

Sri Lanka's New Left Front: an anti-working class bloc

Wije Dias
1 August 1998

A new political bloc has emerged in Sri Lanka to contest the coming provincial elections. Dubbed the New Left Front, it claims to offer a progressive alternative to the increasingly discredited and unpopular People's Alliance regime. In fact, the New Left Front is an inherently unstable combination of forces that share only a decades-long history of using nationalism to subordinate the working class and oppressed masses to one or another section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

The chief components of the New Left Front are the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples' Liberation Front. For years the NSSP, a party of left-talking trade union bureaucrats and aspiring parliamentarians, denounced the JVP as a fascist organization. A rapprochement began only in 1994, when both groups found themselves supporting the election of the very People's Alliance regime against which they now claim to be rallying the masses.

A petty-bourgeois, communal-nationalist organization, the JVP has gone through several metamorphoses. In 1971 it led a guerrilla uprising of rural youth; by the late 1980s it had developed close connections with a faction of the then ruling United National Party and was seeking to impose its authority on the working class through intimidation and assassination. Throughout its 30-year existence, however, the JVP has had two hallmarks--rabid Sinhala chauvinism and intense hostility toward working class action and self-organization.

Both the NSSP and JVP have supported the Sinhalese ruling class's 15-year long war against the island's Tamil minority. But because they lined up with different ruling class factions and supported different strategies for maintaining the unity of the Sri Lankan capitalist state, they were long bitter opponents. The NSSP hailed the establishment in 1988 of the provincial councils, a measure aimed at placating the Tamil elite by constitutionally guaranteeing it a share of political power, while institutionalizing national-ethnic divisions so as better to divide the working class. The JVP, on the other hand, denounced any weakening of the powers of the central government as a betrayal of the 'Sinhalese nation.'

That such erstwhile enemies as the NSSP and the JVP should now come together is a sign of the acute political crisis gripping Sri Lanka. The NSSP and JVP leaders are responding to the mass disaffection with the bourgeoisie's principal political instruments, the People's Alliance and the UNP, and are offering themselves to the ruling class as a means of containing and diverting the masses.

In announcing the formation of the New Left Front, the secretary of the NSSP declared, 'We have a common agreement with all left parties for friendly campaigns and a no-contest pact with the JVP in certain areas.' Unmentioned is the fact that the New Left Front is directed against the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International.

The SEP (then named the Revolutionary Communist League) was the only force that opposed both bourgeois camps in the 1994 election. While the JVP and the NSSP--a constituent of the People's Alliance until it lost

out in the scramble for election nominations that preceded the 1994 vote--were urging the masses to place the current government in power, the SEP was warning that the People's Alliance would intensify the assault on jobs, social services and public education launched by the UNP, and that all the PA's talk of peace would prove to be a fig-leaf for new efforts to strengthen the state against the working class and peasantry and to perpetuate the national oppression of the Tamils.

The record of the NSSP and the JVP

The political significance of the New Left Front emerges most clearly from an examination of the origins and political record of its principal constituents. The NSSP was founded in 1978 by a group of trade union and party functionaries who had split from Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

Under Trotskyist leadership, the LSSP had emerged as a mass workers party in the late 1940s. But the LSSP leaders adapted to the new political relations that arose as a result of the of the postwar restabilization of capitalism internationally and the transfer of political power to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. The LSSP broke with the Fourth International in 1953 and thereafter increasingly sought to restrict the working class to pressuring the bourgeoisie for concessions through the trade unions and parliament.

With its entry in 1964 into a coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP, the principal constituent of the current People's Alliance), the LSSP became the main political prop of bourgeois rule on the island. Between 1970 and 1975, the LSSP participated in a second SLFP-led coalition which came into violent conflict with the masses. An LSSP justice minister authored Sri Lanka's 1972 constitution, which helped sow the seeds of the present war by proclaiming Buddhism the state religion and making Sinhala the sole official language.

The LSSP's 1964 betrayal provoked an intense crisis in its ranks. The SEP of Sri Lanka traces its origins to a group of youth who broke from the LSSP and sought to probe the political roots of its degeneration. The founders of the NSSP, on the other hand, remained in the LSSP leadership through both coalition governments. They broke with the LSSP only when they began to fear that their party membership was becoming a liability to their careers. Because of its role in the second coalition, the LSSP lost much of its support in the working class, and following the 1977 elections, in which it failed to win a single seat, it lost much of its influence in ruling class circles as well.

One of the first actions of the NSSP was to enter into a bloc with a split-off from the SFLP led by Chadrika Kumaratunga, daughter of the then SLFP leader Madame Bandaranike and head of the current People's Alliance regime. Generally, the NSSP has provided a slightly more left-wing variant of the politics of the LSSP. Like the LSSP, it entered the round table talks on the anti-Tamil war that the UNP government convened in 1987, supported the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord under which

Indian troops were brought to the island to suppress the Tamil uprising, and joined the People's Alliance.

In the late 1980s, when working class organizations were being subjected to vicious attack by both the UNP government and JVP gunmen, the RCL (forerunner of the SEP) proposed a united front of all workers organizations for the specific and limited purpose of working class self-defense. Although the NSSP claims that more than a hundred of its members fell victim to the JVP assassination squads, it, like the LSSP, CP and trade union leaders, rejected a united front and instead appealed for protection from the state. The NSSP, thus, must bear political responsibility for the UNP's subsequent terror campaign against the rural masses, which was launched in the name of repressing the JVP.

To boost its left-wing credentials, the NSSP developed ties first with the Militant tendency in Britain and later with the United Secretariat of the late Ernest Mandel. That these groupings have sanctioned the NSSP's maneuvers with capitalist parties and its support for a war against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority only underscores the fact that these organizations have nothing to do with Trotskyism and function as secondary props of the capitalist order.

The JVP emerged in 1966 out of the youth wing of the Stalinist Communist Party. Based among a section of student youth, its politics were an eclectic combination of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala nationalism. In 1970 it supported the election of the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition. But the following year it came into the leadership of a rural uprising against mass unemployment and land shortages that was brutally suppressed by the coalition government.

Prior to 1970, much of the rural and Tamil masses had looked to the working class, led by the LSSP, to provide a solution to the social crisis and the ruling class's incitement of anti-Tamil chauvinism. But the LSSP's subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie through coalition governments opened the door for the JVP and later Tamil nationalism to find a following among wide sections of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie.

Following the suppression of the 1971 uprising (some 10,000 were killed), the JVP adapted itself to parliamentary politics. In 1977 it supported the election of the UNP government, which subsequently became one of the first in Asia to repudiate a national economic strategy, and the associated policy of providing minimal social welfare to mitigate class conflict, in favor of seeking foreign investment by providing cheap labor to the multinationals.

With the outbreak of war on the island in 1984, the JVP evolved in a fascist direction. It gained a mass following by stoking anti-Tamil racism. Moreover, the JVP's longstanding hostility to the working class--which is rooted in the urban petty bourgeoisie's fear of proletarianization, and the false association sections of the rural masses make between the working class and the capitalist development that is destroying their livelihood--reached a qualitatively new level. When workers refused the JVP's dictates, it began targeting them for assassination.

The JVP's support for the anti-Tamil racist war and its repression of the working class soon won it the patronage of the military and a faction of the ruling UNP government headed by Premadasa. They provided the JVP with both arms and recruits. Premadasa, who in late 1988 succeeded Jayawardene as Sri Lanka's president, used the JVP to settle scores with his political rivals, provide his regime with a base of support among the increasingly disaffected rural masses, and, most importantly, to terrorize the working class. The present leadership of the JVP has conceded that its squads of assassins included UNP and SLFP thugs.

The JVP hoped it would win the backing of the ruling class and be brought into the government. As a condition for a deal, the JVP demanded a minimum of three cabinet posts in the UNP government. Ultimately, however, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie turned violently against it.

Despite the subjective intentions of the JVP leadership, a peasantry

radicalized by mass unemployment and poverty could not provide a stable base for bourgeois rule. In November 1989 the top leadership of the JVP was liquidated in a series of military-police operations. Thereafter the military mounted a two-year war against the rural population in Sri Lanka's south, which, according to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, resulted in the deaths of more than 60,000 people.

In 1994, with the UNP regime widely discredited, the ruling class again changed tacks and decided to reincorporate the remnants of the JVP into the official politics of the island. The JVP was allowed to contest the elections and its leaders were granted an audience with the US ambassador.

What has brought them together

The NSSP has been angling for an alliance with the JVP since withdrawing from the People's Alliance. On its own, the NSSP will be hard pressed to maintain a single parliamentary seat. But more than electoral arithmetic is involved in the NSSP's decision to embrace an organization responsible for the murder of much of its cadre and to help in rehabilitating within the working class an organization despised for its violence and anti-Tamil racism. The NSSP's turn to the JVP is a reaction to growing disenchantment in the working class with its trade unionist and parliamentarist perspective. Its own politics having proven threadbare, the NSSP is hoping to exploit the JVP's radical image--no matter that this image derives from the JVP's demagoguery, adventurism and volatility.

The JVP at first spurned the NSSP's overtures. But it was thrown into crisis when it did far worse than expected in the March 1997 local government elections. The JVP has now invested great importance in the provincial council elections. 'We call upon the masses to give us power in one province and test us,' declared the JVP's leader Somawansa Amarasinghe, who lives in self-imposed exile. The JVP is really concerned with using the councils to demonstrate to the ruling class that it can be relied on to control the masses, and this is indicated by the powers of the councils. They are totally subordinate to the central government and can be dissolved within 24 hours.

Again, however, more than mere electoral horse-trading is involved in the JVP's decision to ally with the NSSP. The JVP has turned to the trade union-based NSSP under conditions where it is the working class that has come to the fore in struggles against the PA regime. The JVP leaders calculate that their lack of influence over the working class is a major obstacle to their efforts to win the support of the ruling class and a share of political power. Having failed to coerce the working class, the JVP is now trying to control it by allying with a section of the labor bureaucracy.

Given the history of the JVP, workers have every reason to fear that this political alliance will soon take the form of a violent conspiracy aimed at throttling the rank and file. Today, however, such action would be justified in the name of upholding the authority of the legally recognized unions.

An alliance between a section of the trade union bureaucracy and a petty bourgeois, nationalist-communist organization, the New Left Front is the opposite of the revolutionary alliance between the working class and peasantry for which the SEP fights. Such an alliance must be based on the political independence of the working class, implacable opposition to Sinhala chauvinism, and the recognition that neither the democratic nor social aspirations of the masses can be realized under the rule of the national bourgeoisie, or within the confines of the nation-state system erected on the Indian subcontinent in 1947-48. Sri Lanka's backwardness--including the oppression of the Tamil minority--will be overcome only through the establishment of a workers and peasants government and as part of the anti-capitalist struggle of the world working class.

See Also:

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[1 August 1998]

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