Sri Lanka: The JVP and the executive presidency

K. Ratnayake
10 October 2009

The Sri Lankan opposition party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has recently made the abolition of the country's executive presidency the chief political plank of its various campaigns, including today's election for the Southern Provincial Council. If one were to believe the demagogues of the JVP, the party has now become a champion of democratic rights in opposition to the autocratic methods of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The executive presidency, established as part of constitutional changes in 1978 by the right-wing United National Party (UNP), gives enormous powers to the head of state and government. In the hands of Rajapakse, the post has become the centre of a politico-military cabal that treats the constitution, the legal system and parliament with contempt. Rajapakse is not only the president, but the defence minister and finance minister as well. The presidential secretariat, rather than the cabinet, has become the real centre of government decision making.

The JVP's campaign, however, is a cynical ploy designed to bolster the party's waning support among the rural masses and to cover up its own complicity in the crimes of the Rajapakse regime. Chief among these is its support for Rajapakse's renewed communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), including the military's indiscriminate bombardment of Tamil civilians and "disappearances" and killings by pro-government death squads. The JVP also supports the government's internment of more than 250,000 Tamil civilians in huge detention camps following the LTTE's defeat in May.

The JVP suddenly announced its push to abolish the executive presidency in August, as Rajapakse and government leaders indicated plans to hold the next presidential election early next year, prior to general parliamentary elections due in April. While the presidential poll is not due until 2011, Rajapakse clearly calculates his support will only continue to fall as the economic crisis in Sri Lanka and internationally worsens. His lies about military victory inaugurating a new period of "peace and prospective" are already wearing thin.

The presidential election poses a dilemma for the JVP. In 2005, it decided not to stand a candidate of its own. Having assumed ministerial posts for the first time the previous year, the JVP found its support rapidly falling, including among the rural Sinhalese masses that had looked to it to improve their lot. Fearing a poor showing, the JVP decided not to stand its own presidential candidate and instead signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Rajapakse to support his campaign.

Four years later, the JVP's difficulties have only multiplied. The party remained in opposition rather than joining the ruling coalition, largely because of the government's rising unpopularity. At the same time, however, the JVP supported Rajapakse to the hilt as he plunged the country back to war in 2006. It voted for his military budgets that imposed new burdens on working people and for draconian emergency powers. As the party's popularity continued to decline, a breakaway faction, headed the JVP's parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa, defected to the government in April last year.

In the latest round of provincial council elections this year, the JVP's vote collapsed. Its tally of council seats fell from 12 to zero in Central Province, 6 to 1 in the North Western Province and 23 to 3 in the Western Province. The outcome in today's Southern Provincial Council election is likely to be similar.

If the JVP decides to stand its own presidential candidate next year, its lack of support will be all too evident. As a result, it is left with the unpalatable options of backing Rajapakse, as in 2005, or the right-wing UNP's candidate. In this context, the JVP's call to abolish the executive presidency has an element of political manoeuvre—a threat to campaign against Rajapakse, as well as a plea to postpone the presidential poll and a hint that their alliance might be renewed. It has nothing whatsoever to do with defending the democratic rights of working people.

The JVP launched its "campaign" with a letter to Rajapakse in August, which has since been distributed at public meetings

© World Socialist Web Site

and seminars. Written by JVP secretary Tilwin Silva, the letter laments the plan for an early election and Rajapakse's failure to abolish the executive presidency as agreed with the JVP in 2005. "Casting aside the MoU signed with the JVP on behalf of the country and without any regard to the mandate you received, is an unethical act," he declared, appealing to Rajapakse to "abandon the idea of holding another presidential election and take steps to abolish the executive presidency as promised."

The JVP's attempt to portray the MoU—an electoral arrangement—as a sacred pact with the nation is absurd. The JVP helped Rajapakse to achieve his narrow win by promoting his "Mahinda Vision" program as the means to solve poverty and unemployment, defend democratic rights and promote peace. As soon as he took office, Rajapakse jettisoned his promises and rapidly moved to restart the war with the LTTE, which had been the MoU's central plank all along.

Now as it prepares for next year's elections, the JVP has resurrected the demand to abolish the executive presidency to try to dupe voters once again. In the Southern Provincial Council election, its leaflets declared that the JVP was the alternative to "anti-democratic rule" and the means for "good governance". However, as its record demonstrates, the JVP's opposition is not based on principle, but on political expediency.

The JVP was formed in the 1960s as a guerrilla outfit based on Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. Following the eruption of civil war with the LTTE in 1983, the JVP evolved rapidly to the right. It denounced the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, which attempted to end the conflict through the imposition of an Indian peace-keeping force, as a betrayal of the nation. In the late 1980s, its fascistic armed thugs murdered hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political opponents that refused to join its patriotic campaign.

The JVP's main social base was always among impoverished Sinhalese rural youth, particularly in the south of the island. After joining the political mainstream in 1994, the party functioned as a useful safety valve as discontent grew with the two major bourgeois parties—the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The JVP withdrew from the 1994 presidential race in favour of the SLFP's candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga after she promised to abolish the executive presidency—a promise she quickly ditched. She made the same pledge to the JVP six years later in 2001 in a failed attempt to retain a parliamentary majority.

The UNP took control of parliament and signed a ceasefire with the LTTE in 2002, creating a standoff between the government and the presidency, still held by Kumaratunga. Far from calling for an end to the executive presidency, the JVP, which opposed the ceasefire, mounted a campaign to demand Kumaratunga use her anti-democratic powers to bring down the UNP government and hold fresh elections. The JVP cheered on Kumaratunga after she dismissed three key ministers in November 2003 then threw out the whole government in February 2004, claiming it was undermining national security.

At the time, JVP secretary Silva justified the ousting of an elected government by restating its opposition to any peace deal with the LTTE. "This is a crucial time for Sri Lanka," he said. "It is not a time to consider religion, caste or creed but to assist the President to defeat separatism [the LTTE] and create a people-friendly political atmosphere for all communities. We must be prepared to defeat the anti-democratic forces in order to do so."

Just prior to the government's dismissal, the JVP signed an agreement with Kumaratunga paving the way for a joint campaign in the general elections in April 2004 and for a coalition government in which the JVP held the ministerial posts of agriculture, small industries and fisheries. Its period in office, which lasted only a year, proved to be a turning point. Fishermen, farmers and small businessmen that previously regarded it as an alternative to the two major parties were bitterly disappointed as JVP ministers implemented the government's pro-market agenda and the rural economy continued to decline.

Support for the JVP has never recovered. Its call for the abolition of the executive presidency is a desperate attempt to divert attention from its support for Rajapakse and his war, its backing for state repression particularly of Tamils, and its lack of any policies to address the deepening social and economic crisis facing the majority of working people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site