

Sri Lankan elections: JVP in sordid alliance to back Fonseka

K. Ratnayake
5 January 2010

The 2010 presidential election campaign in Sri Lanka is providing a glaring exposure of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This Sinhala populist party, which still speaks of defending working people and occasionally of “socialism”, has joined the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in backing former army commander General Sarath Fonseka.

Fonseka is standing as the non-party “common candidate” of the two opposition parties against incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse. Both Rajapakse, as president, and Fonseka, as the country’s top general, are responsible for three years of devastating communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in its defeat in May.

The JVP and the UNP both supported Rajapakse’s bogus “war on terrorism” and do not oppose his savage attacks on living standards and jobs. In a series of provincial council elections last year, the two parties offered no alternative to the government and lost badly. They are backing the “victorious general” as a means of counteracting Rajapakse, who has sought to confine the campaign to one issue—the defeat of the LTTE.

The JVP bears direct responsibility for Rajapakse’s rule. In 2005, it actively campaigned for Rajapakse against the UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. Rajapakse’s program—his so-called “Mahinda Vision”—was largely drawn up by the JVP, which was hostile to the then UNP government’s peace talks with the LTTE and called for a redrawing of the 2002 ceasefire. As the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate Wije Dias warned at the time, it was a program of war.

After Rajapakse narrowly won, the JVP remained in opposition, but agreed to back the government on key votes. After Rajapakse restarted the civil war in July 2006, the JVP voted in favour of his huge military budgets that led to deep inroads into public spending on essential services and subsidies. Through its unions the JVP helped to suppress any industrial action that threatened the war effort. As popular hostility to the war and the worsening economic and social crisis grew, the

JVP split in 2008 with many of its MPs forming the National Freedom Front (NFF) and openly joining the government.

The JVP’s disarray was apparent in this year’s provincial council elections—its seat count plunged from 12 to zero in Central Province, 6 to 1 in North Western Province, 23 to 3 in Western Province and 14 to 3 in the Southern Province. The loss in the south was particularly significant as the area has been a base of JVP support since it was founded as a guerrilla movement of impoverished Sinhala rural youth in the 1960s.

In the current election, the JVP is posturing as a defender of democracy and castigating the Rajapakse regime for “family cronyism and dictatorship”. In an interview given to the *Sunday Times* last month, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe stated: “He [General Fonseka] has agreed to abolish the dictatorial executive presidential system in Sri Lanka. Secondly, he has also agreed to restore and strengthen democracy and bring good governance.”

Lending the campaign a military flavour, the JVP declares that after winning the war, Fonseka is now engaged in a “second operation” to bring democracy to the island.

For the JVP and Fonseka to pose as “democrats” is absurd. Along with Rajapakse, Fonseka prosecuted the war and all its associated crimes—the military’s slaughter of civilians and the illegal incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians after the LTTE’s defeat. The JVP now denounces Rajapakse and his cabal for their dictatorial methods but it publicly defended the killings and disappearances of hundreds of people, including politicians and media workers, by death squads acting with the complicity of the security forces.

Claims by the JVP that Fonseka will end the powerful executive presidency are a swindle. Presidential candidates routinely call for its abolition—while in opposition—only to make full use of the office if they win. Far from being an exception, Fonseka, who has no significant base of support of his own—other than the military—will rely even more heavily on the sweeping presidential powers than his predecessors.

Whether Rajapakse or Fonseka wins the January 26 poll, the next government will launch a massive assault on public spending and the living standards of the working people. Rajapakse called the election two years early in the full knowledge that the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund will rapidly produce widespread hostility. In waging this “second operation”, Fonseka will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in using the police-state measures built up in 26 years of war to suppress any opposition.

While promising greater democracy and improved living standards to voters, Fonseka is offering himself to the ruling elite as a Bonapartist figure who will enforce “law and order”, crack down on corruption and establish a “disciplined society”. In his interview, JVP leader Amarasinghe hailed Fonseka in similar terms, declaring: “The general is not a bankrupt politician. He is not a crook... He is incorruptible.”

Just as it helped Rajapakse formulate his “Mahinda Vision”, so the JVP has joined with the UNP in drawing up a program of false promises to assist Fonseka. Last Friday JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Disanayake announced that the two opposition parties had agreed on a “common minimum program” to be implemented by the next government, including “relief” for farmers, public and private sector employees and pensioners, changes to the draconian emergency regulations and the resettlement of Tamil civilians.

None of these electoral promises will be kept. The continuing sharp differences between the JVP and UNP are evident in the fact that their “common minimum program” is not for a coalition government. According to their schema, the party with the most seats will form government—the other will remain in opposition, but will support the government on critical votes. All these calculations hinge on Fonseka calling parliamentary elections and abolishing the executive presidency, but the general has already indicated that he has no intention of being a ceremonial figurehead.

The JVP’s transformation into a pillar of the Colombo political establishment has been a protracted process. As a guerrilla outfit, the JVP launched a failed uprising in 1971 that led to the deaths of some 20,000 rural youth in the subsequent government repression. While mouthing “Marxist” phrases, the JVP was always based on Sinhala communalism, which became even more pronounced after the eruption of civil war in 1983.

The party bitterly denounced the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord for making limited concessions to the Tamil elite, and JVP gunmen killed hundreds of workers and political opponents who refused to join its “patriotic” campaign against the accord. After toying

with the idea of bringing it into the government, the UNP ended its tacit alliance with the JVP and unleashed the military, slaughtering an estimated 60,000 Sinhala youth in the process.

The JVP entered the political mainstream in 1994, after President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won power. Amid rising political disaffection with the SLFP and the UNP, the JVP played a critical role as a political safety valve for the ruling elites. In 2004, the JVP joined Kumaratunga’s coalition and became part of the government for the first time. The result was a rapid loss of support as those who had voted JVP as a protest against the two established parties concluded that the JVP ministers were no different from the rest of the government.

The JVP has never recovered. Terrified that its loss of support would be too obvious, it did not stand its own presidential candidate in the 2005 election and backed Rajapakse instead. After Rajapakse effectively took over the JVP’s chauvinist program, the party continued to decline, leading to the debilitating 2008 split over purely tactical issues—whether to join the Rajapakse government or not. Recently its national women’s organiser, Priyangika Kotalawala, resigned and joined the government.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to draw the necessary conclusions. The JVP’s evolution underscores the political bankruptcy of all forms of nationalism and communalism, even the most radical varieties. Working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—can only defend their most basic rights by unifying and mounting a political struggle independent of all factions of the ruling class for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. That is the program for which the SEP’s candidate Wije Dias is fighting in this election.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact