

JVP-SLFP alliance heightens political tensions in Sri Lanka

Vilani Peiris, K. Ratnayake
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Political tensions in Sri Lanka have escalated following the decision of President Chandrika Kumaratunga to form an alliance between her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP, which at times postures as a socialist party, openly appeals to Sinhala chauvinism and is hostile to the so-called peace process aimed at securing a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's long-running civil war.

SLFP general secretary Maithripala Sirisena and his JVP counterpart Tilvin Silva signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on January 20 in Colombo to establish the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) with the declared aim of ousting the United National Front (UNF) government. The opening sections of the document denounce the UNF for paving the way for the formation of a separate Tamil state, destroying the country's economic foundations and its subservience to international financial institutions. The UPFA held a public rally last Thursday to reinforce its objective.

The SLFP-JVP alliance adds a new and potentially explosive factor to an already volatile political situation in Colombo. A tense political standoff between the president and the government over who controls the levers of state power has now dragged on for three months without any sign of resolution. Urged on by the JVP, the military top brass and various Sinhala extremist groups, Kumaratunga seized control of three key ministries on November 4, prorogued parliament and moved toward imposing a state of emergency. The government, she claimed, was caving in to the LTTE and endangering the country's national security.

Kumaratunga only backed off after pressure from the major powers. Washington in particular, is intent on ending the country's civil war which undermines its economic and strategic ambitions not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the South Asian region. Sections of big business also want an end to the war in order to encourage foreign investment and integrate the island more closely into the processes of globalised production. But the peace talks with the LTTE have triggered sharp tensions within the ruling elites, which for more than five decades have exploited anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and shore up their own political rule.

The political stalemate has continued for three months. Talks with the LTTE, which stalled last April, have not resumed. Despite intense international pressure, talks between Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe failed to produce a compromise and all but broke down in late December. The key sticking point was control of the defence ministry, which the president refused to give up and the prime minister insisted was essential if the government was going to conduct talks with the LTTE.

In the midst of the crisis, sections of the SLFP pressed Kumaratunga

to form a coalition with the JVP in a bid to shore up the party's support and to hold early elections. Other sections of the SLFP and its Peoples Alliance (PA) partners—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (SLCP)—pointed to the dangers of an alliance with the JVP, which would undermine any attempts to reach a deal with the LTTE to end the war. According to SLFP parliamentarian Chandana Kathirarachchi, 45 of the party's MPs signed a petition to Kumaratunga opposing such a move.

A deal with the JVP has been on again, off again for months as wrangling continued within the SLFP and Kumaratunga prevaricated on the issue. When talks with the government produced nothing and then were suspended in December, the president finally gave the nod to an agreement with the JVP. Kumaratunga appears to be trying to use the JVP as a means of pressuring the UNF to reach an accommodation. She has kept her distance from the JVP by absenting herself from the ceremony to sign the MoU and from last week's joint rally. At the same time, she restarted negotiations with the government—the first meeting was held on January 23 and talks are due to take place today as well.

It is a high-risk strategy. If Kumaratunga is successful in reaching a compromise with the government, the JVP-SLFP alliance is likely to break up quickly. It is possible that a section of the SLFP led by her brother Anura Bandaranaike could go with the JVP. If the Kumaratunga-Wickremesinghe talks fail, the president will come under increasing pressure to call early elections in which the JVP would exploit the opportunity to boost its position. Whatever the particular twists and turns, the enhanced role of the JVP in Colombo politics threatens to further undermine the prospects of a deal with the LTTE and increases the dangers of a return to open military conflict.

For its part, the JVP is seeking to use the alliance with the SLFP to cement itself as part of the political establishment and to establish the basis for ruling in its own right. The SLFP, which held power as the leading party in the Peoples Alliance (PA) between 1994 and 2001, lost support after it failed to deliver on its elections promises to end the war and improve living standards. The JVP has capitalised on the alienation felt among layers of small business and working people to the impact of the program of economic restructuring that has been implemented by both major parties. At the last national election in 2001, it secured 16 seats.

The JVP was formed in the 1960s by appealing to disaffected rural Sinhalese youth on the basis of an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Guevarism and Sinhala chauvinism in the aftermath of the LSSP's renunciation of socialist internationalism and its entry into a SLFP government in 1964. Over the past three decades, however, the JVP has largely jettisoned its socialistic rhetoric, embraced the most rabid

forms of communalism and accommodated itself more and more to the demands of big business.

The formation of an alliance with the SLFP marks a further step in the JVP's adoption of economic restructuring and market reform. While the Memorandum of Understanding pays lip service to the needs of local farmers, entrepreneurs and industrialists, it nevertheless declares the intention to "maximise foreign capital investments on the basis of mutual benefit". Significantly, the JVP has dropped any criticism of the SLFP's record of privatisation, severe cutbacks to public spending and other restructuring measures.

If there were any doubt about the JVP's economic program, it was clarified by the JVP's leader-in-exile Somawansa Amarasinghe, who, shortly before departing from London for Colombo, told the *Asian Tribune* his party was for a "corruption-free democratic capitalist system". He insisted that, under a UPFA government, "entrepreneurs would be placed in an unprecedented advantageous position to develop Sri Lanka to the fullest possible extent following footsteps of the new Asian leaders like Malaysia, India and China". Like the LTTE's pledge to transform Sri Lanka into an "Asian tiger," the JVP is promising to turn the island into a cheap labour platform for the foreign and local corporations alike.

In the SLFP-JVP's plans for the "regeneration" of the economy, workers are called on to accept "increasing productivity in both public and private sector" and "modern management". Justifying the party's economic policies, Amarasinghe told the *Asian Tribune* that all barriers to the making of profits should be removed. If businesses became profitless, he said, entrepreneurs could not pay the salaries of employees and would not survive long. He urged employers to follow the Buddha's teachings and treat "employees like fathers treated their children".

While no substantial disagreements exist between the SLFP and the JVP on economic policy, sharp differences remain on the issue of the civil war. Both parties propose "correct dialogue" with the LTTE, but differ on the basis for such negotiations. The MoU simply brushes aside the differences, declaring the "divergence of views regarding the final settlement should not be an obstacle to their journey together to overcome the serious crisis".

But it is precisely the "divergence" over the war that points to the highly unstable character of the alliance. Kumaratunga and the SLFP's proposals for the devolution of power to the North and East provinces are not greatly dissimilar to those advanced by the UNF government. The plan is for a power-sharing arrangement along communal lines between the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie for the mutual exploitation of the working class. Kumaratunga's reluctance to embrace the UNF plan reflects the sensitivity of both major parties to agitation by Sinhala extremists against any concessions to the Tamil minority.

The JVP opposes the plan for devolution to provincial councils and calls instead for "administrative decentralisation to local authorities". It is not a minor semantic difference. As far as the LTTE is concerned, there is a vast difference between controlling a joint provincial council of the North and East with enhanced powers, and being relegated to minor roles as local officials at the town and district level. It is highly unlikely that LTTE officials would even agree to talks on such a basis, setting the stage for a return to war. The JVP speaks for those layers of the ruling elite who are not prepared to make any compromise with the LTTE.

The differences between the SLFP and JVP have been on open display ever since they signed their agreement. Senior presidential

adviser Lakshman Kadirgamar has declared the LTTE's proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority "may not be acceptable" to the alliance but it was "prepared to discuss everything at the negotiating table without condition". Last weekend, however, JVP leader Amarasinghe, appearing on the Independent Television Network, said the LTTE proposals were "not negotiable".

Since the formation of JVP-SLFP alliance, Kumaratunga has come under sharp pressure to compromise with the government. The reaction of big business was evident in trading on the Colombo stock market, which lost 9.3 billion rupees (\$US95 million) in share value in three hours of trading on the day that the MoU was signed. Speaking on behalf of the major powers, Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi warned in Colombo last week that the alliance was "cause for concern" and said "the international community is keen to see an end to the dispute between president and prime minister".

A meeting of donor countries is due to meet on February 17 in Washington to "review" Sri Lanka's peace process and the financial aid to the country. The Joint Business Forum in Colombo warned last week that Sri Lanka cannot afford to place in jeopardy the \$US4.5 billion in international aid that has been pledged to help rebuild the country. "We are going to face a major cash flow crisis by April because direct foreign investments and foreign aid flows have been seriously affected by the political crisis," forum chairman Mahendra Amarasinghe warned.

Kumaratunga also faces continuing criticisms inside the SLFP and from its allies—the LSSP and SLCP. LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon simply said the agreement contained "rhetoric and platitudes" and did not address the "burning issue of this country". The SLCP called on the JVP to embrace the SLFP's proposals of devolution but was mainly concerned to increase the number of its seats on the executive committee of the alliance. Neither party has taken any principled stand against the JVP and may yet fully embrace the alliance.

What the government and the opposition will do in the days and weeks ahead is by no means certain. The formation of the JVP-SLFP alliance has added another wild card to an already highly unstable political situation. What is clear, however, is that none of these parties have any solution to the issues that confront the vast majority of working people in Sri Lanka—the need for peace, basic democratic rights and a decent standard of living.



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