

Sri Lanka: JVP vehemently opposes any concessions to Tamils

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In a speech last Thursday, the leader of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Somawansa Amarasinghe, stridently warned the Sri Lankan government not to “betray” the army’s victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by making concessions to the island’s Tamil minority.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has not the slightest intention of modifying the Sinhala supremacist character of the Sri Lankan state, which the protracted civil war against the LTTE was waged to defend. His vague calls for a “political solution” involving some form of devolution of powers to the North and East of island are aimed at securing the support of sections of the Tamil elite, not providing genuine democratic rights for Tamils.

The JVP backed the election of Rajapakse in 2005 and, while remaining formally in opposition, completely supported his renewed war. In resuming the war, Rajapakse in effect took over much of the JVP’s Sinhala chauvinist rhetoric. The JVP backed the government’s huge military budgets and its trade unions repeatedly sabotaged struggles by workers when Rajapakse declared that they endangered the war effort. Now, the JVP is trying to boost its waning support by attempting to outdo the president’s militarist, communal demagoguery in order to capitalise on the army’s victory.

Amarasinghe told the JVP’s rally last week: “We cannot fight like the security forces but will be compelled to wage war against the government if it continues to betray the nation by ignoring the opportunity created by the military victory.” After attacking India for waging a proxy war against Sri Lanka through the LTTE, he declared: “The government has succumbed to India and is prepared to devolve power on the basis of what is over and above what is in the 13th [constitutional] amendment.” Amarasinghe warned that the JVP would not allow that to take place.

Anti-Indian chauvinism has always been a central strand of the ideology of Sinhala supremacist ideology. The JVP, which

was formed in the 1960s on the basis of an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Guevarrism and Sinhala chauvinism, denounced Tamils as a fifth column for “Indian imperialism”. While India, under pressure from the Tamil population in southern Indian, did initially provide some assistance to the LTTE and other Tamil separatist groups, it quickly turned on them when the LTTE’s struggle threatened to inflame separatist sentiment in India.

In 1987, as the LTTE’s guerrilla war was spreading, India came to the assistance of the Sri Lankan government by signing the “Indo-Lanka” Accord and sending peace-keepers to the north of the island to disarm the LTTE. At the time, the JVP waged a reactionary campaign to “defend the nation” against the Indian intervention and the 13th constitutional amendment that devolved limited powers to provincial councils in the North and East.

The JVP’s fascistic gangs murdered hundreds of political opponents, trade unionists and workers who refused to support its patriotic demands. JVP gunmen also murdered three members of the Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, which opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord on the basis of an international socialist program.

In the 1990s, the JVP formally ended its “armed struggle” and was welcomed into the political mainstream as a useful political safety valve to mounting opposition to the two major bourgeois parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). It has all but abandoned its socialistic phrase-mongering, and while still posturing as being on the side of workers and the poor, participated in an SLFP-led coalition government in 2004 that made further inroads into the social position of the working class.

Amarasinghe’s resurrection of anti-Indian demagoguery is a rather desperate attempt to revive the JVP’s flagging fortunes. It is pitched in particular at the most extreme Sinhala chauvinist layers, including in the military and state apparatus, who

bitterly resented India's limited calls for a ceasefire to ease the plight of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians trapped in the fighting. In reality, New Delhi gave its full support for Rajapakse's criminal war, providing military equipment, training and intelligence.

Amarasinghe's denunciation of any attempt to devolve powers to the North and East appeals to the same layers of the Sinhala ruling elite that are adamantly opposed to any concessions to their Tamil counterparts. In its 14-point program issued on May 27 to "bring the nation forward," the JVP went further, calling for the rejection of even the window-dressing put forward by the All Party Representative Committee to resolve the "ethnic problem".

The JVP's program rejected "all proposals of devolution that confer police, land, financial and more powers to provincial councils" in the name of "national unity" and "equal opportunities for all citizens". These latter phrases in the government's utterances simply mean the maintenance of the status quo and the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination that was built up by successive Colombo governments over decades and led to the war in the first place.

In a direct appeal to the military leadership, Amarasinghe denounced international calls for a war crimes investigation into the killing of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final months of the fighting by the army's indiscriminate shelling. "It would be only on our dead bodies that any one of the government or the military could be dragged into international courts on charges of war crimes," he said.

Criticising the Rajapakse government's victory celebrations, Amarasinghe declared: "Many have forgotten those who played a major role in defeating the LTTE... The contributions of friendly nations such as Pakistan, China and Iran have also been forgotten." The reference to China is particularly significant as the JVP still maintains links to the Stalinist Communist Party of China and holds up the Chinese cheap labour platform as the model for Sri Lanka. China, which provided arms and financial assistance to the Rajapakse government, is currently trying to use its unqualified support for the war to boost its political influence in Colombo at the expense of its rivals, including India.

Speaking at the same rally, JVP general secretary Tilvan Silva boasted of the party's support for the "war on terrorism". He said that if a 100-page book were written about the victory against "terrorism," the names of the government would only appear on page 75. The JVP always had a clear ideology about terrorism and had fought from its very inception against the separatist struggle, he said.

An editorial in the on right-wing *Island* Tuesday the JVP against destabilising the government, declaring that Rajapakse's phone call to Amarasinghe following the army's victory must have "inflated the JVP's ego immensely". Declaring the victory as an opportunity for Rajapakse "to find a feasible political remedy acceptable to all communities," the editorial warned: "To trip him at this juncture is to ruin Sri Lanka's chances of putting the conflict behind her."

The *Island* speaks for layers of the ruling elite who are acutely aware of the precarious position of the Sri Lankan economy and are pressing Rajapakse to push ahead with a major onslaught on the living standards of workers and the urban and rural poor. Its concern for Rajapakse is a recognition that support for his coalition government could rapidly evaporate as it attempts to impose new economic burdens on working people. The newspaper fears that that JVP's populist agitation will encourage social unrest.

The JVP's 14-point program calls for a reduction in the size of the cabinet and demands that ministers, parliamentarians and higher officials accused of corruption be brought before the courts. It makes an appeal to the retrograde perspective of economic nationalism, calling for ending the sale of national resources, along with a halt to privatisations. Significantly, however, the program makes no reference to any defence of the living standards of the working class and no restitution of the wages, social services and price subsidies that were sacrificed during the war.

The most sinister aspect of the JVP's orientation is its strident defence of the army's war crimes. The JVP's anti-Indian and anti-Tamil rhetoric is aimed at currying favour with the most reactionary elements of the Colombo establishment that will not hesitate to use police-state measures against workers, students and farmers who oppose the government's austerity measures. The JVP is signalling that it will support such methods to "bring the country forward" and offering its services should they be needed.



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