

Sumanthiran Interview – Truth with Chamuditha

Today we have with us one of the most controversial political figures in Sri Lankan politics. He is none other than Jaffna District MP of the TNA and President's Counsel M. A Sumanthiran.

What was the actual need to establish the Tamil National Alliance?

There is a perception that Tamils have been unjustly treated in this country since independence. It was to right (*the injustices*) that the Federal Party was formed in 1949. It has been called different names over the years but now we are known as the Tamil National Alliance.

Is the Tamil National Alliance the political project of the LTTE?

No. The LTTE was formed in the 70s. We were formed in '49.

But the TNA's first meeting was held under Velupillai Prabhakaran?

No.

Prabhakaran held the inaugural meeting of the TNA. Sambanathan was a participant at that meeting?

No.

Are you saying that the Tamil National Alliance was not formed based on the wishes of the LTTE?

No, you can't say that. I think in 2001, when the Tamil National Alliance was formed, there was a ceasefire in place. It was created then. You could say we had connections with the LTTE. Even the government had connections and held meetings with the LTTE then.

There were 7 political parties when the Tamil National Alliance was formed. Now there are only 3 left – PLOTE, TELO and ITAK.

There are 3 political parties now. When it was formed there were 4. There is only one party remaining from the founding. Some parties left and some have joined us from time to time.

Anandasangaree was also with you. But he left saying he couldn't work with fascists anymore?

Anandasangaree was part of the TULF then. He was not part of the Federal Party. Anandasangaree had a conflict with the TULF and filed a case against them in court. It was at this point that the TULF was removed and Federal Party joined the TNA.

Wigneswaran has left, Ananthi Sasitharan has left, Anandasangaree left. Various groups and people have left the TNA. All those people point the finger at you.

Yes, both sides have accusations against me. Those like Wigneswaran and Ananthi Sasitharan who attempt to portray themselves as extremists accuse me, so do those like Douglas Devananda who say they are committed to work within the mainstream national politics.

They say that the Tamil National Alliance is latching on to the coat tails of the UNP?

There is nothing like that. In 2015 we prevented Ranil Wickremasinghe from running for President and brought then General Secretary of the SLFP to run as Presidential candidate, and helped form the unity government. No one can say that was support for the UNP.

Tell me clearly if the real leader of the TNA is Sambanthan or M. A Sumanthiran?

Sambanthan

That is what we see from the outside. I am asking who is the actual leader?

The actual leader is also Sambanthan

What if I explicitly say that M. A Sumanthiran is the leader of the TNA?

No, I don't accept that. I reject that. There could be my influence... Mr. Sambanthan discusses matters with me and acts based upon that advice

So I could say you are the unofficial leader?

Nothing like that. Sometimes he does not agree with me. He takes all the final decisions.

All these leaders who represent the Tamil groups were scared of the LTTE then, they were scared of Prabhakaran. Isn't that why the TNA clearly stood for the goals of the LTTE then?

I can't say they stood for the goals of the LTTE. But they worked together with the LTTE. From 2001- 2004 they worked with the LTTE. That was a time when even the then government held meetings with the LTTE.

Is M. A Sumanthiran a racist?

No, I am not.

Do you like to see the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim people living together?

Yes, that is my fervent hope.

But some of your statements seem like you are person with racist views?

There is not single statement you can show like that.

Who is your political leader?

My political leader is Sambanthan.

You entered politics in 2010, on the National List, as a lawyer. You entered politics by appearing for groups or people connected to the LTTE, like prisoners or persons who disappeared. Wasn't that the image you built up?

No one can say I appeared on behalf of the LTTE. I only appeared in civil cases. I didn't appear in criminal cases, except maybe one or two. But when I started as a lawyer in 1990 I appeared in PTA cases for the JVP. So no one can say I appeared for the LTTE.

You got 58,000 votes in the 2015 general elections meaning you are a popular figure. How could you get 58,000 votes in Jaffna by appearing for the JVP?

You can. During that election when the JVP held their May Day rally in Jaffna I too wore a red shirt and walked the streets of Jaffna in their rally. Our people don't look at that.

So are you saying your political ideology is that of the JVP's? Aren't you in the wrong place?

No. But at that time we had a democratic campaign against the then government. We worked together with the JVP.

Are you saying Anura Kumara Dissanayake is your leader?

No. I am saying that I am ready to work with any political party.

People of Jaffna say that Sumanthiran can only be seen during the elections and is nowhere to be seen after that?

No one says that.

Does Sumanthiran speak of political prisoners now? About lands? About the disappeared? All we see is you speaking about the general elections and the curfew?

They know very well I speak about these matters. I also worked to free several political prisoners. I have worked to release lands. They know that very well.

Are there political prisoners yet to be released?

Yes, there are around 70.

Are you satisfied with the release of land?

No, I am not satisfied. But more than 80% of land has been released.

About the disappeared?

There has been no progress on that. The OMP was formed but its functioning has not been successful yet.

Why do you go abroad and carry all these tales against Sri Lanka?

It is not against Sri Lanka. If Sri Lanka is to have a good standing these matters cannot be pushed away. You have to address these issues and find a solution to them. We cannot move forward without it.

Isn't Sumanthiran the only person in the TNA with the most connections with the Tiger diaspora?

I have no connection with the Tiger diaspora.

What is your connection with Rudrakumaran?

I have no connection.

Not even a telephone connection?

I have spoken to him on one or two occasions. But you cannot say I have a connection. I have connections with some organizations in the diaspora like the GTF, BTF, CTC and ATC. They all work together with the TNA.

When did Rudrakumaran last speak to you?

I don't remember. I got an invitation from him to address their parliament around 2016-2017 but I rejected it.

Rudrakumaran wants to form a separate Tamil Eelam government outside Sri Lanka. Why do you have connections with him?

I don't have connections. He invited me and I rejected it.

Doesn't the funding from the Tiger diaspora that funds the TNA come via you? Aren't you the middleman and agent for those funds?

No, the funds come if there is a family member who lives abroad and who has family here. They send money. That is the economy that is currently present in the North. There is unemployment and no other opportunities. So they survive on the remittances from their relatives.

Do you believe in separatism? In a separate state?

Never.

Do you agree in unity?

Yes, there should be unity but all people should have a right to use state power.

Then why does the Tamil National Alliance demand a federal system?

We are asking for a federal system. We ensure a situation where all groups of people can use state power only through federal system.

That means a separate state.

No, federal does not mean separate state.

The country (*Sri Lanka*) is divided through federal.

America has a federal system, Australia has a federal system, Canada has a federal system, Europe has numerous countries with the federal system. They are not broken into separate states. It makes those countries stronger. They are strong countries because they have a federal system.

Do you accept the national emblem of this country? The national flag?

Yes, I accept the national flag.

The national anthem?

Yes I accept the national anthem. I hoist the national flag in Jaffna. In our party I think I and Mr. Sambanthan are the only two people who hoist the national flag.

Why can't you then control your party members? That is what I want to know. There are areas in Jaffna where they don't hoist the national flag.

You have to look at its history. When the first constitution was created in 1972 we were ignored in its making. Tamil people and their recommendations were not included. We were ignored in the national cohesion. That is the call for separatism grew in 1976. The flag came from there. There are some who boycotted the flag. Some people still cannot accept it. They think, how can we accept something we boycotted then. I don't have that problem.

Do you accept former LTTE Leader Veluppilai Prabhakaran's political project? His armed project?

No. Never.

You never condone it?

I never condone it. I will say this in Jaffna. I will say it anywhere. There has been a lot of opposition against me due to this. They say 'why don't you accept it when they fought for us'. I don't accept it because I don't condone armed insurrection.

Why are so strongly campaigning to reconvene parliament these days?

If this is a democratic country there has to be a parliament. There cannot be a democratic country without a sitting parliament.

But we can't convene the parliament constitutionally.

Yes, we can. Under Article 70 (7) a dissolved parliament can be reconvened if an emergency arises.

The government is handling the emergency sufficiently. Aren't you satisfied with that?

The government has three branches. One is the Executive, two is the judiciary, and three is Parliament. You remove one of these branches and country will fall. That is why, although with stringent conditions the maximum time allowed to function without a Parliament is 3 months, the Constitution has categorically stated that if an emergency arises within this period the dissolved parliament can be reconvened.

Even without a parliament, hasn't the government contained the pandemic?

You can't do that. We have to pass new laws. We have to pass new laws related to COVID-19. All the countries in the world are convening their parliaments to pass laws related to this pandemic. The laws we have called the Contagious Disease Ordinance is more than 150 years old. The Quarantine Act is more than 100 years old.

Many people say that is an argument without foundation?

No. One was introduced to combat cholera and the other due to smallpox. The nature of those diseases is different to this pandemic. That is why countries like UK, India and Singapore have introduced new legislation to deal specifically with this pandemic. If only the Executive is dealing with this pandemic then the Executive has no authority to use these legislations.

Why are you going around saying that the curfew is illegal?

It is because it is illegal.

It is legal.

Who said that?

It is legal under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Act...

I am a lawyer and I say it is illegal.

Isn't it legal under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Act...

We have several judgments of the Supreme Court that such curfews are illegal. Are those judgments wrong then?

Why did you write to the Human Rights Commission then?

The Human Rights Commission has the authority to advice the government regarding this. And to use this authority to provide counmsel to the government. I have said that the curfew is necessary. The curfew is necessary in our country during this period. But it has to be done properly. The President's Media Division can't declare curfews. It has to gazzetted and published. The people have to be informed the times of the curfew, how to obtain curfew passes. All of it is in the law.

Aren't you lying? Isn't there a hidden objective in wanting to reconvene parliament?

If we are to sustain democracy in this country the parliament has to function, especially now.

Aren't you trying to bring a in fresh list of nominations for the general elections by subverting the Standing Orders of parliament?

No, you have to look at it this way. The President has the power to call for early elections. Or the elections will be held after September. He used this power to call elections early. But there are several conditions to this. You can only call for elections after 4 ½ years. The Supreme Court declared the calling of early elections by Maithripala Sirisena null and void because he violated those conditions. There are other conditions too. When you call elections early the new parliament has to convene within three months. If that condition is going to be violated the order by the President calling for early elections will be null.

Isn't Sumanthiran trying to provide the time to unite the UNP and go for a fresh nomination list?

I am not doing this on behalf of the UNP. I will tell you one more thing. Even if you give them 6 more months they will never unite. I know that well. That will never happen. That's a false accusation.

Aren't you a political conspirator?

I am involved in politics so that the national question is resolved to the satisfaction of all people.

As far as I know you have never appeared in cases advantageous to the country. You have only appeared in cases harmful to the country; in all these cases you're behind them.

In 2018 Novemeber I appeared in Court against the actions taken by Maithripala Sirisena. All 7 judges of the court unanimously gave a decision. Are you saying they are co-conspirators too?

Finally, I will knock on your heart and I need a straight answer. Do you hate the Sinhala people?

Never. I've lived in Colombo since I was 5. I have Sinhala friends. I am very fortunate to live among Sinhala people.

You talk like this in the South and you say a different story in the North.

I say the same in the North.

You provoke innocent Tamil people...

I never do that. There is a section who oppose me because I don't do that.

Will you win in the upcoming elections?

Definitely

Will you get 58,000 this time too?

More than that. Twice as much. I will win with more than 100,000

Is that a challenge?

Yes

People there say we are waiting for Sumanthiran to come there...

Yes, they are waiting to vote for me.

Definitely not to vote for you...