

Opposition leader stakes. (1994, August 28). The Island.

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OPPOSITION LEADER STAKES

By Prabath Sahabandu
Sunday Island Political Desk

As someone in the press gallery, that was packed to capacity, cracked that the inauguration of Parliament without the presence of the Opposition was like a wedding without the bridegroom.

The UNP after 17 long years in the Opposition and the PA was jubilant for the newly elected Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, was seated next to the Leader of the Opposition, Gamini Disanayake, who had been elected to that position by the UNP group the previous day.

PA MP Jayaraj Fernando, a member given to teasing his opponents, shouted across the floor, "Mr. Wickremasinghe what happened to you?" Ranil pretended not to hear what Jayaraj said.

A few hours after the election results were announced, on Wednesday, and after Prime Minister Wickremasinghe expressed his willingness to step down, several prominent ministers of the UNP - including Harold Herath, A. M. S. Adhikari, and Weerasinghe Mallamarachchi met Mr. Gamini Disanayake.

They requested him to lead the UNP in the Opposition. Mr. Herath came at night and insisted that Mr. Disanayake be the Opposition leader and promised his support and assured that the majority in the UNP group would vote for a ballot to be held to select the Opposition leader.

Later the same day, district MPs of Kandy visited Disanayake. He told them that there was a request from senior party members for him to be the leader of the Opposition. All MPs from senior party members for him to be the leader of the Opposition. All MPs said they also like to see him as the Leader of the Opposition and pledged their support if a ballot was required for the purpose.

After the Kandy UNP MPs left, Mr. Disanayake turned to his associates for advice. First he rang up Dr. Wickrama Werarajooriya who advised him to go ahead with the idea. The others to receive

calls from Mr. Disanayake were Palitha Pelola and Rohan Pethiyagoda. Both of them also wanted him as the Opposition leader. Their position was that it was Mr. Disanayake who deserved that post. They argued that if he had not been expelled from the UNP, he would have become the leader of the Opposition.

Next morning Gamini Palitha Wickramaratne and two others paid a visit to the Leader of the Opposition's office at the President's House. They spent a few minutes discussing political developments.

In the meantime, attempts by Mr. Disanayake and Prime Minister Wickremasinghe to form a minority government had failed. President Wijetunga's position was that he was the leader of the Opposition when the government was defeated. But Mr. Disanayake insisted that it did not necessarily have to be the case. His argument was that there had been exceptions and he should be the leader of the Opposition.

President Wijetunga, knowing that the voters were not prepared to settle for less, said "Then the only thing I can do is to consult the party. What the party says I will accept." This meant that the leader of the Opposition had to be elected by a ballot.

Mr. Disanayake, after returning from President's House with one obstacle cleared, with his morale boosted by the fact that several senior members of the party and other MPs had backed him, decided to be contacted on Monday. He had assured him of support, though of confronting Ranil straight. Ranil received a call about 11.30 a.m. on Thursday. Gamini wanted to meet him urgently to discuss an important matter. Ranil was busy at that time and said he would be available at 2.30 p.m.

At 2.30 p.m. Gamini Palitha and two others saw Mr. Wickramasinghe at the

Temple Trees, where arrangements were being made by the Premier for departure.

Ranil did not like the idea that Gamini had to be the leader of the Opposition. He argued that the outgoing Premier had to be the leader of the Opposition. Argument ensued and a solution agreed upon. A secret ballot.

Friday Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike took visits with her Cabinet.

On the 20th Mr. Disanayake knowing for sure that there would be a secret ballot to elect the Opposition leader, approached Mr. Thondaman, the man who helped the UNP see its face at least in Kandy, Nuwara Elya, Badulla and Kegalle. Disanayake counted on Thondaman's help as the latter had sent a letter to his supporters asking them to support Disanayake. On Wednesday about 10.00 a.m. UNP MP's converged at the Presidential Secretariat, where they gathered three years ago to pledge their support to late President Premadasa after an impeachment motion was brought against him. These MP's among whom were former cabinet ministers, state ministers and project ministers, came in ordinary vehicles. A large number of Hala vans were parked outside the secretariat.

UNP MP Hanban-tula Mervyn Silva was jubilant that Anura was the candidate. He had insisted that Anura had to be the candidate not Mohamed.

Next it was who would be the leader of the Opposition. This was the moment everyone was waiting for. Since it had been agreed upon earlier, a solution was the moment everyone was waiting for. Since it had been agreed upon earlier, a solution was the moment everyone was waiting for.

Ranil was seated with the President. UNP General Secretary Dr. Gamini Wijetunga or a announced the ballot. Papers were distributed among all members present. They were asked to write down the name of the person they wanted to be the leader of the Opposition and to sign the paper so as to prevent confusion.

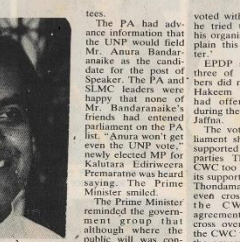


They began writing down the names. Some raised their hands and smiled with Ranil. Disanayake whereas others tried to attract the attention of Ranil. Mervyn Silva went further. He wrote in capitals "Gamini Disanayake" and put it into the box. Mervyn wanted to dispel doubts cast on him that he will vote for Ranil because he (Mervyn) was Anura's associate.

About 20 minutes passed Ranil was engaged in conversation with the President. Dr. Wijetunga came up to the President and handed over a slip of paper containing the results. President Ranil was puzzled. For a second time the President looked at Ranil and Ranil knew something was wrong. "Gamini has polled more," the President was compelled to say at last. "Then please announce it," Ranil replied.

In the meantime, Minister of Irrigation, Power, and Energy, and Deputy Minister of Defence, Col. Anuruddha Ratwatte had just assumed duties in the Ministry of Defence. He was addressing the employees of the ministry flanked by the service commanders. Defence Secretary General Wanasinghe was on his left. A sound of crackers lighting from the direction of the Presidential Secretariat.

The Opposition leader is elected.



someone was heard saying. Ranil got up, shook hands with Gamini and left the Secretary to his new office in Jawatta where over a 100 people were waiting for the results of the contest. Many had mobile phones and every one buzzed all flocked round the owner, of the phone wanting to know the result. Several calls came but not the one they were waiting for.

And the call came at last. Silence fell in Ranil's office. Then murmur and cursing. "That...rained the party," a former staffer of Ranil was heard saying.

Gamini was jubilant. His followers were lighting crackers. They had brought garlands. They were celebrating a win against a UNP defeat only a week before. Gamini polled 45 votes while Ranil 42. It was a majority of 3 votes.

Gamini, G. M. Premachandra and Premadasa Ganesekera posed for a picture. Gamini himself made arrangements for the press to have pictures of his group. Other gamini supporters made arrangements for the press to have pictures of his group.

UNP MPs left the premises quietly. It was then decided that Mr. K. B. Ratnayake be the candidate for the post of Speaker and Mr. Anil Moonesinghe candidate for the post of Deputy Speaker. The PA was confident of minority party support. General Secretary of the SLMC Rauf Hakeem was selected for the post of Deputy Chairman of Commit-

tees. The PA had advance information that if his organiser, Tili cheer up others. "How are you today," he asked Ranil. "Are you leaving the party," one of his supporter asked him. "Never" was Ranil's reply.

Meantime, on Wednesday the government group met at the Temple Trees with Mrs. Bandaranaike presiding. Minister Dharmasiri Senanayake in formed MP's that in Parliament subjects involving ministries were not to be answered by any one other than the minister concerned.

Jayaraj Fernando proposed that the emergency be confined only to the northern and eastern provinces. Minister Richard Pathirana seconded it. Several other new MP's complained of Police in their areas not cooperating with them and wanted OIC's of such police stations transferred. But Dharmasiri objected. "You must wait and see," he said. Colonel Ratwatte promised that if those police officers continued to be recalcitrant then he would take necessary actions against them in his capacity as the Deputy Minister of Defence.

Reggie Ratunage proposed that all vehicles used by UNP Ministers be exhibited at the Galle Face Green for public view. Others laughed off his idea.

About 11.00 p.m. Prime Minister Mrs. Karunaratne ordered. She sat close to Mr. B. Minister C. V. Gunaratne wanted the findings of the "Air bus scandal" made public, so that they would know what the previous minister had done. The "Air bus scandal" would be made public, so that they would know what the previous minister had done. The "Air bus scandal" would be made public, so that they would know what the previous minister had done.

The whole welcome offer will give priority to setting up of permanent bribery and corruption commission.

The Prime Minister told the group that the Treasury had little funds and Rs. 1.4 billion had been spent without records. Therefore we have to be very careful," she said. "But we must fulfil our election promises."

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