

# United we stand

## INTERVIEW WITH H.E. MAITHRIPALA SIRISENA

PRESIDENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA



MAITHRIPALA SIRISENA has Diplomas in Agriculture and Political Science. He was first elected to Parliament in 1989, joining the Cabinet as Minister of Mahaweli Development and Parliamentary Affairs. In 2004 he was appointed Leader of the House of Parliament. He has held several other ministerial posts and, as Minister of Health, received the World Health Organisation's 'World No Tobacco Day Award 2013'. In November 2014 he resigned from the government to be the opposition Common Candidate at the Presidential Election. He was elected President on January 8, 2015.

### How important is the Commonwealth to Sri Lanka, and what have been your main highlights as Chair-in-Office?

As a founder member of the Commonwealth of Nations and the first country to adopt universal franchise in Asia, Sri Lanka cherishes the organisation and adheres to the principles of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth brings together such a large number of sovereign nations that have now transcended their post-colonial beginnings.

Sri Lanka remains firmly committed to upholding the principles of the Commonwealth and to the widening of its scope and relevance in contributing to international cooperation, as well as the building of a world order that supports sustainable development and the fair distribution of resources and capabilities of the world.

The core beliefs that form the Commonwealth's charter, are not necessarily newly invented, namely: democracy, human rights, international peace and security, tolerance, respect and understanding, freedom of expression, separation of powers, rule of law, good governance, sustainable development, protecting the environment, access to health, education, food and shelter, gender equality, importance of young people in the Commonwealth, recognition of the needs of the small states, recognition of the needs of the vulnerable states, and lastly, the role of civil society. These cover a baseline formula of any national strategy and states are bound by these to deliver as per their mandate. These are among the aspects that I think makes the Commonwealth both a relevant and valuable organisation to the international community today.

As Chair-in-Office (2013-15), we managed to showcase the progress Sri Lanka has made in the recent past. We have shown the world how Sri Lanka has strengthened its democratic institutions and progressed on the path of reconciliation. Our people live in harmony, the economy is on the right track, and the country's post-conflict challenges are managed in the most inclusive manner.

### What are the main diplomatic priorities, both regional and global, which you are pursuing?

In one phrase, the country's foreign policy is 'Asia-centric Middle Path'. The aim of our government is to build the widest friendships internationally that

recognise and respect our individuality as a nation. In doing so, we strictly adhere to the middle path and extend friendship to all nations, strengthening trust and cooperation with international organisations, multi-national bodies and regional institutions to achieve greater mutual understanding. While pursuing a Middle Path foreign policy, we will focus more on fostering ties with our neighbours and friends in Asia.

It is the expectation of our government to obtain the assistance of friendly nations and international organisations to advance the development of our country and assure the future success of our people. We are also committed to the expansion of intra-regional economic integration.

### What key policies distinguish your administration from the previous government?

That question can be easily answered if you take a look at how diverse my cabinet is. We have a government comprising the two main political parties in the country, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP), the two rival political parties that ruled the country separately for more or less three decades each since independence in 1948. Furthermore, my government comprises various other political parties with different political ideologies and compositions. While respecting the differences among us, we have succeeded in working together to find solutions to the country's problems. In other words, we have succeeded in introducing a new culture of consensual politics to Sri Lanka.

My government introduced essential amendments to the constitution in order to strengthen democracy in Sri Lanka. These amendments have reinforced the foundations of good governance through institutional reforms that have strengthened pluralism and democracy. With my personal intervention and facilitation, some of the executive powers vested in the Presidency were transferred to Parliament and other independent institutions.

Accountability, transparency and financial discipline are priorities of my government, from public administration to investment management and international trade.

In this way, we stand clearly ahead in inclusiveness in policy making, administration and democratisation, in tune with the growing civil aspirations of our country.

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HE Maithripala Sirisena with Waqās Ahmed, Head of Special Projects, FIRST

### **How can you reassure the international community that Sri Lanka is now politically stable?**

Sri Lanka is not known for political instability in the sense that we see in most countries in Asia. We have never had coups or military regimes. All elections have been held duly and satisfactorily. Despite a protracted armed conflict, Sri Lanka has been able to maintain its democratic core and political stability since independence.

Today, Sri Lanka is more stable than at any other point in its modern history. The two main political parties have formed a government. I am the chairman of one of them and the Prime Minister is the chairman of the other. All major political parties have transparent and democratic mechanisms to address differences of opinion within them. Furthermore, the leader of the main political representative party of the Tamil people, Mr Rajavarthiam Sampanthan is the leader of the opposition in the parliament. This is the most politically stable moment in Sri Lankan history, because we have set in place an inclusive system of governance in which the voice of all citizens is heard.

### **How do you ensure effective protection of minorities in a greatly diverse society?**

Diversity is our strength. In Sri Lanka, different communities and religions have co-existed in harmony for millennia. If you just look at Colombo, you find Buddhist and Hindu temples, Churches and Mosques close to each other and people freely observing their faith. And one of the priorities of the government is to foster public trust and overcome post-conflict challenges by creating an inclusive society and dealing with the past in a trustworthy manner. In dealing with the past, we will follow a process of truth seeking, justice, reparation and non-recurrence. We have

initiated an All Party Conference to look into the issues and to suggest measures for long term reconciliation and communal harmony.

### **What is your economic growth strategy and what are your sectoral priorities?**

Growth with equity is our economic strategy. We're focusing on nurturing economically as well as socially successful citizens. Inclusive growth is a challenge not only for Sri Lanka, but the whole world. Firstly, I stress the fact that in the inter-connected world we live in today, no country alone can think of promoting inclusive growth, unless the whole world comes together for that purpose. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals will guide Sri Lanka, as we take them seriously and are committed to achieving them. Sri Lanka's policy framework is in the process of being revitalised with these goals in mind. Sri Lanka wants to take geopolitical realities seriously, and adjust ourselves accordingly. We believe that our efforts will help narrow the wealth gap in our society.

### **What key investment opportunities would you like to promote to international business people?**

Sri Lanka believes in the market economy. We have created an enabling environment based on good governance. Sri Lanka is ranked as having the most liberalised economy in South Asia, shown by the high level of deregulation, greater encouragement of the private sector, and the opening the economy to international competition. We're further strengthening a hassle-free investment environment. An independent judiciary with investment laws aimed at fostering foreign direct investment; a skilled and highly trainable workforce and the rapid expansion of Information Technology also contribute to the rising investment potential in the country. The Board of Investment (BOI) of Sri Lanka provides all the required assistance to local and foreign investors to start profitable ventures.

### **What is your future vision for Sri Lanka as a society and as an important player in the world economy and political arena?**

Concern for people and our planet is at the core of my vision for the modern Sri Lanka. The objective is to maintain an inclusive and consistent growth rate and achieve a cohesive society, based on democratic values, and equality of opportunity for all, while adhering to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the United Nations. It is the commitment of the government to ensure the development of various sectors of our economy, through new technology and industrialisation; and joining hands with the industrial world to move forward as a truly awakened country. **F**

