

# An abrupt turn in Sri Lanka's civil war once again reveals the fascist character of the JVP

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Recent events in Sri Lanka have brought into sharp relief the fascistic character of the political party known as the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples Liberation Front. Barely three months after the middle class radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) called upon it to lead a Left Alliance as an alternative to the discredited Peoples Alliance (PA) government, the JVP is conducting an election campaign and organising demonstrations on the basis of the chauvinist slogan “fight to protect the motherland.”

In recent weeks the JVP has linked up with the most right-wing sections of the opposition United National Party (UNP), the Buddhist clergy and openly racist groups such as the Mavbima Surakeemay Sanvidhanaya (Organisation for the Defence of the Motherland) to oppose the attempts of President Chandrika Kumaratunga to push through constitutional changes as the basis for talks to end the country's protracted civil war.

The JVP does not oppose the devolution package because it fails to provide for the basic democratic rights of the minority Tamil population and institutionalises communal divisions that will lead to further bloody ethnic conflict. Rather, it has joined the most chauvinist elements among Sri Lankan ruling circles in protesting against any concession to the Tamil minority and insisting that the army intensifies the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In early August, the JVP political bureau sent a letter to members of parliament calling upon them to defeat the PA draft Constitution Bill. Eulogising the Sri Lankan military, the letter stated that “all the sacrifice that the masses made for defence of their country... that soaked the land with their own blood to defend this country and preserve its unitary character will be completely nullified by this constitution. It will open the road for the division of the motherland causing the greatest harm.”

Significantly the JVP took special exception to government's removal of clauses introduced into the present (1978) constitution by the UNP through its notorious sixth amendment, which ruled that every MP had to take an oath declaring his or her allegiance to the unitary state. On the basis of that amendment, a number of Tamil parties were excluded from parliament.

The JVP's extreme right-wing orientation is shown most clearly in its decision to invite the monk Madoluwave Sobhita, a notorious Sinhala supremacist, to conduct the funeral rites of its member Champika Silva, killed on August 20 by thugs. Madoluwave Sobhita played a leading role in organising demonstrations against the devolution package when it was presented to a special parliamentary session in early August. A vote on the constitutional changes was called off after it became clear that the government did not have the necessary two thirds majority.

The *Daily Mirror* of August 21 reported that Madihe Pannasiha, one of the leading Buddhist priests involved in the anti-devolution campaign, has called on the JVP to play the principal role in a coalition of chauvinist groups to oppose the government during the current parliamentary election campaign.

The JVP's own election manifesto appeals for the unity of “all the

Reverend Holy Lords (Buddhist monks), Reverend Clerics (Christian priests), intellectuals, artists, professionals and all those who love this land, and the future of this country, to create a beautiful motherland capable of securing the religious and cultural freedom of all people, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslim.”

For anyone who is aware of the JVP's record and program, its trumpeting of “the defence of the motherland” and its alliance with openly reactionary groups and elements will come as no surprise. In the period 1988-90, the JVP murdered hundreds of members of working class organisations in its campaign to compel workers to participate in anti-government strikes. It has only been with the support of the Peoples Alliance and the NSSP, the Sri Lanka section of the United Secretariat, that the JVP has been able to enter the mainstream of bourgeois politics in Colombo since 1994 and dress itself up as “left” and even “socialist”.

The JVP was able to coexist with Kumaratunga and even support the PA in regional councils where it had gained seats as long as the government was pursuing its “war for peace” and was making military advances against the LTTE. It sought to exploit the growing popular sentiment against the war by demagogically saying that “the UNP and the PA wanted to continue the war ad infinitum for profiteering and as a pretext for imposing burdens on the masses...” But its criticisms were always from a chauvinist standpoint: that the government was not prosecuting the war vigorously enough and was undermining the Sri Lankan state. “The only difference between the UNP-PA and the LTTE,” the JVP argued, “is that the former want to introduce [a separate Tamil] Eelam piecemeal while the latter want it at once.”

But the fall of the strategic Elephant Pass army base in April abruptly ended any immediate prospect of Kumaratunga coercing the LTTE to the negotiating table through force of arms and precipitated a profound political crisis in Colombo. Under pressure from the major powers and sections of big business, Kumaratunga resurrected the devolution package as a possible basis for negotiations with the LTTE and in doing so attracted the ire of the racist groups.

With no room to manoeuvre the JVP abruptly joined the chauvinist campaign with a Politburo statement denouncing the PA and UNP for strengthening the hands of “the bloodthirsty LTTE”. The JVP's Propaganda Secretary, Wimal Weerawamsa, commented: “The defeat [at Elephant Pass] is a defeat for us all. We will not give an Eelam at any cost... We will not give fresh victories for them. If the LTTE wants to resolve the question they can discuss the problem with us. But if they want to continue the war we are ready to meet that situation.”

The JVP's open embrace of extreme right-wing and fascistic organisations is a graphic exposure of the NSSP's opportunist politics. In 1998, desperate to boost its own flagging political fortunes, the NSSP formed an alliance with the JVP even though the JVP's hit squads had been responsible for killing a number of NSSP members and leaders in the late 1980s. The NSSP's leader Vikramabahu Karunaratne was himself critically injured when the JVP threw a bomb into a public meeting killing

22 people. But even at the time while protesting against the JVP's "fascist style" attacks, the NSSP nevertheless supported the JVP's strike calls.

The NSSP leadership justified its embrace of the JVP by saying that those responsible for the attacks on workers organisations—in particular, the leaders of the JVP's military wing, the Deshapremi Janatha Vijaparaya (DJP)—had left the party. At the end of last year, as he was jockeying for the position of the coalition's presidential candidate, Karunaratne told a newspaper, even "when I was lying on the death bed in 1988 [after the JVP bomb attack], I was dreaming of the day we [the NSSP and JVP] would fight together."

In its latest statements, the NSSP has made an abrupt about face and now "opposes" the JVP describing it as "the 'red' tool of the racists". But we can confidently predict that the NSSP leadership will provide no serious explanation of its previous support for the JVP and its claims that the JVP had fundamentally changed since the 1980s. The failure of the NSSP to provide any principled accounting of its alliance is all the more reason to critically examine the JVP's political perspective and history.

The roots of the JVP lie in the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in the 1940s and 1950s won a powerful following not only in the working class but among small farmers and the poor in rural areas. In 1964, however, after a lengthy period of political backsliding, the LSSP abandoned its socialist principles and joined the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government. The JVP, which emerged in the 1960s based on a mixture of Sinhala nationalism, Maoism and Castroism, was able to exploit the frustrations and anti-government sentiment to gain a following among unemployed rural youth.

As far back as 1969, Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka), explained in his book, *The Class Character and Politics of the JVP*, that the aim of the JVP was not the socialist transformation of society. Its slogan "nationalise the state machine" was aimed at the control of the existing state and utilising it for their own narrow needs. Its orientation was not to the working class but to the Sinhalese rural petty bourgeoisie, who it called the "Children of Mother Lanka".

He pointed out that the seeds of the JVP's fascism were already present in its attitude to Tamil-speaking plantation workers, who had been brought by the British colonialists to work in the tea estates. JVP founder Rohana Wijeweera branded the plantation workers as agents of the "Indian expansionists who are trying to gobble up our lands through illegal immigrants and the Indian cultural invasion".

Balasuriya explained: "It would be wrong to call the JVP hostility to the plantation workers simply racist because the petty bourgeois hostility to the working class, which arises in a period where attempts are being made by the British imperialists and the Lankan bourgeoisie to destroy the plantation workers for their class interests, becomes a naked tool of monopoly capital. This racism leads to fascism and the JVP is creating in Lanka a force hostile to the working class which a future fascist movement could use."

In April 1971, the JVP launched an uprising against the Bandaranaike government, which had returned to power the previous year. But the ill-prepared rebellion had the character of an adventure, with disastrous consequences for the rural youth who had flocked to the JVP's banner. The JVP had assumed that a minimal display of force would result in the defection of significant sections of the military. But the army remained loyal to the government, which included ministers from the LSSP, and the result was a massacre. Government troops killed an estimated 17,000 youth equipped with crude bombs and a few guns, and arrested another 20,000.

The resort to an armed uprising in no way altered the class character of the JVP. In fact the more astute political representatives of the Sri Lankan ruling class recognised that the JVP, with its militant Sinhala nationalism

and base among the peasant youth, could in some circumstances be used to prop up capitalist rule.

In 1978, President J.R. Jayawardene legalised the JVP calculating that the party could be used to divide the working class, which only two years before had brought down in the Bandaranaike government in a general strike. Jayawardene's move coincided with his own increasingly racist attacks on the country's Tamil-speaking minority. The JVP's organic hostility to the working class soon proved of value to the bourgeoisie when it blacklegged on the 1980 general strike, which was broken by the Jayawardene government.

For a brief period the JVP postured as a radical democratic party and advanced the slogan of "self determination for the national minorities." But the JVP has never seriously championed the rights of the Tamil and Muslim minorities and every crucial turn in the political situation has revealed the entrenched Sinhala chauvinism that lies at the core of its perspective.

Following Black July—the notorious anti-Tamil pogroms organised by UNP thugs that began on July 23, 1983 and precipitated the outbreak of the war in 1984—the JVP turned sharply to the right. In response to the war the JVP began attacking the LTTE and "Tamil racism," repeating the anti-Tamil propaganda of the UNP with its claims that call for a separate Eelam was a revival of Indian invasions of the 11th century.

The war not only intensified the economic and political crisis confronting the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie but rapidly accelerated the degeneration of the JVP. By 1987, Jayawardene, confronting a deteriorating military situation in the north and growing opposition among workers in the south, turned to the Indian government for military assistance. With the support of all the major parties, except the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), he signed the Indo-Lankan Accord paving the way for Indian troops to be sent to the country's north and east to suppress the Tamil minority.

The JVP reacted by branding the accord as a betrayal and launching a terrorist campaign. But when its patriotic slogans failed to win any significant support among the working class the JVP sent its armed squads to the factories to force workers to strike at the point of a gun. Its terror campaign served the deepest needs of the ruling class and graphically confirmed warnings made by Keerthi Balasuriya about the fascist tendencies contained in the JVP's hostility to the working class.

The JVP and its thugs, working in close collaboration with elements of the police and army, murdered a large number of members and officials of trade unions and left wing parties, including three members of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). The RCL was the only party to call for a united front of all working class organisations to take measures to combat the attacks of the JVP and state forces.

So useful was the JVP in terrorising the working class that President Premadasa, who replaced Jayawardene in 1988, made moves to strike a deal with the JVP and once again grant it official recognition. In the event, the UNP government finally turned on the JVP after it had carried out its dirty work on behalf of the bourgeoisie. In 1989, the army captured and murdered the JVP's leader Rohana Wijeweera and his two deputies, and then used the pretext of the JVP threat to launch a far-reaching campaign of terror throughout the south in which an estimated 60,000 rural youth were slaughtered.

The events of the late 1980s are a stark warning to the working class of the dangers it confronts in the coalition of Sinhala extremists now forming around the JVP. It is significant that in their latest statements the JVP leaders are not only extolling the patriotic virtues of the army but of their own armed thugs who died a decade ago. The chief political responsibility for resurrecting the JVP, bringing it into the official mainstream and providing it with "left" credentials lies with the parties of the Peoples Alliance, including the LSSP, and, in particular, with the middle class radicals of the NSSP.



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