

Sri Lankan government negotiates with JVP ally on program for all-out war

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Amid open fighting between the military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over the past month, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has been actively negotiating for the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to join his ruling coalition. While a deal is yet to be struck, the fact that discussions are proceeding is one more clear sign that the government is preparing for all-out war against the LTTE and a savage assault on the democratic rights and living standards of working people.

The JVP, which is based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist demagoguery, supported Rajapakse during last November's presidential election. The backing of its 39 parliamentarians has been crucial for the survival of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. The JVP's price for its support was a more aggressive stance against the LTTE—the revision of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, the bolstering of the military and a distancing from the so-called international peace process.

During the current discussions, the JVP has proposed a 20-point “common program” with Rajapakse's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) as the basis for joining the ruling coalition. The common program amounts to the complete repudiation of the “peace process” and an open declaration of war to destroy the LTTE militarily. Key points include:

- * The immediate scrapping of the 2002 ceasefire as soon as the common program is signed. The JVP has been bitterly critical of the truce since it was agreed for granting too many concessions to the LTTE and has constantly sought to undermine it.

- * The dismissal of Norway as the formal facilitator of the peace process within a week of signing. The JVP has repeatedly accused the Norwegian facilitators and the Scandinavian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which currently oversees the ceasefire, of “LTTE bias”.

- * Immediate steps to impose government rule over areas that are presently under LTTE control, if necessary through the deployment of the armed forces.

- * The de-merger of the north-east province into two separate provinces, which were combined in 1987 under the Indo-Lanka Accord—the first attempt at a negotiated peace deal. Following the 2002 ceasefire, the LTTE renounced its demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam in return for negotiations on a significant devolution of powers to the north-east province within a federated Sri Lanka. The de-merger would effectively destroy the basis for further peace negotiations.

The JVP's proposal for talks with the LTTE fails to address any of the grievances of the country's Tamil minority. It simply denies that there has been any discrimination or that this was the reason for the outbreak of war. JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe told the press last month that there was not a communal problem, only a “terrorist problem.” Its plan to solve “administrative problems” among Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese is for very limited decentralisation up to the village level—a proposal that the JVP knows is completely unacceptable to the LTTE.

Rajapakse has since November been implementing significant aspects of the JVP's program. For months, the army and its allied paramilitaries waged a covert war in the North and East aimed at undermining the LTTE and provoking retaliation. The government has accused Norway and the SLMM monitors of bias and at talks in Geneva in February called for the revision of the 2002 ceasefire, leading to a virtual collapse of negotiations.

On July 26, the president ordered a major offensive to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate in LTTE territory on the pretext of providing water to farmers downstream. The operation in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement rapidly provoked fighting in other parts of the East and North of the island. The military

seized the opportunity to launch air raids on key LTTE positions and installations.

The JVP has collaborated closely in the war with the government providing JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa with helicopter transport to tour the war zones in the North and East. He visited several military camps and villages seeking to whip up support for the war among troops and Sinhalese villagers.

Rajapakse has, however, been reluctant to openly embrace the JVP's program. Talks on the JVP entering the government have dragged out since early July. Last week the president responded to the JVP's demands by saying that the government would not be "rushed to" abrogate the ceasefire or dismiss Norway as formal facilitator. As for the de-merger of the North and East, he pointed out that the JVP had filed a case in the Supreme Court over the issue and thus "it is a matter for the courts to decide."

Rajapakse wants to keep the JVP on side. The SLFP, which is also mired in Sinhala chauvinism, is susceptible to criticism that it is not taking a tough stance against the LTTE. At the same time, the government is hesitant to openly declare war on the LTTE. Rajapakse has continued to posture as a man of peace in order to maintain the support both of the major powers and within the country. Despite the lack of an antiwar movement, the majority of the population is fearful of, and hostile to, the return to a civil war that has already cost more than 65,000 lives over the past two decades.

As well as its support for the war, Rajapakse also wants the JVP's backing for the suppression of popular opposition to the country's social crisis. There is growing unrest among workers, as well as the urban and rural poor, over the privatisation, the loss of jobs and increasing prices. The rising costs of the war will inevitably fall heavily on working people, raising the prospect of a social eruption. The government is seeking to use the JVP's influence, particularly among the rural poor, to block such a movement.

The JVP, which had its origins in a guerrilla movement in the 1960s, still occasionally postures as "socialist" and demagogically denounces "imperialist" interference. The preamble to its 20-point program calls for a fight against "foreign enemies" and their local collaborators. It opposes the "peace process" because it gives the LTTE equal status to the government and denounces Norway for dictating terms to a sovereign country and treating it as a colony. While condemning Norway, the JVP remains silent on the criminal activities of US imperialism in

Afghanistan and Iraq, as the Bush administration is tacitly supporting the war against the LTTE.

The most significant aspect of JVP's program is its explicit call for all social issues to be subordinated to the war against the LTTE. It calls for "industrial peace" between employers and employees "in order to realise the aim of defeating terrorism". JVP leaders have already opposed a number of strikes as part of their chauvinist campaign to "defend the motherland".

In an interview on August 20, JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa told Lakkima: "Today the central issue of our country is this terrorist question. Because of that a large number of secondary problems have been concealed... We admit the people are under severe burden because of the increasing cost of living in the country ... However, surpassing all these problems, the terrorist problem has come to the fore."

Appealing to big business, Weerawansa argued that the war would not deter foreign investors. "[I]f the global investors can see that the government is working on a tough stand to implement law and order that will also be one reason to encourage investors," he declared.

The JVP's opposition to the strike action by workers is part and parcel of its broader attacks on democratic rights. In the name of defending the motherland, the JVP has supported tough media censorship and has campaigned against anyone who criticises or opposes the war as a traitor.

Rajapakse is seeking deals, not just with the JVP, but with other political parties in order to shore up the shaky ruling coalition. Last week the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Upcountry Peoples Front, which are based among Tamil speaking plantation workers, joined the government, giving it a parliamentary majority. The president has made an appeal to the United National Party (UNP), the largest opposition party, for a national unity government.

However, whether it finally joins the cabinet or not, the JVP will continue to have a major hand in setting the government's agenda, as it has done over the past ten months.



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