

## Ask the President's House Photographer

The name Sudath Silva appearing in a small print below a photograph may be familiar to you. Interviewing the present Sri Lankan Presidential Photographer Sudath Silva was a memorable experience. There are only a very few people, fortunate to own the rare title, 'The Chief Official Photographer to H.E the President'. Starting from the time of the President R. Premadasa, Sudath Silva has been able to retain his position since the leaders of different political parties kept their trust on his talents.

Sudath Silva answered some questions on his career in covering presidential events.

How did you start your career?

I learnt the techniques of photographing from my father Gunasiri Silva-a photographer of 'Aththa' newspaper. He owned the studio called 'Plato' in Colombo Fort during the British ruling time. From my childhood I have interested in photographing, as our house was filled with photographs, cameras of both my father's and grandfather's. We even had a 'Dark Room' in our house. I learnt each and every aspect of photographing, including cropping, printing and colour adjustments in my father's studio when I was schooling. I studied both in Susamayawardana Maha Vidyalaya in Borella and Ananda Shasthralaya Vidyalaya in Kotte. My father used to take me to places where he covered weddings, parties and funerals.

How did you become the Presidential Photographer?

My father was the private photographer of President R.Premadasa, and covered 'Gam Udawa' Projects from 1977 up to 1984. The President did not have an Official Photographer at that time. I used to go with my father in the weekends with my 120mm camera, and my father allowed me to take photos as I wanted. I was only 24 years old when I took the photos of the President R.Premadasa at 'Gam Udava' Projects in 1984. I was eager to send those photos to the President. So my father advised me to send them to the President through his officials. Later I got to know that those photos were not received by the President. So I was determined to meet him and give the photos myself. H.E the President R.Premadasa had a habit of meeting the public, and checking their mails at 'Sucharitha' early in the morning. So I lined up in the crowd, and gave the photos to him. He admired my talents, and appointed me as his Official Photographer on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1984, as he also had an intention of appointing an official photographer.

What do you admire in your profession?

The most important part of my job is to be at the right place at the right time to get the best shot. I learnt the qualities of a Presidential Photographer such as loyalty, punctuality, patience, dedication and determination when I worked with President R.Premadasa. Those qualities helped me to retain my position as the Presidential Photographer since 1984. My profession is not merely a job; it is rather a great responsibility of serving the President. However I also do a service to the common people by providing them memorable pictures. I am responsible in documenting the President's various day- to-day meetings with visitors and other events. One day I am in a plane accompanying the President, and the next day, I am in Colombo at the President's House. It is a hard job but it has really interesting moments. I see things that no one else can. What is so amazing is that people see news through my eyes.

Do you have drawbacks in your career?

In 1994 I was transferred to the Information Department of News when the ruling party got changed. However, then I was lucky to receive a scholarship to Japan to study new



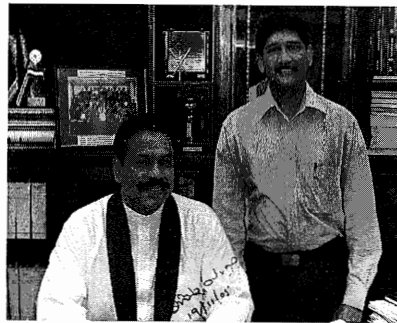


technological advances in photography. When I returned from Japan in 1998, I was appointed to the Presidential Media Unit by Mr.Ariya Rupasinha. After working for nearly four years, I was again appointed as the Chief Official Photographer to the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinha in 2002 for his tour to India. Later I was appointed as the Chief Official Photographer to the then Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksha by the Secretary of the Government's Media and Information Department Mr.B.Ganegala.

I believe that I was able to get my position again because of my talents. Even President Mahinda Rajapaksha was misled by labeling me as a pro-UNP as I had worked for a long time with H.E the President R .Premadasa. However, the President Rajapaksha kept his trust on me.



Sudath Silva with the late H.E the President R.Premadasa in 1986



With H.E the President Mahinda Rajapaksha in 2005

What is your role in presidential campaigns?

I'm assigned to build the positive image of the President through posters, billboards and cutouts beside roads. In 2005 Presidential Campaign, the images I made of President Mahinda Rajapaksha, which appeared in posters and huge billboards all over Sri Lanka were very influential. People recognized their future leader through my images. Both President R.Premadasa and Present President Mahinda Rajapaksha got quite a similar attraction of almost all rich and poor Sri Lankans,

At the time of President R.Premadasa I was really busy with his 'Gam Udawa' Projects. Similarly now I am busy with 3 to 5 assignments per day with President Mahinda

Rajapaksha. What is so special with President Mahinda Rajapaksha is that he was able to become the President within a very short period of time. Therefore, my task is to maintain his positive image which he has created throughout his long political career. I don't need to show him as a hero in my photographs. I never have a hand in the President's postures as it is easy for me to get the best shots of him. What I always do is to take the best shots of him as natural as possible. My task is to help him to establish his good image in the public.

In covering presidential events what types of hardships did you face in 1980s since the technology was not developed?

In 1980s when I started my career I didn't have digital cameras, modern software of photo cropping, printing, e-mails or laptops to send the photographs within seconds. In my first foreign visit to Rumania, England and Turkey with President R.Premadasa, I faced many troubles in printing photos throughout the sleepless nights. The President wanted to check the photographs of the previous day's visits early in the morning next day. Therefore, I had to print photos all night making use of the bathroom of the hotel I stayed in as a darkroom, by covering all the windows with black sheets. When I compare the difficulties I faced in 1980s and the ease of modern photographing and printing equipment, I feel that modern photographers have a task of pressing buttons. Today after coming back to my office from the photographing location it takes only ten minutes to send photos to both local and foreign editors through e-mails. When I visit far away places with the President I use my laptop and mobile phone to print and send photos. I think the hardships I faced at the beginning of my career had made me capable of surviving in any difficult situation.

What is your experience in covering foreign presidential visits?

Since 1986 I have visited more than sixty countries, and now I'm using my eighth passport. I have covered more than a thousand of foreign presidential planned events. I was fortunate to see great foreign leaders like Rajiv Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Mahathir Mohammad, Hosni Mubarak and Gorge .W Bush. Specially in covering foreign presidential events, I have a responsibility of introducing the Sri Lankan President to the world. When the President's photos appear in websites worldwide, the rest of the world would get an insight of him. In covering the events in which a foreign presidential event, I have to travel there before the President arrives as I need to get the required permission to accompany the President; especially, in covering those events I have certain limits in getting the access to the President and when I have to act according to the orders of foreign organizers. However in local coverage, I often do not get restrictions. Even though I'm the Presidential Photographer, I have to compete with other photographers to get into the best angle.

Would you like to share a memorable case you have worked on?

In covering newsworthy events of the President, I have faced many dangers. Once I accompanied President R.Premadasa to the funeral of Mr.Amirthalingam in Trincomalee. The area was administrated by the Indian Army at that time. People who gathered to the Municipal Ground got agitated and there was a big panic. The security officers sent the President quickly in a vehicle, and I was left behind with the other reporters of Rupavahini. I told the police of my situation, and they ordered me to get into a fast moving jeep. If I had fallen down while getting into that fast moving jeep I would not have talked to you. It was a lucky escape. I cannot forget the day on which the late President R.Premadasa was killed by a suicide bomb attack in his party's May Day rally. I saw everything of that dreadful situation.



Has your job affected your life?

During both 1982 presidential campaign and 1984 violence, I received several death threats by unknown people. During my career I haven't earned money by selling photographs of the Presidents to any one. Though I get many requests from the people who want the photos in which they also appear with the President, I never take money. Some people are ready to pay any amount and get the photos which are memorable to them. However I give the photos to them freely, since the photograph is hung in their houses they would admire it well. But I have not betrayed any leader to earn money or nor have I criticized him.

What are your future plans?

My plan is to have an exhibition on presidential photographs in near future, since I have a big collection of photos of four Sri Lankan Presidents and Prime Ministers. I have many rare photographs, which haven't been seen by the public dating from 1980s black and white photography.

What is your advice to the young photographers?

They have to be ready to face any challenge in their lives while tolerating difficulties. Each and every assignment is a challenge to a good photographer. There are many regrets of losing the best shots due to the technical problems of the camera. However a news photographer should be alert with his camera every second as he can miss the best shot within a single second. I need the people's desires to be fulfilled properly, since they do not have the access to the presidential events.

This article is based on an interview conducted on 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 2008 with Sudath Silva, The Chief Official Photographer to H.E the President.

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