

Sri Lanka: Acrimonious feuding inside JVP as party's support slides

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Bitter factional differences have erupted in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sri Lankan party that combines populist demagoguery with Sinhala communalism and strident support for the renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the dispute is dominated by personal abuse, organisational manoeuvring, court actions and violence, the tensions reflect the deep-going political and social crisis that is wracking the island as a whole.

The disagreements emerged publicly on April 8 when the JVP's parliamentary group chief Wimal Weerawansa launched a scathing attack in parliament on the party leadership. It appears that the JVP Central Committee initiated disciplinary proceedings against him last month at the instigation of party leader Somawansa Amarasinghe. Weerawansa has since been supported by nine other JVP MPs and has mooted the formation of a Patriotic Front as a vehicle for his political ambitions.

The party is rapidly moving toward an open split. During the past fortnight, two vehicles belonging to dissident MPs were seized and taken to the JVP headquarters. The parliamentarians responded by making a complaint to the parliamentary police, which led to the detention of JVP MP Jayantha Weerasekera and two others. The home of another dissident MP, Samansiri Herath, was attacked, allegedly by JVP thugs. Two organisers with the JVP front, the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), which is reportedly sympathetic to Weerawansa, were beaten up.

The immediate issue behind the rupture is the party's attitude to the government—whether to join the ruling coalition or remain on the opposition benches. The JVP was crucial in assisting Mahinda Rajapakse in narrowly winning the presidential election in November 2005 and boasts that it was instrumental in pushing the island back to war. At the same time, the JVP decided to keep its distance and not to participate in Rajapakse's governing United Peoples Freedom Alliance.

Even while formally part of the opposition, the JVP has been critical in propping up the shaky government. The JVP's 37 MPs have backed the military offensives against the LTTE in breach of the 2002 ceasefire and the final abrogation of the truce in January. They have voted to extend the government's draconian emergency powers, endorsed its attacks on

democratic rights and supported budget proposals that have heaped the economic burden of the war onto working people. Widespread popular hostility to the war and its impact on living standards have produced a sharp slump in support for the government, but also for the JVP.

Weerawansa and his supporters have been pushing to join the Rajapakse government. As he explained on the Derana television channel on Sunday night, the JVP leadership has been discussing how to reverse a drastic fall in party membership over the past few years. "My idea was to enter into the government and do some people-friendly work so that we would be able to have a mass base," Weerawansa declared. "My argument was that if we work separately from the government, Mahinda Rajapakse would take advantages of successes of the war against the Tigers (LTTE) as we are on the outside... After all, we took the initiative to renew the war."

Weerawansa, who is notorious as a demagogic supporter of the war, obviously sees a niche for himself in Rajapakse's cabinet. He and his supporters are virtually assured of ministerial positions as Rajapakse has been compelled to give every member of his alliance an official post in order to retain their backing.

In his April 8 statement to parliament, Weerawansa lashed out at the "conspiracy" within the party to relieve him of his posts and claimed to be a victim of enemies "that have an imperialistic agenda." Developing on the theme in comments to the *Irida Divayina* newspaper, he claimed that "conspirators" in the party "have joined hands with the [opposition] United National Party (UNP) and western forces." The party leadership, he declared was "following an agenda to bring UNP in to power".

Weerawansa's diatribe reflected the views of the most rabid supporters of the war, which regard any, even limited criticism of the military's repressive measures and atrocities as tantamount to treason. In reality, the right-wing UNP, which was responsible for initiating the protracted civil war in 1983, has fully backed the military offensives since July 2006. Apart from muted criticisms of the military's most flagrant abuses, the US and other imperialist powers have tacitly backed the government's war and ignored its tearing up of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

Weerawansa visited Kandy on Sunday to obtain the blessing of the Buddhist hierarchy for his plans to launch a new political front. Speaking afterward, he denounced his opponents even more stridently as stooges of the LTTE. “[T]here is a conspiracy to destroy the national leadership of the country. The LTTE is carrying that forward. Those who are promoting separatism have contributed towards dividing the JVP. Those who are supporting forces that promoting separatism in the country are happy today,” he said.

Weerawansa’s opponents in the JVP leadership are just as steeped in Sinhala chauvinism. At the same time, however, they are deeply concerned that the party’s remaining support will evaporate if it joins the government. Disciplinary action has been taken against Weerawansa for his failure to toe the party’s political line and take a more critical attitude to the Rajapakse government.

At a press conference on April 9, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe listed a series of issues on which Weerawansa had failed to criticise the government. These included the forcible evacuation of hundreds of Tamils from Colombo by police in June 2007, the rising cost of living, and arson at the Leader Press, which publishes the *Sunday Leader* that has been critical of the government.

In an interview in the JVP newspaper *Lanka* published on April 20, general secretary Tilwin Silva accused Weerawansa of trying to “tie the party to Mahinda Rajapakse”. The government, he stated, “wanted to put the party in their pockets... We suspect that Wimal [Weerawansa] has been used to control the party from within.... When they failed they took him out.”

The JVP is just as strident in its support for the war as Weerawansa. Silva told *Lanka*: “The country is facing many problems. Foremost is the national question. Using this question, a Western conspiracy and Indian intervention is going on. There is a conspiracy to make Sri Lanka a Kosovo... There is an economic crisis in the country... The Rajapakse government has no solution to these problems. It [the country] needs to have a new patriotic front of patriots and progressives.”

It is no accident that the dispute, which has been brewing for some time, has erupted into the open now. The JVP leaders are well aware that skyrocketing inflation is fuelling broad discontent, including among its traditional base of support in rural areas. The annualised inflation rate for food items hit an unbearable 37 percent in March, reflecting growing shortages, including of rice, the country’s staple.

After winning some quick victories against the LTTE in the East last year, the military’s operations in the North have bogged down. The bulk of the army is drawn from poor rural youth in the country’s largely Sinhala south. University students and public sector workers engaged in protests over funding cuts and wages have become increasingly disillusioned with JVP student and union leaders demanding sacrifice for the

war effort. Workers are starting to desert the JVP unions. Significantly, the JVP this year decided not to hold a May Day demonstration, which has traditionally been used to display its strength.

The JVP is often referred to in the Colombo and international media as “Marxist”, but the party has never had anything to do with Marxism or socialism. Its orientation was always toward impoverished rural youth, not the working class. From its formation in the 1960s, the JVP’s ideology was based on a mixture of Maoism, Guevarism and Sinhala communal politics, which evolved rapidly to the right under the impact of the country’s civil war.

In the late 1980s, the JVP launched a “patriotic” campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord, accusing the UNP government of betraying the country by agreeing to allow Indian “peacekeepers” into the North to suppress the LTTE and impose a peace deal. Fascistic JVP gangs killed hundreds of workers and political opponents who refused to support the JVP’s communal protests. In 1989, President R. Premadasa, who had been toying with forming an alliance with the JVP, turned on the party, murdered its leaders and then unleashed death squads throughout the south of the country that killed tens of thousands of rural youth.

The JVP was brought back into the political mainstream in 1994 following the election of Chandrika Kumaratunga as president. As opposition grew to the two major parties—the UNP and Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the JVP played a valuable role for the ruling elites as a political safety valve. The JVP’s fortunes began to decline, however, when it joined the SLFP-led government in 2004 and failed to keep any of its promises to help the poor.

Amid falling popular support, the JVP quit the Kumaratunga government in mid-2005, bitterly opposing its formation of a joint body with the LTTE to hand out international aid to victims of the December 2004 tsunami. Its denunciations of the aid body signalled a campaign to whip up communal sentiment for a renewed war against the LTTE. Uncertain of its support, the JVP did not stand a presidential candidate of its own in the November 2005 election but backed Rajapakse, who replaced Kumaratunga as SLFP leader, on the basis of a program that set the course for war.

The continuing slide in the JVP’s membership and broader support has now provoked a crisis in its ranks that is lurching toward a split. In his comments in Kandy on Sunday, Weerawansa indicated that the possibility of “patching up in the party was remote.”



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