

Address by Hon M.U.M Ali Sabry, Minister of Foreign Affairs

at Cambridge Union

23 January 2024

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great pleasure and honour for me to stand before this audience today to address this prestigious union. As we all know, you are the oldest debating society in the world. When I was invited by the Union to share my perspectives, experiences, and insight as a lawyer and a lawmaker in Sri Lanka, I thought it would be important for me to accept the invitation because it would give me an opportunity to share with you, what we went through during the last four years, how we coped up with it, and what stands in store for Sri Lanka.

In early 2020, I was a successful lawyer, was happy, was enjoying my practice, when I was invited to take over the Ministry of Justice. I took over the Ministry of Justice for reasons that I will discuss with you later. After one and a half years I had to change course and take over the position of Finance Minister. Thereafter, after a short stint at the Ministry of Finance, I changed course once again, and had to take over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here I am, as Sri Lankan Foreign Minister. During this particular period of time, Sri Lanka went through a challenging period; some of those experiences and insight, I'm sure will interest you.

As I told you, I come from Sri Lanka. Due to its strategic location at the intersection of maritime trade routes and sea lanes, Sri Lanka has historically attracted the interest of global superpowers. Prior to gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka was under colonial rule for around 500 years. Though the colonial era's legacy of exploitation and division left an indelible mark on our nation, we cannot disregard the fact that it gave us democracy which we enjoy today, the rule of law, an independent judiciary which is vibrant, and infrastructure and a robust civil service.

At the threshold of independence, it was up to the leaders of the diverse, multicultural, and newly independent Sri Lanka to build on this foundation and create a country which is stable, prosperous and peaceful for all its Sri Lankans. Democracy is no doubt the best form of governance, yet, in my opinion, it has some inherent challenges-three of them-which somebody has to overcome to make it meaningful. Firstly, to desist from the temptation to exploit societal divisions for electoral gains. Secondly, to resist populist economic policies which are unsustainable to gain electoral advantage. Thirdly, to maintain policy consistency across the government and parties.

The relative economic and social progress that democracies have achieved all over the world can be directly attributed to how well the leaders in those countries tackled these three challenges which I spoke of.

Looking back at the last 75 years, as an independent nation, Sri Lanka has worked diligently to ensure the social upliftment of its people. We have addressed the challenges of literacy, nutrition, education, and social welfare, achieving significant progress in these areas. Sri Lanka provides universal free healthcare and universal free education to all its citizens. Some of our indicators such as infant mortality rates at birth are comparable to advanced countries in the world. Sri Lanka was conferred universal adult franchise in 1931. Since then, we have always had consistent peaceful transfer of power, the separation of power, and also an independent judiciary to safeguard the rule of law.

Of course, while we take pride in our achievements, as Sri Lankans, we should also have the humility to accept our failures. We are still a work in progress when considering our most crucial aim: forging together the diversity of our people into one coherent and strong Sri Lankan nation. We have faltered along the way during the last 75 years. We have permitted our differences to gain prominence and dominate our social fabric, subsequently failing to nurture the commonalities that bind us together. There is a lot of work for us to do.

Sri Lanka has a vibrant and independent judiciary, but much cannot be said of its efficacy and efficiency. As a citizen and lawyer, I have been troubled by the perennial issue of laws' delays, which have plagued the efficient and equitable administration of justice. A routine lack of investment in the legal system, the failure to regularly review and revisit old laws, and the reluctance to embrace technology have been its root cause of these problems.

For example, in the year 2019, Sri Lanka had almost one million cases to be heard by 336 judges in all courts. When divided by its population, this works out to 15 judges for 1 million citizens. Compare that with the advanced jurisdictions, we have a ratio ranging from about 50 to 150 judges per million citizens. If my memory serves me well, when we did the study in 2019, in the UK, apart from technological advancement, had 44 judges per one million.

As the saying goes, justice delayed is justice denied. Laws' delays have a direct impact on the rule of law, social cohesion, investment, and the economic progress of a nation.

"My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right."

I think some of my friends think this is a controversial statement, but I have always been fascinated by its inner meaning— which puts citizens' responsibility in nation-building. Even though I was happy with my practice, when I was invited to take over the Ministry of Justice, although politics was *not* my cup of tea..., I saw this as an opportunity to actively overhaul the system I had been limited to critiquing from the sidelines.

When I took over as Ministry of Justice, I realised the solution needed to be holistic. I focused on five specific areas:

1. Securing sufficient funds for the justice sector
2. Improving the infrastructure of the legal system
3. Embracing technology, particularly digitization
4. Increasing the number of judges
5. Reform of the law covering the areas of criminal law reform, civil law reform, and commercial law reform

We focused on these five areas. In a relatively short period of time, our initiatives resulted in significant success, entailing an increase in the number of judges in courthouses – particularly in the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal –, the introduction of online hearings, and the commencement of the process of amending and introducing over a hundred laws which is still taking place.

In early 2020, while our focus was on judicial reforms, Sri Lanka was facing the worst economic crisis since its independence, and it threatened to completely unravel our nation.

Years of unsustainable populist economic policies, the accumulation of a severe debt, a refusal to take some of the timely decisions which were rational and needed, and a lack of political will to meaningfully combat the menace of corruption made this economic fault out inevitable. External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine hastened the process.

Amidst the rapid depreciation of the rupee, inflation started to skyrocket. It was at one point in time, 70%. Lack of fuel, lack of essentials, 4-5 hours of fuel queues, 13 long hours of power cuts which Sri Lanka had never experienced since independence, gas queues for more than one month, brought the Sri Lankan public to their knees. They were outraged, and rightly so. Demonstrations and agitations against the government became an almost daily occurrence, and growing tensions reached a breaking point.

The resulting chaos forced the government to resign and a new government was asked to take over. Normally, as you know in your country, the Minister of Finance, is one of the most sought after jobs. In my country at that point in time, no one wanted to take it, but I did not want to abandon my country at one of its most crucial times in the recent history. I wanted to give a shot at it.

I'd been agitating for changes within the cabinet though I was the Justice Minister. So my colleagues at the cabinet knew I had a special interest – I was suggesting some alternatives to what they were doing at that point in time. When I took over the Ministry of Finance, I decided to do it my own way. I addressed the Parliament, and I told the public the truth and the absolute truth about the Sri Lankan economy's perilous situation. The reserves of the Sri Lankan treasury at the time for 22 million people was less than 20 million USD. So, there was no time to waste. We immediately changed the bureaucrats who were poorly formed particularly the Governor of the Central Bank, the Secretary to the Treasury – who is like the Director General of Finance.

We started negotiating with the IMF, the World Bank, introduced cost-reflective pricing so that it was possible to buy or order fuel and other essentials which are necessary to roll out those reforms. And of course, our debts were unsustainable and accordingly, we decided that debt will be restructured, and announced a moratorium of payment.

Though we started talking to the IMF, we knew that unlocking the IMF's extended fund facility would take time. The challenge was how to manage the interim period – we call it bridge finance. During that particular period of time, we discussed with the World Bank, the ADB, the AIB and repurposed about 1 billion USD which was earmarked for other infrastructure development for the most important essentials in day to day lives – to import fuel, medicine, and to support the vulnerable segment of our society, by cash transfer. For our luck, our neighbour, India came out and gave us almost 4 billion worth of credit-line, so we managed to stay in force for about 12 months until IMF came in and rolled out their EFF. Looking back, it was a very tough period of time.

While the reforms were taking shape, the public was in no mood to compromise. Continuous agitation and uprisings by the public resulted in President Gotabaya Rajapaksa – who was elected about 4 years ago with an overwhelming majority - relinquishing office. The subsequent constitutional process – where the Parliament had to decide on a successor – led to President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is my current President, succeeding in his place.

President Wickremesinghe, a seasoned politician with wide-ranging experience, swiftly took control of the situation and adopted a dual strategy. The restoration of law and order and crucial economic reforms were pursued with renewed vigour and purpose.

Upon assuming office, President Ranil Wickremesinghe wanted me to take over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – so for the last 18 months, I have been working and carrying out the foreign policy of President Wickremesinghe's government in order to mobilise the support of the international community to get our economy back on track. It was particularly difficult for us because we were undergoing a debt restructuring process - that restructuring process required us to get the debt assurances from various players including Paris Club which includes Japan, China, and India. We have managed to obtain those assurances by now and we have managed to get all our friends to support our cause.

Sri Lanka maintains a very independent foreign policy, but we also work with all our partners both in the East and the West. We call it our multi-aligned foreign policy.

18 months later, Sri Lanka's inflation, which was 70% in September 2022, has come down to less than 5% in August 2023. The rupee has stabilised and, in fact, appreciated by about 15% from its peak against the US dollar. Remittances have seen a 60% increment on year on year from 2022-2023. Tourism has in fact seen an annual growth of 106% on year on year in the year 2023; our

forex reserves which were at 20 million US dollars in April 2022, have risen to 4.5 billion US dollars by January 2024.

Certainly, we are not out of the woods, but Sri Lankans have shown tremendous resilience in weathering one of the most difficult periods of our times. If we resist divisions amongst ourselves and bring unity amongst our diversity, and continue to pursue those difficult yet prudent economic policies, and if we maintain consistent policies - at least on the basic economic policies - across the parties and the government, we can learn lessons from our past. I am sure Sri Lanka is within touching distance of achieving its true potential.

Let me conclude with the following quote:

A stone is broken by the last stroke of a hammer. This doesn't mean that the first stroke is useless. Success is the result of a continuous and consistent effort.

I sincerely wish that my contribution as a law maker and a member of the Cabinet could make a small dent in the profound debt of gratitude that I owe my country.