

Feature

President JRJ:

An iconic gentleman and a cherished statesman

—By—
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President J. R. Jayewardene affectionately and commonly known as 'JR' or 'JRJ' was a statesman who dominated the arena of national politics in Sri Lanka for half a century.

He led the United National Party (UNP) to a landslide victory at the Parliamentary Elections of 1977 and served as the seventh Prime Minister and the first Executive President for 12 years until 1989.

As the Minister of State in 1965, JRJ identifying tourism industry as an economically viable venture, capable of earning foreign exchange, and providing avenues of mass employment, conceived and articulated development of the industry in Sri Lanka.

Ever since, tourism has bloomed to an attractive foreign exchange earner to the country.

As the President, JRJ steered Sri Lanka out of the economic turmoil, it was engulfed with, by introducing an open economic system in 1978. It was a complete turnaround of the economic policy. He opened the economy and created an environment conducive to foreign and local investment, with the objective of promoting export led growth.

JRJ was attracted to national politics in his student years. The turning point in his life began when he joined the Ceylon National Congress and soon became its Joint Secretary with Dudley Senanayake in 1939. He was elected to the Colombo Municipal Council in 1940.

Birth and education

Junius Richard Jayewardene was born on September 17, 1906 in Colombo to a family of legal luminaries. He was the eldest of twelve children of Agnes Helen Don Philip Wijewardena and Justice Eugene Wilfred Jayewardene, KC who served as a Puisne Justice of the Supreme Court.

His father, being a strong Anglican and disciplinarian, had provided his children a thorough training in Christianity and in the English Language. On the contrary, they had the benefit of observing the mother's Buddhist activities and strong Sinhala qualities.

JRJ's first political experience was when he accompanied his uncle H. A. Jayewardene as a 4-year, for a reception celebrating Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan's victory in 1911. From his childhood, he had been influenced by his grandmother's devout religious and social role.

He was lovingly known as "Dicky" or "Dick." His younger brother, H. W. Jayewardene, QC was a worthy legal advisor to him. JRJ attended the Kindergarten of Bishop's College, Col. Then, he joined Royal College, Colombo and excelled as an all-round sportsman.

JRJ captained college in rugby at the "Royal-Trinity" (Bradby Shield) in 1924. He also played at the famed Battle of the Blues, the Royal - Thomian cricket encounter in 1925. He was vice-captain of the college football team in 1924 and a member of the boxing team, winning college colours.

He was a Senior Cadet; Captain, Debating Team; Editor, College Magazine; first Secretary, Royal College Social Services League in 1921; and the Head Prefect in 1925. In later life, he served as Secretary, Royal College Union; President, Board of Control for Cricket; and President, Sinhalese Sports Club.

JRJ wrote: "The Royal-Thomian match has a fascination. My first memory is of 1917, I was waving the "Blue and Gold" flag. I have seen many and played in one, in 1925. I was part of the tail and was unable to score a single. I was bowled as I tried to play back to a "yorker." The umpire consoled me, "That was the best ball bowled in the match." My parents, brothers and sisters and relatives watched in silence while I walked back. The next day, I was able to retrieve my reputation."

Legal career and family

JRJ entered the University of Colombo in 1926, reading English, Latin, Logic and Economics. He enrolled into the Ceylon Law College in 1928 and formed the Democratic Students Parliament. He also created the Law College Union and proved his brilliance by winning the Hector Jayewardene Gold Medal and the Walter Pereira Prize in 1929.

While engaged in his studies, JRJ functioned as his father's secretary. It was with his little savings that JRJ paid the well-known David Paynter who drew Mahatma Gandhi's portrait, which still remains at the Law College.

In 1931, he passed his advocate

exams and started his legal practice which he continued for ten years or so.

Following the untimely death of his father in 1932, JRJ took over the family's responsibility. He started to practice his signatures in Sinhala and even dreamt to adopt a Sinhala name as "Ravindra".

"On February 28, 1935, JRJ married Elina Bandara Rupasinghe and were blessed with a son, on April 22, 1936, whom they named, Ravindra Vimal.

"Ravi" as he was known was an aviator and an avid photographer who lived a very simple and austere life. He served in the Volunteer Force of the Ceylon Army from 1956 to 1966, reaching the rank of a Captain. He competed at the Tokyo 1964 Summer Olympics in shooting.

Later, as the National Security Adviser, he created the Special Task Force and spearheaded the formation of the Civil Defence Force.

JRJ and Elina initially lived at JRJ's ancestral home, "Wijayanthi" No. 101, Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo. In 1938, they moved to, "Braemar" at No. 66, Ward Place, Colombo, where they remained the rest of their lives, except when in their holiday home in Mirissa.

JRJ never occupied "Temple Trees" or President's House. The sons of Ravi - Pradip, Rukshan and Amrik attended Royal College under the watchful eyes of JRJ and Elina.

As a young Royalist, the author was part of the Special College Assembly that accorded JRJ a poignant welcome to his alma mater in 1977.

Having joined the Navy, he was privileged to receive two coveted trophies for Best Performances from the Chief Guest, President and C-in-C, JRJ at the Passing out Parade that coincided the Navy's 30th Anniversary celebrations in 1980.

JRJ adopted the national dress as his formal attire. He was elected to the State Council from Kelaniya in 1943. During the WWII, he along with other nationalists, launched a rebellion to gain independence from the British. In 1944, JRJ pioneered to adopt the national flag, national anthem and Vesak Day holiday.

After joining the UNP as a founder member in 1946, he was elected as its treasurer. In 1947, the UNP won the first General Elections. JRJ won from Kelaniya and D. S. Senanayake appointed him as the first Minister of Finance. JRJ strived to balance the budget, amidst mounting Government expenditures.

JRJ was instrumental in the establishment of the Central Bank of Ceylon in 1950. He also co-architected the 'Colombo Plan' in 1950. He initiated numerous development projects. These were all accomplished without getting indebted to the world.

JRJ played a pivotal role in re-admitting Japan to the world community at the San Francisco Conference in 1951. He served as the President of the Board of Control for Cricket in Ceylon in 1952. He was re-elected in 1952 Election and continued as the Minister of Finance.

In 1953, Sir John Kotelawala appointed JRJ as the Minister of Agriculture and Food and Leader of the House. In 1956, JRJ lost in Kelaniya but became the Vice President and Chief Organiser of the UNP, and achieved a narrow win in the March 1960 Election. JRJ won Kelaniya and Dudley Senanayake re-appointed him as the Minister of Finance.

The UNP lost the July 1960 Election, JRJ remained in Parliament in the Opposition having been elected from Colombo South. The UNP won the 1965 election and formed a national Government.

JRJ was re-elected from Colombo South uncontested and was appointed Chief Government Whip. Senanayake appointed JRJ to his Cabinet as the Minister of State and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Defence and External Affairs.

JRJ brought dynamism and cohesiveness into the tourism industry, shunned by leaders in the past



President and Lady Jayewardene on their 50th wedding anniversary

and ignored by investors due to the lack of incentive to invest in projects. JRJ considered it essential for the Government to give that assurance and he tabled the Ceylon Tourist Board Act No 10 of 1966, followed by Ceylon Hotels Corporation Act No 14 of 1966.

Leader of the Opposition

The 1970 election the UNP suffered a major defeat, JRJ took over as the Opposition Leader and de facto leader of the UNP due to the ill health of Dudley Senanayake. After Senanayake's death in 1973, JRJ succeeded him as the UNP leader.

JRJ gave his fullest support to Sirimavo Bandaranaike during the 1971 JVP Insurrection, despite the arrest of his son Ravi by the police without charges, and when the new Republic Constitution was enacted in 1972.

Also, JRJ opposed the Government in many moves, which he saw as short sighted and damaging for the country's economy in the long run. In 1976, he resigned from his seat in Parliament in protest, when the Government extended the term in office from original six to eight years without holding an election or a referendum.

Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

As the 'coalition rule' continued under emergency rule, JRJ took up the leadership to end the catastrophic political trauma - acute shortage of food, daily needs, clothing and basic requirements. The UNP made a surprising comeback under the leadership of JRJ.

The UNP had assiduously built its ground organisation and won the largest landslide in Sri Lankan history, taking 3,179,221 votes (50.92 percent) and 140 of the 168 seats, five-sixths of the legislature. The SLFP was decimated, falling from 91 to only 8 seats, the worst defeat by a Sri Lankan governing party.

Having won the Colombo West, securing 79.22 percent of the votes, JRJ became the Prime Minister and began his cherished vision of an Executive Presidency. He released over 16,000 youth under arrest allegedly as JVP insurgents, granting them the opportunity to join the democratic stream.

President of Sri Lanka

JRJ amended the 1972 Constitution to make the Presidency an Executive post. The provisions of the amendment automatically made the incumbent Prime Minister, the President. JRJ was sworn in as President on February 4, 1978.

One of the best-known parliamentarians, Dr. N. M. Perera had told JRJ on the Executive Presidency: "Dick, I think what you are trying to do is good, but as long as you are in power it will work. But supposing some unscrupulous man gets to this position and when he has unlimited power what will he do to the country?"

JRJ held a referendum for the 1977 Parliament to continue until 1989, and to cancel the 1983 parliamentary elections, relishing a new nickname, "the old fox." At the poll, 54.66 percent voted in favour. JRJ officially opened the new Parliament in the "Diyawanna Oya" in Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte on April 29, 1982. He also passed a constitutional amendment barring from Parliament any MP who supported separatism.

JRJ established the Greater Colombo Economic Commission to facilitate export-oriented enterprises and to administer Export Processing Zones. He abolished the system of rice rationing and withdrew the Floor Price Scheme and the Fertiliser Subsidy Scheme. New welfare schemes, such as free school books and the Mahapola Scholarship Program, were introduced.

The New Comprehensive Rural Credit Scheme and several other medium and long-term credit schemes aimed at small farmers and the self-employed were introduced. He launched large scale infrastructure development projects. He also launched an extensive housing development program to meet housing shortages.

The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme built new reservoirs and large hydropower projects such as Kotmale, Victoria, Randenigala, Ranembe and Ulhithiya. Several Trans basin canals were also built to divert water to the dry zone.

His administration launched several wildlife conservation initiatives, including stopping commercial logging in rain forests such as the Sinharaja Forest Reserve which was designated a world biosphere reserve in 1978 and a world heritage site in 1988.

JRJ moved to crack down on the Tamil terror groups. He passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979. JRJ lifted the policy of standardisation for university admission that had driven many Tamil youths into militancy. The militants continued with violent attacks, ambushed and killed 13 Army personnel on patrol in the Jaffna Peninsula on July 23, 1983.

This incident sparked the 1983 Black July riots and is considered to be the start of the battle against terrorism. The LTTE as the dominant of the Tamil militant groups had a free hand over the Jaffna Peninsula by 1987. JRJ's administration responded with the largest military operation codenamed "Operation Liberation," also known as the "Vadamarachchi Operation."

However, operations were suspended when

the Indian Government dropped food supplies over Jaffna in "Operation Poomalai," on June 4, 1987. This prompted JRJ to accept the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, which provided for devolution of powers to Tamil dominated regions, an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the North, and the demobilisation of the LTTE.

The LTTE rejected the accord, whilst Sinhala nationalists were annoyed by the presence of the IPKF on the Sri Lankan soil. In aggression for signing the accord, an attempt was made on JRJ's life in 1987. Meanwhile, young Sinhalese protested in an upheaval, led by the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna, which was eventually crushed.

Elina insisted that JRJ entirely retire from politics in 1989. They sailed past their 60th wedding anniversary in 1995. JRJ died, on November 1, 1996, aged 90, and was accorded a State funeral in the precincts of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara. Elina, the founder of the "Seva Vanitha" followed him on November 17, 2007, aged 93.

Legacy

JRJ's economic policies are often credited with saving the Sri Lankan economy from ruin. By opening the country for extensive foreign investments, lifting price controls and promoting private enterprise, JRJ ensured that the island maintained healthy growth despite the battle against terrorism.

He is credited with transforming the economy from one of scarcity to one of abundance.

Highly respected in Japan, for his clarion call for peace and reconciliation with Japan at the Japanese Peace Treaty Conference, the people of Japan, honouring President JRJ gifted the Sri Jayewardenepura General Hospital in 1984. Also, a statue of JRJ was erected at the Kamakura Temple in the Kanagawa Prefecture in the popular tourist destination in Japan.

In 1988, the "J. R. Jayewardene Centre" was established by Parliament Act No. 77 of 1988 at his childhood home, "Wijayanthi". It serves as a depository for historical research, archives and library to hold papers and records as well as memorabilia, awards, medals and gifts received by JRJ.

JRJ saved the Anuradhapura Bastian Pilgrim Centre from its mortgage and entrusted it to start a school. JRJ and Elina gifted their ancestral property, "Manelwatte Walwawa" to the Malwatu Maha Vihara. They silently performed such meritorious deeds.

JRJ is respected for his determination, brashness, uprightness and courteousness. The benevolent services he rendered to his motherland during his 90-year life span, would remain immortal and imprinted in the history of Sri Lanka.



President J. R. Jayewardene