

Sri Lanka's constitutional coup thrusts JVP to political prominence

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Less than a week after Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga dissolved parliament and called fresh elections it is already apparent that the real winner in the political crisis is not the president's own party—the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—but rather the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party based on populist demagoguery and rabid appeals to Sinhala chauvinism.

For months, JVP leaders have been demanding that Kumaratunga use her executive powers to sack the UNF government, accusing it of betraying the country in peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and kowtowing to foreign financial interests. Every step the president has taken in acceding to their demands has emboldened the JVP leadership and set in motion forces that have become increasingly beyond her control.

The JVP was the first to hail Kumaratunga's decision on November 4 to seize three key ministries from the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and prorogue parliament for two weeks, insisting, nevertheless, that she had to go further. The party continued to call for an alliance with the SLFP but only on terms that were highly favourable to itself. One of the JVP's key demands was for early general elections.

Well aware that powerful sections of big business and the major powers were pushing for a compromise with the government to enable peace talks to resume, Kumaratunga prevaricated. Her own party was deeply divided with significant sections hostile to any alliance with the JVP and urging a deal with Wickremesinghe. The SLFP's previous partners in the Peoples Alliance—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party—were also opposed. Other layers argued that an alliance with the JVP was the only means for bolstering the SLFP's flagging fortunes.

The new alliance—known as the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—was formed on January 20. Immediately, the JVP leadership stepped up its agitation for a general election. At the first rally held by the alliance in Colombo on January 29, the SLFP leaders vaguely spoke of a future election. JVP leaders Somawansa Amarasinghe and Wimal Weerawansa, however, insisted that there would be a general election soon.

The bitter wrangling within the SLFP leadership was settled at a central committee meeting on February 1 followed by a meeting of SLFP organisers on February 5. Amid growing rumours that Kumaratunga was about to dismiss the government, the alliance was formally registered as a political party on February 6. The

following day, at midnight, Kumaratunga formally dissolved parliament without informing Wickremesinghe or other government leaders.

Since then the JVP has been at the forefront of defending Kumaratunga's anti-democratic actions and demanding that she take further steps against the UNF. At the JVP's behest, the president yesterday removed 39 junior ministers from their posts and stripped them of the privileges of office—the use of government vehicles and other equipment. She accused them of “criminal misappropriation of public property” and threatened unspecified action against them. The JVP then went further, calling on Kumaratunga to take over the posts of any “corrupt” senior cabinet ministers.

Quoted in his party's press, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe took up the theme of “corruption” and poured scorn on those in ruling circles who have criticised the cost of the election—the third in less than four years. “The government says 450 million rupees have to be spent on an election. But if this government continues, how much will be lost in fraud and corruption?” he declared. Amarasinghe added: “This government that is defending robbers but not giving a place to genuine entrepreneurs... would waste millions of money. Because of that an immediate general election is a must.”

Amarasinghe's appeal to “genuine entrepreneurs” has a particular significance. For the purposes of appealing to workers, students and small farmers, the JVP at times still uses some of the Maoist and Castroite rhetoric on which it was founded in the 1960s. While the more astute layers of the ruling class know full well that the JVP has never been a genuine socialist party, there remain concerns that its posturing against privatisation and “foreign corporations” could become a barrier to the further implementation of economic restructuring.

Amarasinghe's remark was designed to allay those fears. To make certain it was understood, he went on to say that the alliance would ensure a “corruption” free environment. “I clearly state that an alliance government would create such a situation and encourage investors. No one should be nervous that investment will not be received,” he declared.

The JVP leaders are aiming to exploit their alliance with the SLFP and the election campaign to bring them one step closer to state power. The party directly appeals to layers of young people, workers and rural poor that have been hard hit by the economic reforms instituted both by the UNF and the previous PA

governments. While not necessarily subscribing to the JVP's vicious communal politics, many ordinary people nevertheless regard it as an alternative to the two established parties. The JVP opportunistically exploits this dissatisfaction by making sweeping, but completely empty, promises that are impossible to meet under the capitalist system it has pledged to maintain.

In the weeks prior to the dissolution of parliament, the JVP intensified its agitation against the government's economic policies. It played a prominent role in organising a railway strike, an industrial campaign by health workers and opposition to planned changes to the labour laws. Last week farmers launched a protest in Colombo against the rise of fertiliser price under the UNF. As soon as the election was announced, the JVP called off the protests and strikes, declaring that a future "alliance government" would solve all these problems.

Within the alliance, the JVP calculates that it will have the whip hand. The SLFP may be the older, larger and more established political party but it is deeply compromised by its eight years in office from 1994 to 2001. The JVP has dictated the political basis of the alliance platform, which begins by denouncing the UNF for betraying the nation to the LTTE and foreign interests. There is no doubt that in the shrill chauvinist election campaign that will unfold against the UNF, the demagogues of the JVP will play the leading role.

The prominence of the JVP in the present situation is the sharpest expression of the putrefaction of bourgeois politics in Sri Lanka and the depth of the current crisis. Just over a decade ago, the party was illegal. In the late 1980s, it led a murderous campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord—the first attempt by a section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to end the civil war. In the name of saving the nation, JVP hit squads killed hundreds of workers, trade union officials and party leaders who refused to fall into line with its policies.

Kumaratunga brought the JVP back into official political life in 1994 after she won the presidential election. Certain elements within the ruling class regarded the party as a useful potential safety valve amid mounting social tensions. JVP leaders found themselves courted by corporate circles and given prominent coverage in the media. In the general elections of the same year, the party received a modest 81,560 votes and won one seat.

The JVP's electoral successes over the subsequent decade are a reflection of the inability of either the SLFP-led Peoples Alliance or the UNF government to meet the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people. The JVP has simply played the same political card, albeit in a particularly extreme form, used by all bourgeois political parties in Sri Lanka for the last 50 years: namely, anti-Tamil chauvinism.

When the Kumaratunga government attempted to pass a package of constitutional reforms in 2000 to start peace talks with the LTTE, the JVP, joined by Wickremesinghe's United National Party, mounted a chauvinist campaign against the move. Now that Wickremesinghe has begun negotiations with the LTTE, his UNF government has become the target of the JVP's political attacks.

The JVP has gained at the expense of both major parties, particularly the SLFP which built its support in rural areas on the basis of directly appealing to Sinhala nationalism. In the 2000

election the JVP received 518,774 votes and won 10 seats. After Kumaratunga's government collapsed in 2001, the chauvinists increased their vote to 815,353 and their seats to 16 in the election of December that year.

Now the JVP is looking for far larger gains. As the price of its alliance with the SLFP, it has been allocated 42 seats in the upcoming elections. There is no doubt that many of these will be in areas where its support is the strongest, and which, without the SLFP in the contest, it hopes to win. With a bloc of this size, the JVP leadership feels it will be in a strong position to increasingly dictate the course of events.

The political impasse of the last three months reflects a fundamental dilemma confronting the ruling class. Sections of big business in Colombo want an end to the country's 20-year civil war to encourage investment and integrate the island into the processes of global production. But to end the war, they confront the legacy of decades of communal politics which they have themselves fomented to divide the working class and shore up bourgeois rule.

The election will do nothing to resolve this crisis. If the UNF is returned, the conflict with Kumaratunga will only continue and intensify. If the SLFP-JVP wins power, the ensuing "alliance" government would likely plunge the country back into civil war. Moreover, all the contradictions contained in this marriage of convenience would rapidly come to the surface. Such is the depth of the splits in the political establishment and the tensions generated by the deepening social polarisation that the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy have all but exhausted themselves.

The JVP's enthusiastic support for Kumaratunga's anti-democratic moves are the clearest warning that it is offering its services to the ruling class should extra-parliamentary forms of rule be required. Its contempt for democratic rights was summed up in the remarks of JVP Propaganda Secretary Wimal Weerawansa to the *Daily Mirror* this week. In defending the president's actions, he bluntly declared: "The people's mandate and the opinion of the general public is important, and not the parliamentary majority."

Weerawansa's comments have more than a whiff of fascism about them. There have been no mass popular demonstrations demanding the ousting of the government. Moreover, as opinion polls and elections results have demonstrated over the last decade, the majority of the population wants an end to the civil war. Yet, the JVP arrogantly asserts that it alone articulates "the will of the people".

Weerawansa's statement is a sharp warning to the working class that the JVP, should it fail to win power through the ballot, will not hesitate to use other means—either with or without the SLFP.



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