

'Much needed breakthrough achieved' - *Buddhika*

by Dasun Edirisinghe

Buddhika Pathirana, who contested the last Southern Provincial Council poll from the Matara district successfully, was appointed opposition leader of the Council by UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe last week. He is the youngest opposition leader in Sri Lankan Provincial Council history.

A popular TV personality who presented several political programmes, cum politician, Pathirana obtained the highest percentage of preferential votes (46.7%) all island, in his debut SPC poll in 2004. Later he was appointed UNP organiser for the Akuressa electorate. Pathirana was re-elected to the Council with the highest percentage of preferential votes (61.09%) polled by any candidate. He secured 57,802 votes of the 96,614 received by the UNP for the Matara District. Pathirana contested the poll as the UNP team leader for the Matara district and was the Chief Minister hopeful of the UNP.

This outstanding young politician spoke to *The Island* soon after his new appointment:

Q. There are several senior UNP councillors in the SPC representing Galle and Matara Districts. But you have been appointed as the opposition leader. Do you think you would be able to obtain the seniors' support?

A. Yes. The decision to appoint me as the opposition leader has been taken by UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. The senior councillors did not oppose it. They will support me definitely. However, this is a very significant Council, the sixth Council of the SPC. The youngest provincial councillor in Sri Lanka, Randima Gamage and the youngest woman councillor, Anarkali Akarsha, representing the Galle District, are members of this Council. I'm the youngest opposition leader. The ruling UPFA has 38 seats while the opposition has only 17 with three JVP seats. In this context there is a massive workload for the opposition leader of this Council. I'm ready to face this challenge. However, I will not be the traditional opposition leader who opposes everything the ruling party does. I will appreciate and support the ruling party's good acts while opposing corruption, bribery and malpractices.

Q. You were in the opposition during the last Council. How was your role as an opposition councillor for the last five years?

A. Unfortunately, our opposition leader of the last Council, Justin Galappaththi, was not up to the mark. Former Chief Minister Shan Wijelal de Silva of the UPFA is his brother-in-law and running the Council became a family affair. What transpired at our councillors' group meeting held at the opposition leader's office was no secret to the ruling party. Within minutes of our decisions and plans and moves to be taken had been informed to the UPFA. All minutes of the meeting had been leaked out by the former opposition leader. Finally, I decided to stop making speeches in the Council. However, there would be no room for such corrupt acts in future.

Q. You obtained the highest percentage of preferential votes in your first election in 2004 and it increased by 13,000 this time. What is your secret?

A. I selected a fresh staff to handle my politics. They would follow my policies and activities. First, I did not allow alcohol or tobacco to be used in my campaign. Alcohol is the first reason to create battles. There is not a single police complaint against me. Some politicians even laughed at me and asked how I was going to do a political campaign without alcohol. Some journalists too laughed at me and went to the extent asking how I worked as a journalist as a teetotaler. But I showed them that the truth could be otherwise.

Secondly, I did not run a promise-based campaign. I did not engage in conventional development works, including providing water, electricity and concrete rural roads. I focused especially on education and health. We have to improve the people's education first. It is like protecting a transformer before providing electricity. I launched several projects to enhance rural education and the health system.

Thirdly, I worked to a time table. If I give someone an appointment, I make it a practice to be there at the arranged time. It is a practice I learned from my parents. I did not paste posters thanking the voters after the poll. I went from door to door and thanked them. In 2004, I organised 700 meetings to thank my voters. But I held only 500 rallies before the poll. This time too I'm doing the same thing. But most politicians are going to Dalada Maligawa or Kataragama after winning the poll.

I did not intend to get to the top of the list at the 2004 SPC race. But people put me at the top not only at the first time, but also the second time. I spent only Rs. 13,000 during the 2004 campaign and below Rs. 75,000 this time. But some politicians spent billions of rupees but failed to reach the winners' list. My campaign was a model for other politicians.

Q. Why did you choose the United National Party?

A. I never thought of being a politician or a journalist. My dream was to become a doctor. Accidentally I was appointed the Matara organiser of the UNP student wing in 1990 as a school student. The then UNP MP for Matara District Ranjan Wijewardena offered me the post when he identified my talent at a function of my school Rahula College, Matara. Any of my relations did not do politics. I saw that the UNP is the only party that brought about so many positive changes in the country since 1948. Anyone cannot challenge the UNP's strategy of the market economy. The UNP introduced a new economy in 1977 but the governments that came to office after the UNP regime did not use it in the correct way to develop the country. As an example, the people of the country are still keen on public sector jobs. When the government was offering jobs for graduates a few years ago, some people came to the public sector giving up a Rs. 45,000 salary in the private sector. But the salary of the public sector is below Rs. 10,000. The reason for that is that the people of the county are still thinking of government jobs and it led to



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today's job crisis among graduates.

The other thing is the UNP's policy for the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Now the war is over, but there should be a political solution for the Tamil people so that it will not create other battles in the future. But the government is yet to have a proper solution for them.

There is a need for a programme to protect and encourage local industries. The environment should be protected when implementing massive development projects. The national heritage should be protected for future generations. As I see it the UNP has the best solutions for these needs.

Q. You are talking about protecting the local industries, the environment and the national heritage. But most people criticize the UNP for selling the land of the country to foreigners, harming the environment by projects, including the 'Regaining Sri Lanka' concept in 2002. There is another accusation that they will not support the local industries and local values. Why do you believe the UNP is the only party that protects these things?

A. The people who did not read and analyze 'Regaining Sri Lanka' made such accusations. But the JVP also appreciated the policy but not directly. As an example, JVP MP K. D. Lalkantha is always saying that we have to give the poor people by taking from rich people. If we analyze 'Regaining Sri Lanka' it is saying the same thing. It proposed the same health system for all, same education for all etc. The UNP is the party which started the massive agriculture projects in Sri Lanka. For UNP regimes commenced the National Youth Council, Sacred Cities concept and so many projects encouraging local values. But, UNP did not market it very well. That is the reason the people make such accusations.

Q. You are married to the daughter of Ambassador Hemantha Warnakulasuriya who is a close associate of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Did you receive any invitation from the government to join the UPFA?

A. No. They know I'm not crossing over. I'm not leaving the UNP in my lifetime even if I get an invitation from the government. There is no future for crossovers. We could find examples from the recent past. Former SPC opposition leader Justin Galappaththi crossed over to the UPFA and he is the last member in the UPFA winning list. If he was in the UNP he would be the opposition leader of the SPC.

I highly appreciate one thing about President Rajapaksa: he remained in the SLFP despite several obstacles for years. There were several obstacles from former President Chandrika Kumaratunga to Rajapaksa. Once CBK removed him from the Labour Ministry and gave him the Fisheries Ministry. But he did not give up the party. It is the

secret of his success.

Q. These days the talk of the town is the abolition of the executive presidency. Some UNPers also campaigned for it. Another thing is that most senior UNPers believe that the present party leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was defeated in around 20 elections continuously would resign from the post and a common candidate will be fielded for the next presidential election. What do you think about these two issues?

A. First, the executive presidency was introduced by the UNP. It was proposed to the Working Committee of the UNP by late President J. R. Jayewardene and was adopted by late President R. Premadasa. My opinion is the Working Committee of the party should decide whether the executive presidency should be abolished or not.

Second thing, the UNP's defeat at recent elections was not caused by our leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. All leaders from ground level to top should be responsible for the defeat. Reorganization of the party is needed at grassroots level. However, if there is a need to remove the UNP leader and field a common candidate for the next presidential election, it would also be decided by the Working Committee of the party.

Q. Most politicians and political analysts describe the Provincial Councils as a white elephant. What do you think about that?

A. There is no process to link the Provincial Councils with the central government and local government institutions. The Sri Lankan governments use the Provincial Councils as a secondary school for politicians. In this context, the PCs are a white elephant.

My opinion is the PCs should be linked to the central government and local government authorities. As an example, the co-operative subject attached to come under the purview of Provincial Councils. But there is a ministry and minister for the subject so far in the central government. There is a need to change all districts and Grama Niladhari divisions in the country. We are still working for those divisions made by the British administration. It has created several problems. If re-organize it there would be reduced Provinces and Districts. Then, more power will go to the PCs. If so no people will try to go to Parliament from the PCs. As an example, Indian provincial government members do not try to enter the Parliament.

Q. Will you contest the next general election?

A. Definitely, as the UNP organiser of the Akuressa electorate I will have to contest the general election.

Q. UNP General Secretary Tissa Attanayake says the results of the recently concluded Southern Provincial Council are a victory for the UNP. But apparently, there is a decrease of 8.62% votes for the UNP compared with the SPC polls of 2004. What is your opinion?

A. Actually, this is not a win but there is an increase of UNP votes in some areas. The UNP could commence a new journey with this turning point, making use of this as a base.

I continue to be in a daze - no it has nothing to do with the fact that I have not had a good night's rest since the 13th but it certainly has everything to do with the bidding of farewell yesterday to my brother - not only a brother by birth but a brother of my heart. Uthum aiya's passing onto glory was a 'shocker' by any standard and the fact that I will continue to be in a daze is to be expected.

I will not go into the details that made this man unique - there is no need to. Anyone who had the privilege of crossing his path or vice versa would know that this was a man, who loved, lived and worked with the sole intention of pleasing his Saviour. That he did without a shred of doubt. During the 10 days that followed his initial headache, I watched, at first in awe and then in amazement as the ICU corridors of the Apollo hospital fill with family, friends & acquaintances on a daily basis. I watched officials at Apollo Hospital make arrangements for crowd - or rather visitor management. I watched as the powerful and the lowly drop in with tear in eye. I watched with amusement at the complaints others' had about the crowds. I watched, at times amused and at others with irritation, the attempts by the Medical staff to manage the information flow. I watched the young and the old shed a tear and look aghast at what had happened to the much loved and deeply respected Dr Uthum Herat who otherwise had no medical issue of serious concern. I watched with gratefulness those friends who dropped by every day to offer their prayers to the Saviour Uthum aiya loved so much. I watched with a heavy heart. At times I cried but at others I smiled. I hoped Uthum aiya would go back home with us. Like the rest of the family, I lived in hope. Yes the big and

mighty dropped by but it meant nothing - all we wanted was to take our brother back home with us.

..... and then everything happened so fast. Today all we have is his ashes which incidentally will be interred fairly soon. Uthum aiya has moved onto glory but left a grieving family - a mum who has no more tears left, brothers and sisters who are lost & nieces and nephews who are confused. He was the bedrock of the family - the father figure is another word that would best describe him. This was possible through the love he had but never publicly displayed.

This was possible by the sheer power of his personality - mild, soft but yet powerful. Never did he desire position, power or attention from even the cat that strolls in the yard. The love he had for his God resulted in Uthum aiya being bestowed with more greatness than any man can strive for. No family gathering was complete without him but there were many he missed - not because he wanted to but simply because the powerful corridors he walked along demanded his attention. His mere physical presence was sufficient to complete a gathering. I have had to fight with him to ensure he was present at family gatherings especially those pertaining to his nieces. Uthum aiya being the man he was, probably smirked whenever I attempted to engage in an argument as to why he should not miss a birthday of his young nieces. Family was very important to

Uthum aiya. This was a fact that was not known. He loved his family and expected the family to understand that his absence was not intentional and I hope he knew that we grudgingly did indeed understand. His love for his family was displayed strongly in the little things he did. One indication of how important his family was to him was displayed by the fact that even if he was at a crucial meeting the family could get through to him at work no matter how busy he was or irrespective of whose company he was in at the time. He had time to discuss matters we needed

clarification on, he had the time to give us his perspective and he had the time to let us know our issues were important to him. He was the brother who showed me what I had to do and the approach I had to take. No academic undertaking was ever taken without Uthum aiya being involved in the decision making process. He also taught us how to think. I admired his thinking and perspective and I remember a time when I was greatly influenced by his trend of thought. He also taught us standards. We maintained standards not only in terms of behaviour but also in terms of thinking. Uthum aiya had no need to force and lecture us on what the Lord expected - he's mere presence reminded us that there was a standard that had to be maintained. No frivolous and wasteful discussions ever took place in his presence. Condemnation of all

Thank you Uthum Aiya

Appreciation

and sundry, gossip and idol chatter felt all so wrong when he was around. No word did he ever mention correcting us - his personality was sufficient to teach us right and wrong. Wasteful thinking and wasteful words in Uthum aiya's presence brought us shame - although he never acknowledged any of it.

So you have left us Uthum aiya - you lit a narrow path for all of us - your siblings, your siblings in law, your nieces and your nephews. The path is clear and well lit but difficult and I salute you - I salute you because you walked a clean path with no mud behind you. You, of all people Uthum aiya having walked the corridors of power, having mingled with the high and mighty and yet had no mud on your feet. How did you do this? Yes, we understand that it was the love you had for the Lord - our Lord. That is the only explanation for the greatness of person you were and will continue to be in my heart. You taught your siblings and siblings in law that ethics were never to be compromised upon - you taught us that right was to be pursued at whatever cost - you taught us that truth stood tall and strong. You taught us the love for books and knowledge - you taught us the value of learning - you taught us the value in pleasing our Creator. You have taught us much. All you have shown us and taught us are etched very deep in our hearts, minds and psyche. Thank you. We love you and will continue to do so and because you taught us to love God with a passion that was not compromised, I will say au revoir until we meet again. You deserve the rest you have - you worked hard and tirelessly. You are now with the Lord and that is what you desired. You have been blessed.

Nelun Herat