

# JVP assists the Sri Lankan government to pass its war budget

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The Sri Lankan government managed to pass its war budget in the third and final parliamentary vote last Friday. To do so, it depended on the support of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which came to the rescue of the shaky ruling coalition by abstaining rather than voting against the budget, as it had done in the second round.

The final vote was 114 in favour and 67 against, with the 37 JVP MPs abstaining. The JVP, which continually postures as a defender of workers and the poor, is now politically responsible for a budget that will not only intensify the country's reactionary civil war, but place its full burden onto the backs of working people through rising prices and cutbacks to subsidies and services.

The government, which began launching offensives against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in July 2006, has allocated a record 166 billion rupees (\$US1.5 billion) on military spending—a 20 percent increase over last year's record. To pay for the war, President Mahinda Rajapakse, who holds the defence and finance portfolios, has imposed a number of new indirect taxes and cut social spending.

With the exception of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), all the opposition parties back the war in one way or another. At the same time, the right-wing United National Party (UNP) opposed the budget in order to capitalise on growing popular anger over deteriorating living standards. Supported by two senior defectors from Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the UNP was hoping to defeat the budget and force new parliamentary elections.

The key to the parliamentary equation was the JVP. While the JVP did not have the numbers by itself, a clear stance against the budget would have encouraged wavering members of the ruling coalition to cross the

floor. The budget has thrown the JVP into crisis—on the one hand, it stridently demands an intensification of the “patriotic” war, but, on the other, it demagogically calls for measures to alleviate the plight of working people and claims on occasions to be socialist.

The issue opened up divisions in the JVP, which prevaricated for weeks prior to the second reading on November 19. The government narrowly won that vote after the JVP voted against. Prior to the third reading, the JVP issued a series of demands, not to ease the economic burdens, but to demand a tougher stance on the war, including the illegalisation of the LTTE. The JVP insisted in particular that Rajapakse tear up the 2002 ceasefire agreement, which, while a dead letter in all but name, allows the government to claim it still supports the so-called international peace process.

Behind the scenes, the government was compelled to bribe and bully its own MPs to prevent them voting against the budget. Four days before the vote, a paramilitary group allied to the military kidnapped the relatives of three TNA MPs and announced it would kill them if the parliamentarians voted against the budget. The three—P. Ariyanethran, K. Thangeswari, S. Jeyanandamoorthy—were not in parliament for the vote.

The UNP was also working overtime to woo government MPs. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem and three deputy ministers resigned and joined the opposition. Hakeem accused the government of discriminating against Muslims, particularly in the East. Last Friday, the day of the final vote, Anura Bandaranaike a leading SLFP member and cabinet minister, defected to the opposition.

There were also signs that the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), which are based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hills districts, were preparing to

cross the floor. UPF member V. Radhakrishnan told parliament that “people wanted them [his party] to oppose the budget,” which would have meant the loss of another two votes.

In these conditions, the defeat of the budget hinged on the JVP’s vote. Right up until the last minute, JVP leaders were declaring that they would vote against, as they had done last month. Even on Friday, JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva speaking on the party’s radio station, V-FM, confirmed that the leadership had decided to vote with the opposition.

On Friday afternoon, however, after talks with the president’s brother Basil Rajapakse, the JVP changed its stand. “A closed door meeting in Parliament at 2 p.m. on Friday between the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Parliamentary hierarchy and Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapakse had led to the JVP announcement that they would abstain from Friday’s crucial budget vote,” the *Nation* reported.

Those who were considering switching sides rapidly changed their minds. The CWC and UPF were not about to quit the government, give up their ministerial privileges and take a stand, if the budget was going to pass anyway. To underscore its support for the war, the JVP actually voted for the defence allocation, which was taken as a separate item prior to the final vote. After the budget was ratified, Basil Rajapakse made a point of thanking the JVP.

Justifying the JVP’s stance, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe told the press on Saturday: “A UNP triumph would have a catastrophic impact on the ongoing security forces campaign against the LTTE. There would have been chaos, political instability and that would have been to the advantage of the enemy. The JVP’s desire to ensure stability, particularly in view of the successful military campaign, surpassed the need to defeat the budget, thereby bringing the government to its knees.”

Amarasinghe’s statement speaks volumes. This party is for deepening the war and maintaining the stability of capitalist rule and the Sri Lankan state. Amarasinghe is simply rephrasing the JVP’s longstanding chauvinist slogan “Motherland First”. Those who will be forced to sacrifice their lives and living standards for this 24-year communal war are working people and their sons and daughters.

The JVP’s stance is completely in line with a

chauvinist press release from the defence ministry, hailing the vote for the budget. “[I]t was none other than terror chief, V. Prabhakaran, [LTTE leader] who had the greatest desire to see the government lose in the budget vote. Failure of the terror sympathisers, treacherous politicians and media manipulators is certainly a great victory of all peace loving Sri Lankans,” it declared.

The JVP’s decision to support the budget has exposed its posturing among workers. On December 11, prior to its decision to abstain, JVP parliamentarian K.D. Lal Kantha demagogically told the annual meeting of Lanka Postal Services Union (LPSU) that the Rajapakse government was the “most corrupt, inefficient and tyrannical government ever to come to power in Sri Lanka’s political history. The entire hierarchies from the very top to the very bottom are corrupt and guilty of mismanagement.”

This government is now even more dependent on the JVP, which has been weakened by its support for the budget. Far from stepping back, however, the JVP will intensify its communal “Motherland First” campaign and will not hesitate to use threats and physical violence against anyone who opposes the war—as the JVP has in the past.



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