

Sri Lanka: The JVP's sham support for democratic rights

K. Ratnayake
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The Sri Lankan opposition party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has issued a pamphlet titled “An approach to solve the national question” as part of its campaign for the forthcoming northern provincial council election. While putting on a bogus display of sympathy for Tamils living in the war-ravaged North, the pamphlet’s central thrust is a strident defence of the capitalist state dominated by the Sinhala bourgeoisie.

The document completely covers up the JVP’s role during the government’s protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Throughout the conflict that began in 1983 and ended in the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, the JVP openly supported the war and lined up with other bourgeois and chauvinist parties to stir up anti-Tamil communalism.

The JVP supported the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2005, urged him to restart the war in 2006, and sabotaged the struggles of workers under the communal banner of “Motherland first”—meaning that everything had to be sacrificed to the war effort.

The JVP defended the massacre of tens of thousands of civilians by the military in its final offensives, the incarceration of 300,000 Tamil refugees in army-controlled camps at Manik Farm, and the arbitrary detention of 11,000 youth as “LTTE suspects.”

Now the JVP cynically postures as a champion of the democratic rights of Tamils. The introduction to its pamphlet criticises the Rajapakse government for failing to use “the situation that emerged after the conclusion of the 30-year separatist war to solve the country’s burning questions, including the national problem.”

The war, however, was a product of the so-called national problem—the resort by successive Colombo governments to anti-Tamil discrimination and pogroms as a means of dividing the working class and consolidating their rule. Rajapakse restarted the war in 2006 for the same reasons—not to address the “country’s burning questions” but to divide and suppress the working class. Since the end of the conflict, the government has increasingly used police-

state methods against the struggles of workers and youth.

Having fully backed the war, the JVP has suddenly “identified” the terrible consequences, including the mass displacement of people, war widows, political prisoners, the lack of democracy, land and housing, and indebtedness. The JVP has also “identified” the problems of language, the obstruction of cultural rights and discrimination against various ethnic groups.

The JVP, which over the past two decades has become thoroughly integrated into the Colombo political establishment, paid lip service to the need for a “socialist transformation.” Its pamphlet, however, then declared that “there are many problems that can be solved and should be solved within the capitalist system that affect the people in the northern and eastern provinces.”

The JVP’s proposed “reforms” have nothing to do with meeting the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people—Tamil, Muslim or Sinhala. Rather they are all aimed at strengthening the capitalist state as it confronts deepening opposition from the working class and oppressed masses. The JVP calls for a new constitution that would abolish the present executive presidency, establish “people’s councils” and designate Sinhala, Tamil and English as official languages.

The JVP defended the executive presidency during the renewed conflict with the LTTE, declaring it necessary to prosecute the war. President Rajapakse used his constitutional powers to concentrate decision-making in a cabal of select cabinet ministers, generals and unelected bureaucrats. The JVP’s call for the abolition of the executive presidency is aimed at reviving illusions in the widely discredited parliamentary system, as well as undermining the ruling clique around Rajapakse.

The JVP’s proposal for “people’s councils” is bound up with its opposition to the provincial councils established in 1987, under the 13th Amendment to the constitution as part of the Indo-Lanka Accord. The agreement between New Delhi and Colombo paved the way for Indian “peace-keeping” troops to disarm the LTTE, while making limited

concessions to the Tamil elite.

The JVP denounced the Indo-Lankan Accord on a communal basis, declaring it a threat to the unitary capitalist state. It launched a reactionary “patriotic” campaign to “defend the Motherland”, unleashing its gunmen in fascistic attacks on workers, trade unionists and political opponents who refused to take part. JVP thugs killed three members of the SEP’s forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), which opposed the Accord on a class basis. As the RCL had warned, the United National Party (UNP) government used the JVP’s campaign to launch mass repression in which military-linked death squads massacred some 60,000 rural Sinhala youth in the island’s South.

In its election pamphlet, the JVP blames the 13th amendment for giving a “new lease of life to communalism.” It opposes calls by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) for its full implementation, including devolved land and policing powers. As in the late 1980s, the JVP promotes anti-Indian chauvinism, now declaring that India has frequently sought to impose “its hegemony on Sri Lanka” and attacking its support for the 13th amendment as a violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty. While not stated in its pamphlet, the JVP has repeatedly called for the abolition of the provincial council system, claiming it “paves the way for separatism.”

Within this context, the JVP’s plan for “people’s councils” can only be interpreted as a further strengthening of the central government. The councils would be set up by a committee of officials and representatives from parliamentary parties, to cater for “backward communities” and those facing “ethnic oppression.” Their powers would be far less than the existing provincial councils. Moreover, each council would appoint a representative to parliament—effectively entrenching communal divisions.

The JVP’s other proposals are aimed at making cosmetic changes to the state apparatus to defuse resentment and hostility among the Tamil minority, while at the same time consolidating the machinery of the state, especially in the war-torn northern and eastern provinces. It calls for public officers, police and security forces to be taught Tamil to make them more effective. It calls for “limiting militarisation” of the North and East, but is opposed to ending the military occupation of these areas.

The JVP trades on its origins as a “people’s liberation movement”, but this party has nothing to do with socialism or Marxism. From its inception in the 1960s, it was based on Maoism and Guevarrism, combined with Sinhala populism.

In his insightful analysis, *The class nature and politics of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, written in 1970, former RCL general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya exposed the communal outlook inherent in its program and foreshadowed

its right-wing evolution. The JVP branded the Tamil-speaking plantation workers as “an enemy” of the Sinhala working class and called for a struggle against “Indian expansionism.”

The JVP’s “patriotic” campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord and its fascistic attacks on workers in the late 1980s were bound up with a sharp shift to the right by similar organisations around the world, associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The JVP ended its “armed struggle” and, with the blessing of the ruling elites, took its place within the parliamentary arena, embracing pro-market restructuring.

In 2001, the JVP junked its anti-imperialist phrasemongering and wrote to US President George W. Bush to back his “war on terrorism” and invasion of Afghanistan. In 2004, the party joined the government of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and accepted three cabinet posts. It backed Rajapakse’s presidential campaign in 2005 on the condition that it end the ceasefire with the LTTE and, in 2010, supported ex-army commander Sarath Fonseka, who was directly responsible for war crimes, as the opposition presidential candidate.

The degeneration of the JVP into a right-wing, bourgeois party based on Sinhala chauvinism graphically exposes the reactionary basis of all forms of nationalism and communalism. As the entire history of Sri Lanka since formal independence in 1948 demonstrates, the defence of democratic rights is completely bound up with the struggle to abolish capitalism. The Socialist Equality Party is the only party standing in the provincial election fighting to unite and independently mobilise workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program to meet their common class interests.



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