

The JVP and the political crisis in Sri Lanka

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A key factor in the Sri Lankan presidential election has been the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has used the campaign to further integrate itself into the official political establishment. The reliance of the Sri Lankan ruling elite on this unstable Sinhala chauvinist and populist formation is a clear sign of the deep impasse that bourgeois politics has reached.

In early September, the JVP signed an electoral pact with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the presidential candidate of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), whose government it left less than three months earlier. On the part of Rajapakse, this was an embarrassing cave-in, and it triggered ongoing recriminations within his own party. The prime minister agreed unequivocally to the JVP's demands—that he renounce a temporary deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to jointly administer aid to the victims of the December 26 tsunami; and, that he demand a rewriting of the current ceasefire and bolster the military.

By committing himself to a deal that sets the course for war, Rajapakse was playing with fire. But such is the decline in the SLFP's support, and the party's internal decay, Rajapakse clearly calculated he had no other choice. After more than a decade of broken SLFP promises, the prime minister needed the JVP to breathe some life back into the party's credibility. And he also needed the JVP, which, unlike the SLFP, still has a significant active base, as the raw material for the election campaign.

The JVP leaders seized the opportunity with both hands. They have figured prominently at Rajapakse's main rallies—hailing the prime minister as the embodiment of the Sinhala Buddhist ideal. The leader of the JVP parliamentary faction, Wimal Weerawansa, was appointed as Rajapakse's campaign co-spokesman. The JVP's main political leader Somawansa Amarasinghe has featured on the platforms, seated next to Rajapakse and offering advice. At the grassroots level, JVP members have provided the manpower to put up posters and banners, distribute leaflets, broadcast propaganda and carry out the other day-to-day work of the campaign.

Given the prominence of the JVP's role in the Rajapakse campaign, the question arises: why did the party not stand its own candidate? The JVP leadership has been remarkably coy about providing an answer. After signing the deal, Amarasinghe noted that the JVP would “with reluctance” have fielded a candidate if the discussions had failed. “However, as Mr. Rajapakse agreed to our proposals that need did not arise. We are happy about it,” he said.

Why such “reluctance”? The reason is that, in reality, the JVP was not negotiating with Rajapakse from a position of strength, but of considerable weakness. Having joined the ruling SLFP-coalition after the April 2004 general election, the JVP found itself in office—with four ministries—for the first time. It was now obliged to live up to its many promises.

Small farmers, especially in the Sinhala south where the JVP had a significant base, had high hopes in the JVP, but these quickly dissolved. The JVP agriculture minister failed to reduce the cost of fertiliser in line with the party's election undertakings and failed to provide sufficient funds to underwrite the government's “guaranteed” price for paddy rice. A grandiose and much publicised plan to renovate or build “ten thousand

tanks [small dams]” was completed, in some cases with “voluntary labour”, but many of the tanks were so small that they could only be used for washing. In the event, the program was more akin to “ten thousands baths”.

Fishermen were also quickly disappointed by the JVP minister in charge of their affairs. In the 2004 election manifesto, the JVP promised new harbours and anchorages, fish processing factories, inland fish breeding, local boat manufacture and cheap loans. None of these materialised—other than a one-off fuel subsidy for large and small boats that covered barely a few days' work. At the same time, the JVP minister imposed new burdens on fishermen, in the form of licence charges on boats and nets.

Young people had their hopes dashed as well. The JVP had been prominent in organising protests by graduates against the previous United National Party (UNP)-led government. Prior to the 2004 election, the JVP-SLFP coalition promised to provide more than 100,000 jobs for university and high school graduates. But once in government, it provided just 32,000 permanent posts, with others placed in temporary, low-paid positions.

Over the last decade, the JVP has made inroads into the working class, posturing as militants and even “socialists”, in contrast to the degenerated parties of the working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP). Workers quickly learnt, however, that the JVP was no different from these opportunist organisations. The JVP ministers were part of the cabinet that pressed ahead with restructuring and privatisation and even denounced strikers for being inspired by the opposition. The JVP unions openly functioned as strikebreakers, most recently in the island-wide strike by health workers.

The most glaring example of the JVP's contempt for ordinary working people was its response to the December 26 tsunami that claimed 30,000 lives and left half a million homeless. While the party expressed concern for the victims and dispatched some volunteer teams to affected areas, its ministers offered little in the way of assistance for those trying to put their lives back together. Nearly a year after the disaster, many of the victims are still living in makeshift accommodation, or with friends and relatives, with little or no government assistance.

Far from helping the victims, the JVP seized on the immense tragedy, which affected Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike, to stir up divisive communal antagonisms. The focus of the JVP campaign was a government proposal to form a temporary, joint administrative mechanism with the LTTE to distribute aid to tsunami victims in the north and east. As far as the JVP was concerned, this was a monstrous concession to the LTTE, serving to strengthen its demand for a separate Tamil state. It was “a betrayal” of the nation.

The JVP attack on what became known as the PTOMS agreement was utterly cynical. With its support flagging after being in office for just eight months, the JVP leadership calculated that an aggressive campaign against PTOMS would be a sure winner. The party warned President Chandrika Kumaratunga that it would quit the government and in June, after she signed the agreement, it carried out the threat. But the JVP's hopes of reviving its fortunes and burying memories of its ministerial failures through the anti-PTOMS campaign were dashed.

Having left the government, the JVP called a general strike and mass protest throughout the island, but the campaign was a flop. Clashes took place between JVP protesters and police outside parliament, but elsewhere workers and villagers simply failed to participate. In Colombo, about 60 people turned up to a rally outside the National Hospital; 200 appeared at the harbour and 100 took part in a lunchtime picket outside the headquarters of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). In many villages, the response was similar.

The JVP's threats of "Motherland first!! Workplace second! All those who are not participating to defend the motherland are anti-patriots" went unheeded. For many people, it was self-evident that the tsunami had hit everyone, regardless of language, religion or ethnicity. Everyone was in the same boat and everyone needed assistance. Whatever their thoughts about the LTTE and the war, a temporary, limited agreement to distribute aid to Tamils in the north and east was not going to "divide the motherland".

The JVP leadership was compelled to shut down its campaign and regroup. Its anti-LTTE rhetoric only began to gain some traction in August, after the assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. Without a shred of evidence, the party immediately seized on the murder to blame the LTTE and attack anyone who suggested that someone else could be responsible. The possibility remains that those who benefited politically from the assassination—various Sinhala extremist groups, including the JVP—may have had a hand in the crime.

Instead of resorting to its old populist demagoguery, however, the JVP sought to open up channels to the military, the state bureaucracy, business and the Buddhist hierarchy. The deal with Rajapakse was particularly timely. Not only did the prime minister agree to the JVP's demands and provide it with a prominent role in his campaign, he saved it from the embarrassment of fielding a candidate under conditions where the party's vote was likely to register a dramatic decline.

Behind the scenes, the JVP has been quietly pledging to big business that it will implement its demands in government. In an interview in the JVP newspaper *Lanka* on October 30, party leader Amarasinghe declared: "Some media try to present us as a bunch of headstrong radicals who want to drive the country back to the Stone Age. This is the grossest of lies.... We are completely agreed to encourage the private sector because we think that the earning of wealth is essential for the welfare of society.

"When our party emerged in the 1960s we had a Marxist economic model based on the Soviet and Chinese models. But by now Russia, China and even the other countries have accepted the free market economy. It is said that by putting this free market economy into practice China, the biggest communist country, is going to emerge as the biggest economy of the world by 2020 having now reached a growth rate of 9 percent."

These are very revealing comments. In the past, the JVP based itself on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism, Maoism and Guevarism. It was able to appeal to a layer of disaffected Sinhala rural youth in the wake of the LSSP's entry into the SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP's betrayal of socialist internationalism, and the struggle to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers, opened the door for radical communally-based organisations such as the JVP and LTTE.

Today, the JVP leaders are carrying out exactly what they previously denounced the LSSP for doing—taking part in a bourgeois coalition with the SLFP and implementing the dictates of big business. The JVP were never socialists, but now, as the party sidles up to the corporate elite, it is abandoning the last vestiges of its previous pseudo-Marxist rhetoric. The JVP's leaders have also ditched any opposition to imperialism—they remain silent on Washington's criminal activities in Afghanistan and Iraq and hold regular tête-à-têtes with visiting US officials at the American embassy in Colombo.

Workers, young people, farmers and the poor should take a very sharp warning from the JVP's references to China as a model. For Sri Lanka, it

would mean nothing less than the establishment of a police state, presiding over an economy geared to the most ruthless exploitation of the working class. Far from being "socialist" or "helping the people", the unfettered operation of the capitalist market in China has ruined farmers and thrown tens of millions of workers out of work, while enriching a thin layer of the emerging capitalist and middle classes.

Whatever the outcome of the presidential elections, the JVP will prove to be a profoundly destabilising factor. If Rajapakse wins, the JVP will expect a political payoff in the form of a greater role in the next government. But the party's entry into high office will only compound its deep internal contradictions. The more it accommodates to big business, the greater will be the hostility from its former constituency—including its own rank and file. As in the past, the JVP leadership will have only one response—to stir up the poisonous fumes of racialism and accelerate a return to war.

For Rajapakse to lose would be a major blow to the JVP, which would likely respond by refusing to accept the result and by launching a series of communalist provocations. Workers should recall the JVP's vicious campaign in the late 1980s against the Indo Lanka Accord, when it dispatched armed thugs to murder dozens of workers and political opponents who refused to take part in its "patriotic" protests and strikes.

The very fact that the JVP has become a key player in official politics points to the depth of the crisis of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka. The ruling class has no solutions to this crisis except to prepare for new and extreme extra-parliamentary measures. The working class must make its own preparations—above all, by turning to the building of an independent movement, uniting all sections of workers and the oppressed throughout the island, that challenges the very foundations of the capitalist system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and its presidential candidate, Wije Dias.



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