government agencies or with non-governmental organizations (NGO's). We also support independent programmes of NGOs that



are considered worthwhile. We work closely with the international community on these projects. Funding is provided by governmental and international funding agencies and individual countries. I must specifically mention here that the large majority of the Sri Lankan people are supportive of our programmes.

Finally, the government is in the process of formulating constitutional provisions, either in the form of a new constitution, or the amendment of the present one, for the purpose of guaranteeing minorities' rights extensively and for power sharing through devolution of political power. This is proving to be a slow and tortuous process, especially when it comes to obtaining approval by both the major parties in government. If the policies I briefly enumerated above are successfully implemented within the next few years, together with the full guarantee of rights to the minorities through the constitution, I believe that Sri Lanka will progress as a democratic, pluralist society in which all communities of its peoples could live in harmony, enjoying a durable peace.

Thank you.

# Open Discussion



Mr. Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs, spoke about Sri Lanka's membership in SAARC and BIMSTEC, especially BIMSTEC that began in 1997 with great expectation and great dreams. Referring to the experience of Mrs. Kumaratunga as an original signatory of BIMSTEC who helped build up this hub into an instrument of economic development, he raised the issue of Myanmar. He wanted to know whether some laudable lessons could be conveyed to Myanmar in terms of reconciliation of conflict as both countries (Sri Lanka and Myanmar) are Buddhist majority. He also wanted to know if SAARC and BIMSTEC can move forward.

In response, Mrs. Kumaratunga pointed out that Myanmar too is a member state of BIMSTEC. Sadly, SAARC and BIMSTEC had severely failed to resolve any of the political problems among their member countries. The founding document of SAARC stipulated non-intervention in internal issues. She recalled that at the SAARC summit in Maldives, she along with the then President of that country, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, had managed to change that language a bit which gave some kind of an opening for SAARC to play a role in a gentle way, in bilateral or even trilateral issues among SAARC members, but she doubted if this would actually happen as big powers within SAARC would not want it. The same applied to BIMSTEC as well. Thus, she highlighted the relative inefficacy of both organisations.





Dr. M. Enamul Haque, former Inspector General of Bangladesh Police and present visiting expert at the United Nations, wanted to know whether peace building or peace keeping is more important for Sri Lanka, given its geographical location and having a big neighbour like India.

In response, Mrs. Kumaratunga said that the priority was definitely peace building, because Sri Lanka was a terribly divided society. The division was being sparked and exacerbated even now by some people in the opposition. Thus, the most important need was peace building, to bridge divisions and promote reconciliation and doing all that was necessary to heal

the wounds of the past and build the future. She said that there was no need for peace keeping assistance from the international community as such.

Mr. Sarwar Jahan Chowdhury, Head of Operations, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), asked Mrs. Kumaratunga about the Provincial Councils of Sri Lanka. He mentioned that in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution, the subject was given to the Provincial Council and he wanted to know her view about the current Tamil political parties whether they are content about the delegation of the subject to the Provincial Council. He also wanted to know why the same powers were given to the North, East, and other provinces, making an equal kind of definition of the subject which was quite different from the example of Scotland.



About the Provincial Councils, Mrs. Kumaratunga replied that it had been a long debated issue and she had nothing to do with it when those powers were accorded by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution in 1987. She also said that they had experienced lot of protest about it, as at that time, people were



not ready for the Provincial Councils. They already had central government and local government. The new provisions had to be brought in urgently because the war had begun and India was insisting on it, and large numbers of Tamil people had been chased away to the south of India and all over the world by a pogrom organised by the government in 1983. The people were not prepared and there were various protests from even within the government. They were of the opinion that if special powers were given to the North and East, people in the rest of the country would protest, and that all provinces should be treated equally. She also believed, as a matter of principle, that in Sri Lanka, it was not necessary to give special powers only

to particular councils. Today, the Tamil National Alliance, the only Tamil party in Parliament, is representing the vast majority of the Tamil people but not asking for special powers though they do want devolution of powers.



**Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, BB**, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh (also former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Sri Lanka), asked about the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, and whether Sri Lanka was going back to the old system of a two-term limitation for the presidency.

Mrs. Kumaratunga responded that one of the main provisions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was doing away with the unlimited number of times that someone could contest for the presidency and bringing it back to a maximum of two terms. She said that President Rajapaksa had brought in the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment only to be able

to contest three times himself and had completely messed up. While this had been rectified by the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the eventual objective was that the executive presidency would be abolished and there would be an executive prime minister like Sri Lanka used to have and like India and most of the countries in this region have. For example, the President would not be able to dissolve parliament or sack a minister without consulting the Prime Minister, although under the earlier provisions, he/she could do so. More work would be needed on this issue as the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment had been brought in as a temporary measure.



**Mrs. Hasna Moudud**, who was awarded by SAARC Women's Association as Role Model for Bangladesh in 2003 by Mrs. Kumaratunga, wanted to know about her perception regarding women leaders in South Asia and how they had performed.

Mrs. Kumaratunga replied that, as a woman, she would like to say that women had ruled much better than men! But in actual fact, she did not see much difference between them as leaders, except perhaps for the fact that women are much more caring and understanding, given the maternal instinct. But again

that was sometimes negated, because some women had come into power but were not prepared for it, so they became weak leaders and then had to rely on male advisers!

**Alhaj Mohammad Fazlul Haque**, Founder Chairman of National Youth and Social Welfare Council of Bangladesh and former Chairman of Regional Council of Asia, emphasised that for good governance and to solve the existing problems in the world and in the region, good, talented and educated leadership is needed. However, presently people with these qualities are not joining politics. He asked how good people could be attracted to politics for good governance and a better world.





Mrs. Kumaratunga said that the answer to this question has been sought for a very long time. She said that every Western democratic country has achieved the objective to a great extent. For example, in the UK, where democracy and democratic processes and institutions have deep roots, most Members of Parliament are highly educated. In comparison, during her tenure as President, there were not even 10 university graduates in the Parliament of Sri Lanka. The most educated people in the parliament at the time were lawyers, who only had diplomas from law colleges. Even at present, there are people in the Sri Lankan Parliament who did not even pass the GCE level exam. Sadly, then as now, people who could not study, did not want to study or were not able to get a job would join politics. These people feel that the easiest and most lucrative business in the country is becoming a Member of Parliament! She opined that if democracy took root strongly, this negative trend would not have continued.

**Ambassador Md. Shafiullah**, asked Mrs. Kumaratunga to speak about her experience of dealing with India's and China's interests in Sri Lanka.

In response, Mrs. Kumaratunga said that all big powers in the region are interested in the geostrategic position of Sri Lanka, especially India more than others. Both China and India were interested in strategic ports in Sri Lanka in particular. The previous government of Sri Lanka had leased the most strategically important ports to China for development, which had bothered India; to balance that, the development of new facilities at Colombo port had been awarded to India.



**Major General (retd.) A M S A Amin** said that he learnt a lot about Sri Lanka from the lecture as he was not very aware about the governance issues in Sri Lanka except the civil war there. He mentioned that there were a lot of commonalities between Bangladesh's and Sri Lanka's experiences. Picking up the comment that "sometimes in politics there are people who are really psychological cases but enjoy popular support and get elected to parliament", he asked whether there is a way to develop some sort of psycho-therapeutic treatment that can be given to such people! He also wanted to know how to incorporate moral values and ethical standard in the political process.



Mrs. Kumaratunga replied that to incorporate moral values and ethical standards in the political process, there is a need to democratise societies, and to build strong institutions and processes for the democratic system to function properly.

Ms. Sharmeela Rassool, Chief Technical Adviser on Human Rights, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), argued that it is very important to have political will for a society to be

tolerant. She added that during Mrs. Kumaratunga's presidency, tolerant society was visible. Institutions that uphold human rights and the rule of law play a vital role in creating the political will that underpins tolerant societies. In the recent past in Sri Lanka, these institutions had been made ineffective. She asked whether there were any specific lessons from Sri Lanka that the SAARC region could learn, specifically regarding institutions upholding human rights and the rule of law.



Major General (retd.) Alauddin M A Wadud commented that for reconciliation to take place, creating peace and providing justice are both very important, but these can also be quite contradictory. In this regard, he wanted to know how Mrs. Kumaratunga had brought balance between the two. Also with regard to revolutionary movements and terrorism, he wanted to know why the root causes were difficult to identify. He added that many scholars believe that these were explained by the regional or global powers seeking to create a balance of power to their own advantages in the region or on global stage.

In response, Mrs. Kumaratunga said there were indeed conflicting interests but reconciliation is all about bringing together and resolving those interests. In Sri Lanka, for example, Tamil people living in the North wanted justice, as innocent people had been killed or simply disappeared. So even the military had to face justice. Soldiers had killed politicians and journalists in Colombo too. She said that in Sri Lanka some politicians did not have the courage to accept and explain to the people that if soldiers killed innocent people then they too would have to be punished. She added that some wars in the Arab world had been caused by certain powers who were trying to protect their interests in those areas. There might be other root causes also, for example groups feeling marginalised by not sharing in the fruits of developments



of their natural resources. She agreed with General Wadud that a major cause of conflict in these countries was interference by external powers.

Professor Mohammad Shamsheer Ali, former Vice Chancellor, South East University and founding Vice Chancellor of Bangladesh Open University argued that lessons from Sri Lanka are unique but good governance and reconciling divided societies did not in themselves turn divergence into convergence. Democracy was essential for that to happen. If democracy was strongly rooted in the land, people would take lessons from each other and divergence would turn into convergence. Also, timing was very important. If problems were not resolved in time, then divergence would become very difficult to bring into a state of convergence.





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