

A moment with the President – 12 April 2013

Marceline: Good evening and welcome to ‘Dialogue with the President.’ This is our first interview for the year and it concludes with the 9th anniversary of Mr Michel swearing in as President of the Republic of Seychelles and this includes the mandate which President Rene handed over to him. After this Mr Michel won two elections in 2006 and 2011. Good evening Mr. President and welcome.

President: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline: Mr. President during the 9 years that you have been President, we can say that Seychelles has been through hard times, there were some problems, when finally in 2008 you sought the assistance of the International Monetary Fund. The fishing as well as the tourist industries have been affected by the problem of Piracy and there were even our citizens who were taken hostage. Many transactions had to be undertaken before they could be released and recently the rate of criminality has increased substantially and our people are crying out. It seems that we have more or less surmounted those challenges. Now what are our big challenges?

President: Nine years have quickly gone by, but at the same time it has been a hectic nine years. Many things have happened during those nine years and also during that period of transformation in Seychelles. It has been a difficult time when as President, at certain times, I have had to take certain difficult and well calculated decisions; at the same time the Seychellois people had to rally behind me to face those challenges and problems. At this point I would like to salute the resilience of the Seychellois people. I would also like to salute the sense of solidarity among us which has enabled us to surmount all those difficulties. It has not been easy but we have succeeded once again because we are united and can work together. As a people we can face any difficulty. And now that you have asked me about the challenges we would have to face, again I think we have done very well in our economic achievements. Our economy has been through difficult times especially when the world was facing an economic crisis never known before. We have managed to sail through and emerge with a solid base and with our partners we have arrived where we are today. We are now more able to face future challenges. Now what is very important is that we are able to protect and defend the assets we have gained and not allow them to slip away. In line with this there are one or two things we have to bear in mind. Firstly we have to continue to maintain this unity among us. We have to put Seychelles first and realize that when we do this we work to push Seychelles forward and make it progress and as a result we are the ones to benefit. And for this to happen we have to have this solidarity, this national unity. Secondly, we have to continue to work hard; things will not fall from the sky for us just to pick up. We have to prioritize our expectations; we cannot get everything we want immediately. We have to learn to gradually build up and manage our expectations. As a people who possess this unity and the ethos of hard work we should try to eliminate the ills in our society today. I believe

that we have a bright future and we will be able to surmount the challenges and make our nation progress.

Marceline: Mr. President, you have spoken on many things we should do especially the retention of our assets. Lately you have talked a lot on ownership. You talked a lot on the concept in your State of the Nation Address, and recently when you visited the SFA you said that the Seychellois should have ownership of this industry. What do you mean and why is it only now that you are emphasizing this?

President: Ownership means a sense of belonging where first of all we have to realize that Seychelles is our country; it is ours and everything in it, is ours. We all have to work to keep it and develop it we develop this sense of belonging then we will understand why we have to take ownership of what we are doing. In our work, in everything that we do for our country, in a way we should claim that this is ours. It is true that I am laying more emphasis now but I've always preached this concept of ownership. When I became President in 2004, the first thing I did was to visit all the districts and begin a process of consultation and the same thing with all the agencies in the country, the economic, social agencies. Once again, my message to all Seychellois is that we need to take ownership of everything happening in our country so that we can work together to make things better. When I initiated the economic reform, I did not prepare this alone. I went to all the districts and I explained to everybody why we had to do this. I explained about the economic crisis which the world was going through and the problems facing us because we are not living in isolation and that we are part of a global village. It is important that we all, as a nation, as one people we unite and we face those challenges. Once more we have taken ownership of the economic challenge which faced us and when we took this ownership we all worked, we made sacrifices and now we are seeing the benefits after Seychelles has gone through those difficult times. When we faced the problem of piracy which was affecting our fishing and tourism industries, once again as nation we made our voices heard, we emphasized the fact that the world, the international and regional communities consider this problem seriously and not only as a Seychelles problem. But we have to go further. In creating this new Seychelles it is important that we take ownership. We have to understand that when we take ownership we take responsibility of all the problems in our country, all the progress that we need to make, are ours and so we can do better and move forward.

Marceline: Mr. President now that you have mentioned this New Seychelles, it seems that your election campaign is based on your vision for a New Seychelles. You are in the third year of your mandate now; how is this task of building the New Seychelles going?

President: I think things are going very well. If we glance around us, we see a Seychelles in full evolution, we see Seychelles in full transformation, a very dynamic Seychelles, we see things moving, everything moving forward in a positive way. I think what is very, very positive in this new Seychelles is that we are succeeding in creating a sense of national unity. We have different views which is normal in any democracy and we are developing a country with a solid

democratic foundation where there is transparency and accountability. We are progressing very well in this direction, and this is recognized by international organizations. It is important that we continue in this direction where we work for Seychelles in a diversity of opinions. And in this new Seychelles that we have today we see where this diversity of opinions is accepted by everybody. Today we no longer see this division in families where there are people with different opinions. They discuss, they share their opinions, they agree and disagree but they understand one another. This is what a civilized society which is mature politically does. This is one of the new concepts that we are creating in this new Seychelles. This is good. Secondly it is our economy. Our economy is functioning in such a way that the world is looking at us with admiration. In this area many countries in the world are facing an economic crisis. In Greece for example 60% of the youth population is unemployed. Here in Seychelles there are more jobs than job seekers and we have to employ foreign workers. Our tourism sector is doing very well because we are proactive, dynamic and we diversify our sources quickly. Let me give a concrete example: I know a bank which used to collect 1.2 million dollars per week through credit cards, and last week it was 2.3 million dollars and this shows that our tourism sector is doing very well. All this has happened because of our diversification, our dynamic tourism sector with open skies policy where there are more airlines coming, and more airlines are marketing Seychelles with our strategic partnership with Ethihad, all this is creating opportunities for more tourists to visit Seychelles in spite of the fact that some countries are facing certain problems. As for our fishing industry, with the reduction in piracy, we expect to see a solution to this problem. There will be a new impetus in the development of the fishing sector not only fishing itself but also on the processing of the fish products by Seychellois for export. The measures that we are taking against crime are being sorted out due to this outcry against it. Today we can see that we are solving some problems, there is less criminality and the police is doing a good job. Everything is not perfect but we are improving. Some social problems are still a challenge but together as a nation we can identify them and together look for ways to solve them. I think we are on the right path to create this new Seychelles. I have a very dynamic Government. We have certain weaknesses and we have some ministries which are not connected enough with the people. We have to intensify our efforts to solve those problems and eliminate our weaknesses. I think that we are a government which is moving fast for better. I know that the Seychellois is behind this team to make things move forward. We all want our country to move forward. To add to all this, there is a formidable thing happening in this New Seychelles and it is this impetus for people to undertake new tasks. Today we see many ordinary Seychellois in small businesses. They are taking loans from different financial institutions to start their business in spite of the difficulties; that spirit of entrepreneurship that we have created during those nine years is now bearing fruit. I think that we should not stop here. What I would like to see is for the small businesses to expand. They should not remain small all the time. If we don't do this the big ones will remain big and the small ones will remain small and the big ones will eat up the small ones. We have to create the conditions to make the small businesses grow and become bigger and so participate in the economic development. Unfortunately the banks are reluctant, even if we are putting some

pressure on them, to give loans with an interest rate which is reasonable for the small businesses. Sometimes the conditions and procedures they require make things very difficult. This is why many small businesses are flocking to the Credit Agency which Government has created. But the banks have their role to play. I am upset when I see that the banks are not playing their roles in the economic development of the country. They consider only the big businesses where they find it easy to give big loans and later take their interest. They don't want to take risks but banks must take risks for them to participate in the economic development of the country. I have asked the Minister for Finance to see, together with our partners, how to develop and maintain other ways, other structures to ensure that banks do participate. This is our challenge, to support the small businesses and allow them to grow. Today Seychelles presents many opportunities, one example is that we have established very strict and transparent mechanisms concerning the allocation of land for the development of small businesses. We put it on tender and when we do this, those with money are successful because their project is better and they have more capital. The small businesses remain small. They too must get the power with enough capital for them to participate in those tenders. This is a challenge which we have in this new Seychelles and we have to try and solve this.

Marceline: Mr. President you started answering my question by speaking a lot on development and revenue coming in from the two main pillars of our economy, tourism and fishing. We have just learnt of a new hotel which will soon be built at Beau Vallon as well as others; there is a big participation of foreigners in these projects. When you spoke about SFA you mentioned the participation of foreigners and wished that the Seychellois would take ownership of this industry. It is a disadvantage when you see many foreigners in this industry because most of the money earned is repatriated in their countries. You also stated, when you talked about employment that there are more jobs than job seekers, but still people don't take the jobs available and we have to import foreign workers. What are the disadvantages of this for our economy?

President: We have a development which is well monitored, here in Seychelles. There is a quota as to how many hotels we can have, how many big hotels we have. What is important economically for an industry to be viable are volume and quantity. If we don't have big hotels, we would not have enough volume to sustain this industry because a tourist industry does not consist of hotels only. It is also all the other related products and activities from this industry which naturally spin off in the Seychelles society through the product that we sell, the fish we catch, the craft we produce and sell, water sports and other economic activities. The money obtained from those activities stay in Seychelles and is for Seychellois. Those big hotels bring in the volume for tourist to take part in many other economic activities for our benefit. There aren't Seychellois with the capital to invest in big hotels. Seychelles is not an exception because in all small countries especially small island states, as well as other countries with a sound economic policy need a percentage of foreign investment. A country which does not have foreign investment will not develop, will not prosper, will remain isolated from the outside world. That is why we need a mixed foreign investment whereby you obtain big capital which can feed that

development and at the same time create the spin-off conditions which will allow the population to develop, do business, expand and in turn become bigger. We have Seychellois who have big hotels here. There are Seychellois who have constructed hotels and then sold them to foreigners. All this is because we are in a free market economy where things are in full evolution, dynamic, moving. Tomorrow the Seychellois will have more money, and they too will be able to buy big hotels. This is how an economy works.

Marceline: Mr. President if we go back a while on your administration, we have noticed that at least once a year even twice a year you make certain changes either at the level of Ministers, Principal secretaries and Chief executives. Why the rotation so often? Is it not breaking the continuity at work and certain people even say that it is a lack of confidence in the ability of those people to deliver?

President: Saying that I make ministerial changes every year or twice a year is false. This is not true at all - I took the presidency in 2004. Naturally as a new president I had to reorganize my team to start work. In 2005 I made a major reshuffle of the cabinet. Then there was the 2006 election. In every government, after an election there is a major reshuffle of the cabinet in order to deliver the planned programme. This is what I did. Then after 2011, I waited for a few months and in 2012 I made another major reshuffle, I appointed the new Ministers. On the whole there have been one or two minor changes where some ministers were replaced. I think that this is entirely normal. I have not done anything extraordinary. I don't do this every two years. I've done it three times during those nine years. When you do something you must also make some changes in the administration, the Chief Executive officers, the Principal Secretaries. I find mobility very healthy indeed for the administration. Mobility brings many good things. First it enables the Chief Executives to have more experience, it broadens their horizon, they understand how Government functions better, in any Ministry, in any agency where they are asked to work. Second, it creates a dynamism in the system, where a new person comes with a new idea and say "It would be good to do this". When you leave a person for too long in one place, he / she finds himself / herself in a comfort zone and this is where undesirable things happen later. I am not saying that they are happening. But it can happen. In modern administration, in the development of a transparent modern system mobility does not only create dynamism, but it also prevents corruption, it stops the risk of establishing small empires. So it is important that people are moved around in such a way that they can develop better and at the same time bring a new dynamism for the country to move forward. We all know that our population is only 80,000. We are very small. When we develop, we do this so quickly that we create new institutions, new agencies to deal with the needs that this dynamism has brought. You need new people with knowledge, to go to the different sectors. You may have put a person in one position today and he is doing a good job, but when the dynamism of globalization shows itself, you have to create a new institution and you feel that the person will do better there. That person has more skills and knowledge to do better there. It is normal that you move him / her there and also allow many

more young people to go up and take more responsibilities. This is how a nation progresses. There is no progress in lethargy. Progress is in dynamism.

Marceline: Mr. President, in the New Seychelles, you said that we need Seychellois everywhere. I think that we should now talk about the education system. It seems that even if Government has invested a lot in education, it seems that the level has gone down. The exams results have confirmed that. According to you, where is the problem?

President: Yes, Government has invested a lot in education, likewise in health because it believes that everybody should have access to education and health. These are guaranteed in our Constitution and we will continue to provide all the facilities and the necessary resources to ensure that children obtain a good education. As you have rightly said there are several problems that we are facing. We had the same problems in the past and they are still there. We have to address these although we won't find solutions immediately. We must work for a change of mentality, ways, mindset and sensitize people. Let's consider education. This is not a domain which is solely government's responsibility. There is an African proverb which says, "It takes a whole village to bring up a child." We also know that it takes a whole community to bring up a child. A child is born and grows up at home and it is only later that he/she goes to school. It is then that there is a shared responsibility among the school, the family and the community where everybody has to join in to ensure that the child gets a good education. If parents at home do not instill in the child the value of learning, make him/her interested in studying and love his/her school, the child will not be interested. This is the job of the parents. If the parents themselves don't do this we have a problem on our hands. The community as a whole should set the good example: If we don't give the good example to children, when they turn into undesirable citizens, the community too will be affected. The school cannot do everything. Again this forms part of our social renaissance to find ways to bring the community and the families together and with the school we will ensure that children get a good education. I think it is human nature that when you get something free, you don't appreciate it. It is when you work hard to get something that you appreciate it. However, we have to get parents, children to understand that they have a right to education. Make the most of it if they want to develop to have a good future, but they have to learn. I also believe that Education principles and practices should not remain static. The Ministry of Education should move, review its curriculum and practices. I know that this is being done as well as many other things. However, this review has to be continuous to ensure that children receive an education which is according to their needs and interest as well the needs of the country. Too often in the past, if a child is not good in the academic subjects, he is often sent to a vocational institution. I think that if a child is interested in a technical subject he/she should be encouraged to continue his general education first and then go to the technical school. If he/she is still interested in technical subjects he/she can join the technical school but later get the opportunity to upgrade his general education so that he too can go further later. The ministry is reviewing all this but perhaps this should materialize faster.

Marceline: Mr. President, the last question on your nine years as President, when you look back, what do you think has been your greatest achievement?

President: There has been many achievements. Those achievements have not been mine only. It has been the achievement of the Seychellois people, because I have never done anything on my own. I've always told the Seychellois people to take ownership and once again, I am emphasizing the word ownership of our country and let us all work together to accomplish the impossible where Seychelles as a small country has come out of an economic crisis in a remarkable way. Today many people are looking at us with admiration. We have created the spirit of partnership where people are undertaking their own businesses. We have created a society where people are aware of the need to participate. This is our society and let us try and build a good society. Another remarkable achievement is the spirit of national unity which exists in our country where we have different political opinions but where we can express ourselves freely, anywhere, in any way. There are some who even take advantage of this and spend their time in their small papers slandering others, creating xenophobia and racism. We forget that we all form part of the human race. But most people have embraced the call for national unity well. Today in the National Assembly we have an opposition that is responsible, that criticizes, that discusses who tells the Government when things are wrong, that strikes when it's time. He does not slander, insult and he does not trample on Seychelles. The remaining little group with one or two individuals who like to trample on Seychelles; let them go to the gossip corner. The majority, even with their diversity of opinions can find other ways of expressing themselves and the government takes them in consideration. Many times I listen to different political opinions and later implement them. Seychelles is ours and we have to take the opinion of everybody in order to move on. This is another achievement.

Another area where we are doing well and going in the right direction is the way where we are tackling the scourge of drugs. Then there is the problem of criminality which I have already spoken about and I repeat, the police is doing a good job.

Something else which is creating a good reputation for Seychelles is our proactive diplomatic policy by which Seychelles has not been left in isolation. We have brought Seychelles to the world, we have promoted it. We have publicized everything we are doing and we are the champion of small island states on climate change. Today Seychelles is an authority on this matter. The world recognizes our stand and fight against piracy and our commitment to create peace in the Indian Ocean to ensure that it becomes a place where there is free and safe navigation. With the help of our international partners, we have put Seychelles in a position where to-day we enjoy the admiration of the world. Wherever you go Seychelles is asked to make presentations on its successes. Because of all this the Seychellois as a nation should be proud of what we have accomplished during those nine years and also on the foundations laid before. This is what we have achieved. This is what the world recognizes and it is important that we don't lose what we have gained. We should even go further.

Marceline: If we are to discuss the latest issues, the scourge of drugs remains a challenge. Lately three Seychellois have been condemned to death in Egypt, for drug trafficking. Seychelles is trying very hard to have their sentences reduced to less than the death sentence, perhaps life imprisonment. What was your reaction when you learnt about this?

President: When I heard about this, I was shocked because here in Seychelles we are against the death penalty. Our constitution is against the death penalty and therefore I asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs to try and ask the Government of Egypt for clemency, that is to change the death sentence to life imprisonment since they are going to the court of appeal. We have abided to the judiciary system of Egypt and we have asked our consul to do everything possible for them to appeal. We believe in justice and it is important that justice follows its course and our consul is doing his best to help them with the appeal. Perhaps when they would appeal, the appeal court will not pass the death sentence. However if the Appeals Court keeps the death sentence, then as the Head of State, on behalf of the government of Seychelles, I shall try appropriate actions with the Government of Egypt to accord clemency for the three Seychellois. According to me nobody has the right to take somebody else's life.

Marceline: Mr. President, this week you also inaugurated a new facility at Les Cannelles, the Wellness Centre. Afterwards we heard Dr. Malulu say that the number of Mental illness cases are increasing, about 900 people have registered as severe. Another 9000 have had depression. What is your comment on this?

President: I think that the nine hundred cases that have been registered is the number of a whole for many types, I would not say illnesses, but certain psychological symptoms related to the style of our modern world where pressure builds up from all sides. To-day we are living a more hectic life compared to the calm life of long ago. There are certain people who cannot bear certain pressures and they show certain symptoms of depression. I think they all add up to the 900. What struck me when I was at the Wellness Centre was that there was a group of young people there, this is the only group there but it also represents all the other young people elsewhere who have become victims of that scourge. This has made me aware of the necessity to redouble our effort against the drug traffickers. What they are doing is destroying a generation of Seychellois. Words cannot describe such a thing. Only a few people out there are destroying a generation of Seychellois just for the sake of money. When we speak about the death penalty, we realize that the drug traffickers too are condemning a generation of Seychellois to death. Today I wish to salute those youths who are trying to seek a cure to get out of the problem they have let themselves in. After a few considerations I find that we still have one or two weaknesses. You have a group of young people who come here to get help and after 3,4,5 weeks they go back to their community and the majority of them go back to their old ways due to pressures from the dealers and others. I have spoken to both Minister Meriton and the Minister for Finance to have a place where after those young people have finished their treatment at the Wellness Centre, they can go, learn a trade if they don't have one, get further counseling to make them stronger to deal with the pressure when they go back to their community. If they had a profession or trade this

will help them after they get out and perhaps there should be a link with the Ministry of Employment to place them in a job. The Wellness Centre is there to give them the initial treatment. The more I realize that we should have this institution to consolidate this initial treatment to get out of this scourge. This Wellness Centre has brought help to society for those young people who want to get out of the drug problem and society must encourage them to go and seek help.

Marceline: Mr. President a last question. You say you are redoubling your effort to fight the big traffickers. When you talk to us, locals you say that people know who are the big traffickers, but still the police are not arresting them. What do you have to say about this?

President: Today there are 60 prisoners on Marie Louise, the majority drug traffickers. There are also the hard core prisoners over there. Some more are going soon according to what the Ministers say. If we take a close look there are a good many traffickers inside.

Marceline: Excuse me for interrupting you, they say that even if in prison their organized crimes continue.

President: The majority are at Marie Louise. I don't think they can traffic and organize crimes over there. Perhaps this was a common activity in the past but this has decreased considerably and when others will go there they will not find the same thing: with the help of those who were working in prison. Unfortunately some people are corrupt to that extent. You say that Seychelles is small and everybody knows who are the big drug traffickers but the police are not doing anything. You know that we have a legal system which is functioning well and very independent. You can't just arrest people because you believe that they are involved in drug trafficking. You need to have proof before arresting people. The police and NDEA are working and as soon as they find proof they will arrest them and charge them. As long as we have no proof we cannot charge them. We have only to track them down until we have proof against them. That is why some traffickers have not been brought to justice.

Marceline: Thank you Mr. President to make time for this interview. Our programme has come to an end. Thank you very much and good evening.