

Sri Lanka: the JVP's bogus appeal for “unity” and “voluntary labour”

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In the wake of the tsunami disaster, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—the second largest party in Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—has issued a plan that would seriously undermine basic democratic rights and put the burden of rebuilding onto the backs of working people.

The catastrophe was the worst in recent Sri Lankan history. The death toll has climbed to over 40,000 and more bodies are still being found. Nearly 90,000 houses have been destroyed and almost a million people displaced. Many have lost their livelihoods, as well as family members. Overwhelmingly, the victims have been poor—villagers, fishermen and shanty dwellers who lived in the most vulnerable positions.

For the UPFA, the disaster has compounded its political crisis. The coalition narrowly won last April's elections, after President Chandrika Kumaratunga summarily dismissed the previous United National Front (UNF) government. But the new regime has failed to restart peace talks to end the country's long-running civil war or address the morass of economic problems. Having berated the UNF for undermining living standards, the UPFA itself is the target of protests over broken election promises and rising prices.

Four weeks after the tsunami struck, there is a groundswell of anti-government hostility. Many survivors, emergency workers and others are justifiably angry over the lack of warnings and the inadequacy of official relief operations. Moreover, in contrast to the government's pathetic efforts, ordinary working people have taken matters into their own hands and banded together to help the victims, regardless of their ethnic background or religion.

The JVP has stepped in to exploit and pervert these sentiments of self-sacrifice in order to prop up the government. The party, which was formed in the 1960s on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism and peasant radicalism, is in office for the first time. Its chief characteristic is anti-Tamil communalism and support for a continued war to crush the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Despite its occasional claims to be socialist, the JVP is now part of a capitalist government that is presiding over falling living standards.

The main thrust of the JVP's proposals is for “national unity”. It calls for the formation of “a national operation centre for the nation building” to be headed by Kumaratunga or, in her

absence, the prime minister. The centre will consist of “all political parties and able officers,” along with the chiefs of the armed forces and police, business leaders, intellectuals and professionals. The body would be established through a “national convention” and responsible for all the tasks of reconstruction.

Any party could take part in the “national operation centre”, but in order to do so it would have to set aside “conflicting political differences” for one or two years. Under the guise of “unity” and “rebuilding the nation”, what the JVP is proposing to establish is an autocratic mechanism dominated by the government, the army and the state apparatus for suppressing opposition and dissent. An agreement to end “political differences” means above all to stop any criticism of the government.

While calling for unity in the abstract, the JVP has made clear that the LTTE and pro-LTTE organisations are not to be included. In fact, party leaders have suggested that now would be an opportune time to take an aggressive stance towards the LTTE—a view that is shared by sections of the military hierarchy.

JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa told the *Island* newspaper on January 9 that the LTTE confronted “unprecedented losses in men and material” as a result of the tsunami that “would have definitely blunted their offensive capability”. He called on the government to drop any plans to negotiate with the LTTE over its interim administration proposal—a step that the LTTE has warned will eventually lead to war.

The JVP has sought to whip up communal tensions by opposing the sending of aid to tsunami victims through pro-LTTE organisations. The North and East of the country, which have been ravaged by two decades of war, were directly in the line of the tsunami. Many of the victims are Tamils in areas under LTTE control and have no alternative sources of aid.

The party has also opposed any official contact with the LTTE by foreign politicians or officials, including UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. During an official reception on January 8, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe complained to Annan about the LTTE and insisted that international aid should not be sent to any LTTE-associated groups.

Under its “national operation centre”, the JVP proposes to set up an extensive bureaucracy. Seven subcentres are to be established for data collection, planning, welfare operations, human resource management, international and national aid collection, national mass media, and finance and auditing.

One of these “subcentres”—for “human resource management”—is particularly revealing about the class character of the JVP’s plans. The main activity of this apparatus would be to induce, and if necessary compel, people to carry out “voluntary work” toward “rebuilding the nation”. It could be “voluntary” or on “half salary”, the JVP declared, but the centre “should make one day a week a voluntary labour day” and “must decide what and where the hundreds of thousands of people should perform their voluntary work”.

The JVP’s proposal for “voluntary work” has nothing to do with the sacrifice of many ordinary people who donated money, goods and went in groups to help the victims. They gave of their own free will, in many cases because they knew that the government would provide no help. The JVP’s plan has the opposite effect: it is to subordinate and regiment all volunteers to a government that has demonstrated its ineptitude and to dragoon others into “voluntary” labour brigades. Needless to say, the “volunteers” will have no say in what they do.

The character of the JVP’s plan is revealed by the party’s own history. In the late 1980s, as part of its chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord, the party forced workers to strike and join protests at the point of a gun. JVP gangs of armed thugs killed hundreds of union leaders, party officials and rank-and-file workers who refused to back its jingoistic campaign to “save the nation”. It has formally eschewed such methods since being legalised in 1994. But as part of the ruling coalition, the JVP would now have the state apparatus behind its plans to regiment “volunteers” for national reconstruction.

Even before the tsunami disaster, the JVP had pushed for a “voluntary” additional hour’s work a day for all government employees in return for a pay rise in last year’s budget. Now the JVP is proposing that workers give up a day’s pay a week to assist the government’s reconstruction efforts. For many employees, the loss of pay would tip them into severe economic hardship. While insisting that ordinary working people sacrifice, the JVP has made no suggestion that the government is going to alter its priorities or for instance slash its huge defence budget.

According to the January issue of *Rathu Lanka*, 5,000 members of the JVP’s unions have already been dispatched for voluntary work. Sarath Manawadu, leader of the All Ceylon Railway General Workers Union, boasted to the newspaper about the comments of the transport minister regarding the union’s “good work”. “If the Manawadus [that is Manawadu’s members] had not sacrificed, we would not be able to run the trains,” the minister reportedly told the president.

The JVP has also indicated that, in the name of “national

reconstruction”, it will suppress any struggles by workers for their own demands. In response to an appeal from one of Kumaratunga’s trade union supporters for “industrial peace”, the JVP minister for small and rural industries, K.D. Lal Kantha declared that the JVP agreed to “refrain from trade union activities regarding salary increases and other demands on employees’ welfare”.

There is no doubt that the JVP’s plans, if implemented, would generate widespread opposition. In order to stifle opposition and whip up Sinhala chauvinist elements, the party is proposing “a national mass media centre”. As part of a propaganda blitz, the JVP calls for the centre to “target particularly the youth to promote patriotism and national unity... in order to building the nation on nationalist ideology...”

The JVP’s proposals are in line with the general thrust of the government and the media for all parties to unify for the sake of the nation. In her first speech after the tsunami, President Kumaratunga appealed for “unity” for the sake of the victims. A number of editorials have called for the major parties to set aside their differences at this time of crisis. What the political establishment is concerned about is not the continuing difficulties confronting hundreds of thousands of survivors, but rather the danger of an eruption of anti-government hostility on the part of working people.

The official response to the JVP plan has been favourable. A spokesman for Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party explained that the JVP’s proposals had been received and would be considered. She has already imposed a series of anti-democratic measures, including placing the military in charge relief operations and invoking draconian emergency regulations. No longer able to rely on the discredited traditional workers’ parties such as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party, the ruling elites are increasingly dependent on the JVP to justify such autocratic measures and suppress any opposition from the working class.



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