

The JVP intensifies its campaign against Sri Lankan peace talks

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As part of a campaign heightening communal tensions in Sri Lanka, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is conducting a series of lectures throughout the island entitled “Who are the true enemies of peace?”. While the JVP claims to be in favour of peace, the entire thrust of these lectures, one of which was delivered in Colombo on August 17, is to plunge the country back to war.

Since winning the April general election, President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her minority United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government have tentatively attempted to restart stalled peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The JVP, however, which is a key partner in the UPFA, has been campaigning against the negotiations that the LTTE insists must take place on its proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA).

Efforts by Norwegian mediators to restart the “peace process” have stalled amid a series of assassinations and reprisals between the LTTE and a breakaway faction in the country’s east headed by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna. Growing evidence points to the involvement of the military in supporting Karuna’s fighters as a means for undermining the LTTE. In this context, the JVP’s campaign is lining up with the most warmongering sections of the armed forces.

While the JVP, at times, falsely claims to be “socialist” and Marxist, it is directly articulating the interests of the capitalist state. For the first time, the JVP is part of the ruling coalition and confronts growing hostility over its broken election promises and the continuing deterioration of living standards. Its campaign against the “peace process” is aimed at diverting this rising disillusionment and anger into the dangerous dead-end of Sinhala chauvinist politics.

The JVP’s propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa gave the lecture at Colombo’s Youth Council Centre. He began by demagogically denouncing all those promoting the peace talks as stooges for the LTTE. He branded the previous United National Front (UNF) government, which signed the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in 2002, as “Green Tigers”—green being the UNF’s official colour. The Norwegian facilitators, he declared, were “White Tigers”. He accused various non-government organisations, which were calling for negotiations,

of “crowing for dollars”.

While not specifically calling for a return to war, Weerawansa attacked the emphasis on peace, saying that it was the result of bowing to the LTTE’s pressure. Peace, he said, had to take a backseat, while “defence of the Motherland” had to be placed ahead of all other demands. In a comment that can only be interpreted as a warning to his UPFA allies, Weerawansa declared that even the government’s survival had to take second place to the defence of the country. “In all our endeavours the security of the motherland has to stay at the pinnacle,” he said, emphasising the need to “mobilise the masses to defeat this so-called peace process”.

Weerawansa did not attack the “peace process” on a class basis or point to the fact that the ceasefire is intimately connected to an economic restructuring agenda that is leading to mounting unemployment and poverty. The JVP’s opposition to the “peace process” is entirely reactionary, based on the defence of Sinhala Buddhist domination. Far from articulating the needs of ordinary working people, the JVP reflects the position of sections of the ruling elite—the military and state apparatus, the Buddhist hierarchy and more backward sections of industry—who are deeply concerned that their interests will be compromised in any power-sharing peace deal with the LTTE.

Weerawansa denounced the LTTE’s proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in similar terms—not because the plan is anti-democratic and communal in character, but because it would undermine the “unitary state”—that is, the present capitalist state based on anti-Tamil discrimination. Even though the LTTE has formally renounced its demand for a separate Tamil statelet, Weerawansa declared: “The ISGA is nothing less than a separate Tamil Eelam. Even on an empty stomach we will defend the unitary state of our motherland.”

Weerawansa repeated the JVP’s threat to split from the government if it proceeded to negotiate with the LTTE on the establishment of the ISGA. “The UPFA’s stand is clearly stated in its agreed program. It is to start talks on a final solution to the issue [the war] and only when the time frame is decided for such a solution should the question of setting up an interim administration be discussed...We will not allow this stand to be changed,” he thundered.

As Weerawansa knows, tying an “interim administration” to a “final solution” is unacceptable to the LTTE. Having made a series of concessions since signing the ceasefire in 2002, the LTTE is confronting increasing disenchantment within its own ranks and among the Tamil people, who continue to face appalling conditions in the former war zones. By opposing the ISGA outright, the JVP is effectively sabotaging any peace talks.

Weerawansa accused the previous UNF government of undermining the military and betraying the country. “By the year 2001, the LTTE was a weakened force due to the valiant military campaigns of the Sri Lankan army. It was under the ceasefire agreement signed by the UNF of [former prime minister] Ranil Wickremesinghe that the LTTE was able to politically defeat the Sri Lankan state,” he said.

These comments, which amount to a rewriting of history, are calculated to appeal to sections of the military top brass, who regularly complain that politicians have undermined the war effort. In fact, in April-May 2000, the Sri Lankan armed forces suffered one of their worst ever reversals when the LTTE captured the key Elephant Pass base and rapidly seized much of the northern Jaffna peninsula. Some 40,000 Sri Lankan troops clung on after bitter fighting, amid international pressure on the LTTE to halt its offensive.

The debacle provoked a severe political crisis in Colombo, forcing Kumaratunga’s Peoples Alliance government to make emergency purchases of military equipment and at the same time to push for constitutional changes to lay the basis for peace talks. The JVP, in league with the United National Party (the main UNF component), denounced the new constitution as a betrayal of the nation, and blocked the changes. As the economy continued to slide, both the PA and the UNP came under pressure from big business to find a means to halt the war. When Kumaratunga proved incapable, her government collapsed, precipitating fresh elections in December 2001 that the UNF won.

By championing “the valiant military campaigns of the Sri Lankan army”, the JVP is lining up directly with sections of the armed forces leadership that opposed the 2002 ceasefire from the outset. In collaboration with Kumaratunga, the military staged a series of provocative naval incidents that effectively undermined peace talks and then backed her anti-democratic seizure of three ministries, including defence, in November 2003. After forming the UPFA alliance with the JVP, Kumaratunga arbitrarily dissolved parliament in February, paving the way for the April elections.

Now in office for the first time, the JVP’s populist demagoguery is rapidly being exposed. It issues feeble demands that the government stick to its “Country First” program but none of the UPFA’s election promises—a 70 percent wage rise for public sector workers, restoration of subsidies, a lowering of the cost of living and an end to privatisation—have been carried out.

The JVP’s campaign against the “peace process” underscores the basic dilemma confronting Kumaratunga and the UPFA government. Facing a severe financial crisis, the president called for a resumption of peace talks in order to pave the way for international aid and assistance. At the same time, however, she confronts opposition not only from the JVP but also from the military hierarchy and within her own SLFP, which is deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism.

Kumaratunga stepped aside as formal UPFA head to distance herself from the JVP. But her replacement, Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, a former prime minister and current deputy defence minister, is well known for his hardline Sinhala chauvinism. With Kumaratunga away in London on a private trip, he delivered a belligerent speech to military officers in Jaffna on August 23, denouncing the LTTE for setting up its own administrative systems and accusing the Scandinavian peace monitors of pro-LTTE bias. Two days later, he told naval commanders that there was “a limit to our patience”. “How long will we have to tolerate these killings [in the east],” he exclaimed.

On the same day, army commander Shantha Kottegoda told the media: “LTTE cadres are attacking our soldiers in breach of the ceasefire agreement. We cannot allow this situation to continue and I have ordered the eastern military commanders to use their maximum strength in defence.” Having colluded with the Karuna faction’s attacks on the LTTE, the armed forces are using the LTTE’s reprisals as the pretext for the resumption of military operations.

Any return to war would be deeply unpopular among the overwhelming majority of the population—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. More than 60,000 people have died in two decades of war and many more have been maimed or left homeless. In demanding the “defence of the motherland” above all else, the JVP is giving notice that it is prepared to use the most ruthless methods to deal with any opposition to the war. No one should forget that in the late 1980s, the JVP murdered hundreds of working class militants and political opponents in the name of “motherland first”.



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