

Sri Lanka: JVP heading for another split

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A major rift has erupted within one of the two main opposition parties in Sri Lanka—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The party, which was formed in the 1960s as a petty bourgeois guerrilla movement based among rural Sinhala youth, has become thoroughly integrated into the Colombo political establishment over the past two decades.

Sensing the profound alienation of workers, the rural poor and young people from all political parties, a dissident faction has been calling for the JVP to “reform” and to return to its “Marxist” roots. The grouping has warned that if the party leadership fails to correct its course, it will split to form a new “left movement”. The JVP was never a Marxist party but was based from the outset on a mixture of Stalinism, Castroism and Sinhala populism.

The opposition faction is led by newer figures, including central committee members such as Senadheera Gunatilake, Kumaran Gunaratnam, Pubudu Jagoda, parliamentarian Ajith Kumara and Chandana Sirimalwatta, the editor of the party’s weekly *Lanka*. Several JVP student and youth group leaders are backing the faction and last week started their own newspaper, *Janarala* or People’s Waves.

Both factions have been engaged in a sordid fight to control the party’s resources, including its headquarters. The JVP leadership sacked members of the party’s media unit who occupied its political offices. The *Lanka* newspaper has been stopped by the JVP leadership with the assistance of the courts and the police.

The dissident group has accused the party leadership of adapting to “neo-liberalism”—that is, free market restructuring—and entering into alliances with capitalist parties.

Jagoda, the JVP’s education secretary, threw down the challenge to the leadership in a public lecture on September 28 entitled “Challenge of the Left”. He declared that the “left movement has been gripped by the pressure of neo-liberalism” and on a world scale has capitulated to “utilitarianism, pragmatism, and opportunism”.

Jagoda vaguely criticised the party’s stance on the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), saying there should have been more of a balance on issues of equality and democracy. He lamented the fact that the party is widely regarded as Sinhala chauvinist as a result of its full backing for the war. The comments were utterly cynical. He did

not oppose the war or the JVP’s long record of being among the most fanatical proponents of the conflict.

In his lecture, Jagoda opposed the detention of thousands of Tamil youth after the war without charge as “LTTE suspects”. However, he had nothing to say about the other atrocities and abuses of democratic rights carried out by the government and military.

The JVP supported the rounding up of nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians—men, women and children—who were herded into “welfare villages” after the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009. The JVP also defended the government and military from accusations that it was responsible for war crimes—the killing of tens of thousands of civilians in the final months of the war.

The “left” faction of the JVP is just as mired in communal politics as the rest of the party leadership. Its belated concern about the plight of detained Tamil youth is a desperate attempt to stem the party’s loss of support particularly among young people. Likewise, its criticisms of the JVP’s opportunist alliances with establishment parties are of a purely tactical, not a principled character.

In an interview with *Janarala*, Gunatilake described the JVP’s entry into a coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 2004 as a “blunder”. Similarly he attacked party leader Somawansa Amarasinghe as a “coalitionist” for advocating that the JVP join the Rajapakse government in 2006. Gunatilake has also criticised the JVP’s backing for former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka in the 2010 presidential election as “a mistake”.

Gunatilake and the rest of the dissident faction are just as wedded to bourgeois parliamentary politics as their opponents. In hindsight, they describe the various coalitions with capitalist parties as “blunders” and “mistakes” only because the JVP subsequently lost support. Significantly, in the interview, Gunatilake left the door open for similar alliances in the future, saying: “I do not rule out the opportunity for such matters in politics.”

The dissidents are calling for the removal of the current JVP leadership, including Amarasinghe, general secretary Tilvin Silva and parliamentary group leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who are regarded as too compromised by their wheeling and dealing

with the Colombo political establishment. These leaders have rejected the calls of their opponents for the party to make a “self-criticism”.

In his Colombo lecture, Jagoda declared: “Challenge of the left is finding the socialist road.” His faction calls for “the party to find its lost identity” and turn back to the teachings of founding party leader Rohana Wijeweera. These dissidents are no more capable of giving an honest accounting of the party’s history than their opponents.

The JVP’s communal politics stem directly from Wijeweera’s teachings, which were subjected to a detailed critique by Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League—the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. Balasuriya pointed out that the JVP’s orientation to the rural petty bourgeoisie and its hostility to the working class, particularly its racist antagonism to Tamil plantation workers, contained the political seeds of a future fascist movement. (Balasuriya’s *Politics and the Class Nature of the JVP* is available in Sinhalese).

From the outset, the JVP lurched between armed adventurism and opportunist manoeuvre. In April 1971, it led an abortive “uprising” in the south of the island that was brutally crushed with an estimated 15,000 youth killed by the security forces. Many of its leaders including Wijeweera were jailed and only released in 1978 by an incoming United National Party (UNP) government, which the JVP had tacitly supported at the election.

The JVP backed the government’s decision to plunge the country into war against the LTTE in 1983 and only came into conflict with the right-wing UNP after it signed a deal in 1987 with India to send “peace-keepers” to supervise a ceasefire and devolution package. The JVP denounced the Indo-Lanka Accord as a betrayal of the nation and whipped up a fascistic campaign against it. JVP gunmen killed hundreds of workers, union leaders and political opponents who refused to join its strikes and protests.

Facing mounting social unrest in the South, the new UNP president Ranasinghe Premadasa opposed the Accord in 1989 and sought an alliance with the JVP. Failing in the attempt, he turned on the JVP, murdering its top leadership including Wijeweera and unleashing the security forces against Sinhala rural youth. An estimated 60,000 were slaughtered by the military’s death squads.

The JVP was revived by the SLFP’s Chandrika Kumaratunga who won the presidency in 1994 as a useful safety valve for political discontent. As opposition grew to the Kumaratunga government and the opposition UNP, the JVP won its first seats capitalising on the protest vote. It fully supported Kumaratunga’s intensified war against the LTTE.

Its greatest “success” was when it entered a coalition with Kumaratunga’s SLFP in the 2004 election and won 39 seats. It joined the government and received three ministerial posts.

However, having entered government for the first time, the JVP’s support plummeted. Those who had voted for it as an alternative to the two major bourgeois parties were quickly disappointed as it backed all of Kumaratunga’s pro-market measures.

The JVP quit the government in 2005, but never recovered. Unwilling to stand its own presidential candidate in the November 2005 election, the JVP formed an electoral pact to back Rajapakse and campaigned for renewed war. Divided as to whether to join the government, the JVP remained in opposition but guaranteed parliamentary support and voted for its budgets.

Rajapakse, however, had virtually taken over the JVP’s program and plunged the country back to war in mid-2006. As the government gained its own parliamentary majority through a series of manoeuvres and deals, it no longer required the JVP’s services. The JVP’s internal divisions over whether or not to join the Rajapakse government erupted in a debilitating split in 2008, with a substantial portion of its parliamentarians forming a new grouping and joining the ruling coalition. After the LTTE’s defeat, the JVP has floundered from one manoeuvre to another—forming a coalition in the 2010 presidential and parliamentary elections with General Fonseka.

The JVP lost most of its parliamentary seats in the 2010 parliamentary election, retaining just 5, and in subsequent local elections has lost many seats in local bodies that it held in the past. During the war, it betrayed strikes and industrial campaigns by workers, and reined in student protests—all in the name of the war effort. As a result, support for its trade unions and student organisations has been dwindling.

Amid signs of developing struggles of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally, the emergence of a dissident faction in the JVP is a desperate attempt to breathe life back into a political corpse. The SEP warns that what is being prepared is a trap for workers and youth to block any independent movement of the working class. A genuine struggle for socialism can only proceed on an internationalist basis in direct opposition to the nationalist and communal politics of the JVP and the entire Colombo establishment. The SEP alone fights for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation in South Asia and internationally.



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