

# Sri Lanka: The JVP's cynical posturing as a defender of democracy

Vilani Peiris  
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The Democratic National Alliance (DNA) held a protest in Colombo last week demanding the release of its leader former general Sarath Fonseka and the restoration of democracy in Sri Lanka. The demonstration was another attempt by the DNA's main component, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to exploit rising anti-government sentiment by cynically posturing as a defender of democratic rights.

The JVP formed the DNA with Fonseka just prior to Sri Lanka's general election in April. The common ground for this alliance was Sinhala supremacism and support for the protracted communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that ended with the LTTE defeat in May 2009. Fonseka, who as army chief was directly responsible for prosecuting the war, fell out with President Mahinda Rajapakse and stood as the common opposition candidate against him in the presidential election in January.

Concerned to prevent Fonseka from becoming the focus for continuing political opposition, Rajapakse had the defeated candidate arrested just two weeks after the election on trumped-up allegations that he was plotting a coup. He is being held in military custody and faces five cases in courts martial and civilian courts—none of which have anything to do with the initial coup claims.

About 7,000 people took part in the DNA rally and march on July 21—overwhelmingly JVP supporters mobilised from its rural support base. The central thrust of the DNA's campaign is to “Free Fonseka”. The general's wife, Anoma Fonseka, briefly addressed the gathering to explain the rigid conditions of her husband's detention. “They [the government] can never stop us in our victorious march to our goal [of releasing Sarath Fonseka],” she said.

The JVP is also calling more broadly for the abolition of the executive presidency, the independence of the judiciary and the withdrawal of emergency regulations. At the rally JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva called for support for the democratic rights “not only of Sarath Fonseka but political opponents, journalists and artists.” Noting Rajapakse's plans to change the

constitution to extend his term of office, Silva declared: “We say go back to abolish the executive presidency and strengthen the parliament to implement the democracy.”

The witchhunt against Fonseka should certainly be opposed. If it can arbitrarily arrest and prosecute the presidential candidate and former top general, the government will use far more draconian measures against working people as they seek to defend their rights and living standards. After the LTTE's defeat, Rajapakse announced an “economic war” to “build the nation” and has begun to impose austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund including a wage freeze on public sector workers, increased taxes and cutbacks to welfare. The government has already begun to use its wartime, police-state methods to intimidate and suppress opposition to its economic plans.

No one should be under any illusion, however, that the DNA will defend democratic rights. Along with the Rajapakse government, Fonseka was centrally responsible for the military's war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. In the final months of the war, the army killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in relentless aerial and artillery attacks on LTTE-held territory. In the face of overwhelming evidence, the government has flatly denied that the army killed any civilians—a lie that Fonseka has never challenged because he was intimately involved.

Fonseka, together with the government, was responsible for hundreds of abductions, “disappearances” and murders carried out by pro-government death squads acting in collusion with the security forces. Following the LTTE's collapse, Fonseka also directed the detention of more than a quarter of a million civilians—men, women and children—in military-run “welfare villages” that were operated as internment camps surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by heavily armed soldiers.

As for the JVP, it actively campaigned for Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election and subsequently pressed the president to renew the communal war against the LTTE. It fully supported the military and denounced anyone who criticised its

actions, even in a limited way, as traitors to the country. Its campaign for “democracy” has nothing to do with defending the rights of ordinary working people. The JVP is concerned only with its own rights and more broadly preventing the growing hostility of workers and youth becoming a threat to the political establishment and capitalist rule.

The JVP has a long record of abusing democratic rights. It was formed as a guerrilla outfit among Sinhala rural youth in the 1960s on the basis of a mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala chauvinism. With the eruption of civil war in 1983, the JVP openly turned to jingoism in support of the military. In the late 1980s, JVP death squads murdered hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political opponents who refused to support its “patriotic” campaign against the Indo-Lanka accord that inserted Indian troops as “peacekeepers” into northern Sri Lanka.

Since dropping its guerrillaism in the early 1990s, the JVP has jettisoned its empty socialist phrasemonging and integrated itself into the Colombo political establishment. Central to its program has been trenchant support for the ongoing communal war and opposition to any power sharing deal to end the war through concessions to the Tamil ruling elites. In pursuing this agenda, the JVP has had no scruples about supporting anti-democratic methods.

The JVP now calls for the abolition of the executive presidency, but it has not hesitated in the past to support the use of the president’s autocratic powers. In 2003, the party actively campaigned for President Chandrika Kumaratunga to oust the United National Party government in order to scuttle the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE and to block peace talks. Kumartunga dismissed three key UNP ministers in November 2003, threw out the elected government in 2004 then formed a coalition with the JVP after winning general elections.

The JVP’s opposition to the country’s continuing state of emergency is also completely hypocritical. During the war, the JVP routinely voted in favour of the state of emergency. Even after the LTTE’s defeat, the JVP continued to support the parliamentary motion each month to continue emergency rule. Only recently has the JVP begun to criticise the measures and abstain on the vote. Only in June and July this year did it openly vote against the emergency’s renewal.

As part of its latest posturing, JVP has expressed “sympathy” for Tamil civilians whose lives have been devastated by the war. JVP leader Silva has declared that there is no “freedom for people in the country, there is no freedom for the northern [Tamil] people. They are still in the camps.” The JVP, however, backed the establishment of the detention centres last year even though the basic constitutional rights of the inmates

were being blatantly breached. Significantly the JVP has not called for the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, under which thousands of Tamils continue to be detained without trial in undisclosed locations as “terrorist suspects”.

At the same time, the JVP has opposed any, even limited, international investigation into war crimes and human rights violations. In June when UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon appointed a panel to investigate the final stages of the war, JVP leader Silva responded by declaring that “protecting human rights is difficult at times of war”. The Colombo political establishment as a whole is responsible for ruthlessly prosecuting the civil war for more than a quarter of a century. All of the main parties have blood on their hands and are determined to block any scrutiny of the military’s crimes.

This filthy record is testimony to the fact that the Sri Lankan ruling class as a whole has proven organically incapable of meeting the aspirations of working people for democratic rights and decent living standards. For more than 60 years, successive governments have time and again whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and bolster capitalist rule. While the DNA now declared that it is fighting for democracy, Fonseka and the JVP would have been just as ruthless as Rajapakse in implementing the agenda of big business. In the course of his presidential election campaign, Fonseka boasted of his military record and thrust himself forward as the “strong man” reviving the country.

The only social force capable of fighting for genuine democracy is the working class as part of the struggle to abolish capitalism and establish a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement a socialist program. The elementary precondition for such a struggle is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism to establish the basis for fight for the unity of workers in Sri Lanka, South Asia and the globe. The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation fighting for this internationalist and socialist perspective in Sri Lanka.



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