

JVP dissidents in Sri Lanka: a new political trap

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The emergence of a dissident faction within the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Sri Lanka in recent months is a further sign of the party's deep political crisis. The party split in 2008 over whether to join the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and now confronts another debilitating breakaway that would include much of its youth wing.

A recent lecture by JVP dissident Chameera Koswatte demonstrates that the opposition faction has no fundamental disagreement with the current leadership. The dissidents are engaged in a desperate attempt to revive the so-called "revolutionary" and "Marxist" traditions of the party and in doing so create a new political trap for workers and youth seeking a way to fight the government's attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

The lecture, entitled "The heritage we defend," was a rambling, repetitive speech that glorified the party's founder Rohana Wijeweera. Koswatte declared that since Wijeweera's death in 1989, the party leadership had been guilty of an "opportunist deviation" and "mistakes" that had led to the party's loss of support. These included the JVP's decision to enter a coalition government led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004, its support for Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election and its backing for General Sarath Fonseka in the 2010 presidential election.

In reality, the JVP's entry into a capitalist government in 2004 and its alliances with bourgeois figures like Rajapakse and Fonseka were not the product of "mistakes." They flowed organically from the petty-bourgeois, nationalist politics that dominated the party from the outset. The JVP was never based on Marxism, but eclectically combined Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. Its orientation was to the "armed struggle" of the peasantry, not the class struggle of the proletariat.

The JVP was formed in the wake of the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which entered the bourgeois government of Kumaratunga's mother, Sirima Bandaranaike, in 1964. Attacking the "old left," Koswatte declared in his lecture that the LSSP leaders "came from middle class families; studied in England; attracted to the left because of discrimination against Asians there; they learned only the theories of class collaborationism."

This "explanation" is false to the core. The LSSP's betrayal was the product of its abandonment of the principles of revolutionary Marxism—that is, Trotskyism—for which its leaders had fought courageously in the course of World War II as members of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI). The LSSP's post-war degeneration was bound up with the emergence of an opportunist current within the Fourth International headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, who encouraged the LSSP's adaption to the Sinhala populism of Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), was the only party to draw these political lessons from the LSSP's betrayal and to reaffirm the principles of proletarian internationalism. It was founded as the Sri Lankan section of

the International Committee of the Fourth Internationalism (ICFI) in 1968 in the struggle against Pabloite opportunism.

By contrast, the JVP was always mired in nationalism. It was bitterly hostile to Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution which oriented the RCL to the fight for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie as the only means for mobilising the rural masses in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

The RCL's founding general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya wrote a comprehensive book-length critique in 1970, entitled *The Politics and Class Nature of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, which definitively established that the JVP, for all its socialistic posturing, had nothing to do with the fight for Marxism.

Balasuriya wrote: "The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is the movement built by the Lankan Sinhala petty-bourgeoisie parallel to the middle class movements built in other countries around the world. Its aim is not to bring the working class to power but building the 'patriotic state machinery' to rally not only Sinhala workers, Sinhala peasants, Sinhala oppressed and Sinhala students but also sections of the native capitalist class on the basis of 'patriotism'."

In his lecture, Koswatte boasted that Wijeweera was a practical man who brought "Marxist-Leninist theory down to the earth" and discussed politics in remote villages. Wijeweera's discussions, however, involved a rejection of the working class as the revolutionary class, and redefinition of the term "proletarian" to apply to the rural poor and other oppressed social strata. Wijeweera was openly contemptuous of the struggles of the working class as being merely "the fight for porridge."

What Wijeweera and the JVP rejected was the protracted and difficult struggle for the independent political mobilisation of the working class, and behind them the rural masses, as the only basis to fight for socialism in Sri Lanka and internationally. As Balasuriya explained, the JVP, like all political formations based on the petty bourgeoisie, veered wildly between adventurism and cringing support for sections of the bourgeoisie. The result was one disaster after another for the Sinhala rural youth who were drawn into the JVP.

Koswatte claims that the JVP's support for Kumaratunga, Rajapakse and Fonseka was a new phenomenon. However, shortly after the party's formation, Wijeweera hailed the second Bandaranaike coalition government with the LSSP and Stalinist Communist Party, formed in 1970, as "progressive" and pledged to defend it against "reactionaries." An article in the JVP's newspaper, *Janatha Vimukthi*, advised that this "united front government should seek support not from the armed forces ... but from the masses of the proletarian classes."

Months later, the JVP launched an adventurist uprising in April 1971 against the "reactionary" Bandaranaike government that was savagely suppressed by the security forces, with an estimated 15,000 youth killed. Koswatte is incapable of making any serious appraisal of this disaster and still claims it as proof of the JVP's "revolutionary" credentials.

Wijeweera, who was jailed following the failed uprising, made an empty “self-criticism,” saying that his party had been mired in “Menshevik politics.” There was nothing scientific about his use of the term “Menshevik.” It was simply a convenient word, never explained, to cover over the next turn by the JVP—this time to the right-wing United National Party (UNP). The JVP tacitly supported the UNP in the 1977 election and in return its leaders were released.

Following the JVP uprising, the Bandaranaike government openly turned to Sinhala chauvinist politics—imposing a communal constitution in 1972 that entrenched Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the only official language. The officially sanctioned discrimination against Tamils radicalised Tamil youth and led to the formation of armed groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) advocating a separate Tamil state. After taking power, the UNP accelerated the drive to civil war through a series of anti-Tamil provocations designed to deflect attention from the devastating impact on working people of its own pro-market policies.

In his book, RCL general secretary Balasuriya warned about the communal character of the JVP’s politics and its branding of Tamil plantation workers as a tool of Indian expansionism. He foresaw that “this communal opposition towards plantation workers will develop into fascism and the JVP is building in Sri Lanka an anti-working class force that could be used by a future fascist movement.” That prediction was confirmed with the outbreak of civil war in 1983.

The JVP quickly became vociferous cheerleaders of the communal conflict to suppress the democratic rights of the island’s Tamil minority. The JVP bitterly opposed the 1987 deal by the UNP government under President J. R. Jayawardene with India to impose a settlement backed by Indian peace-keeping troops for a limited devolution powers to the North and East. The JVP opposed the Accord, not from the standpoint of the working class, but as a betrayal of the nation.

The JVP waged a fascistic campaign against the Accord, killing hundreds of workers and political opponents, including three RCL members, who refused to join its patriotic strikes and protests. At the same time, Wijeweera held secret negotiations in 1989 with the new UNP President R. Premadasa, who was hailed as “progressive” for opposing the Accord. Premadasa ultimately turned on the JVP, fearful not so much of its leadership, but its inability to control its rural base. The security forces brutally murdered Wijeweera and most JVP leaders, then slaughtered an estimated 60,000 Sinhala rural youth.

Koswatte still considers the JVP’s fascistic campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord as part of the heritage that he defends. At a rally last weekend to commemorate Wijeweera and other JVP martyrs, he declared: “Let us fight for a free, beautiful new world. If necessary as they did it in the past, let us fight.” Koswatte’s glorification of Wijeweera is a clear warning that the JVP dissidents have nothing to offer workers and youth but the nightmare of communal politics that has already produced a quarter century of civil war.

The murder of Wijeweera was a turning point for the JVP, but this was mainly because it coincided with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The party joined the international wave of renunciation by various pseudo-radical organisations bemoaning the failure of “socialism.” Only the ICFI insisted that it was not socialism that failed but Stalinism and its nationalist outlook of “socialism in one country.” The JVP joined a long line of guerrilla movements that abandoned the “armed struggle” in exchange for a place in bourgeois politics.

In Sri Lanka, the JVP struck a deal with the SLFP to withdraw its candidate in the 1994 presidential election in favour of Chandrika Kumaratunga. After she won the presidency, Kumaratunga ended the ban on the JVP and smoothed the way for its entry into the Colombo political establishment. For the next decade, the JVP was able to capitalise on

growing popular disaffection with the two major parties—the UNP and SLFP—to build up a significant parliamentary faction.

Koswatte and his dissident faction now criticise the JVP leaders for their sordid manoeuvres with bourgeois parties, its private chats with US embassy officials and its overtures to the corporate elite. There was no indication at the time of any opposition from the “dissidents.” Their criticism of the JVP leadership and its “opportunist deviation” takes place now because they see in hindsight that the JVP’s entry into the Kumaratunga government in 2004 marked the beginning of its electoral decline. Popular disgust with the JVP emerged as its ministers imposed Kumaratunga’s pro-market agenda.

Similarly, the JVP dissidents now make occasional critical references to Rajapakse’s conduct of the war against the LTTE. The present “opposition,” however, is strictly limited and does not include a condemnation of the war, the continued military occupation of the North and East or the many war crimes and atrocities carried out by the government and the military. For the past two decades, the JVP, of which they were part, has been the most rabid opponent of any attempt to negotiate an end to the war.

While berating the JVP leaders for their alliances with bourgeois parties, the dissident faction has not ruled out their own opportunist manoeuvres. In an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, one of the faction leaders, Senadheera Gunatilake, speaking about alliances with other parties, declared: “I do not rule out the opportunity for such matters in politics.”

Like the leaders they denounce, the JVP dissidents are anxiously seeking to find ways of halting the present slide in support, especially among students and young people. All of these factions are looking over their shoulder at the growing hearing for the SEP and the International Students for Social Equality and the principles of socialist internationalism. The support for the SEP reflects a widespread disgust with the opportunist manoeuvres of the major parties and pseudo-radical outfits, and with the communal politics on which they are all based.

In a recent lecture, JVP secretary Tilvin Silva declared that the SEP simply published a website and was “a negligible force.” The dissident faction has made similar dismissive remarks—which begs the question as to why they would even bother to comment if the SEP and the ideas for which it fights were so unimportant. Housing Minister Wimal Weerawansa, who broke from the JVP in 2008, was more astute when he declared in his lecture on the JVP crisis that it was the “SEP Marxist fundamentalists” who stood to gain.

The SEP urges workers and youth to reject all the JVP factions and their nationalist politics. The touchstone of a genuine struggle for socialism has always been internationalism—the fight to unite workers regardless of nationality, ethnicity, language, gender or religion against their common oppressor—the profit system. Opportunists and petty-bourgeois radicals have always been organically hostile to such a fight as it cuts across their own political adaptation to one or other section of the capitalist class.

We urge workers and young people to turn to a serious study of the program and history of the SEP and ICFI, which alone have fought for the fundamentals of contemporary Marxism—that is, Trotskyism—and to join and build the SEP as the necessary leadership of the working class for the revolutionary struggle ahead.



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