

Sri Lankan ex-radical calls for a JVP presidential candidate

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Dayan Jayatilleka, a former middle class radical turned diplomat and political adviser to the Sri Lankan establishment, has proposed that Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the new leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), should be the main opposition candidate in the next presidential election. Media speculation is rife that President Mahinda Rajapakse is planning to hold the election in early 2015, though constitutionally it is not due until 2016.

As a student, Jayatilleka embraced Maoism and Castroism in the 1970s and joined the armed Tamil separatist group, the Eelam Peoples Liberation Front (EPRLF), in the 1980s. Over the past three decades, he has integrated himself into the Colombo political establishment, first as an adviser to United National Party (UNP) President R. Premadasa in the late 1980s and more recently as a senior diplomat.

In 2007, Rajapakse appointed him as Sri Lanka's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva, where he served for four years. The job was a sensitive one. He had to defend the Rajapakse government at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) against the US-led campaign, following the 2009 defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for an inquiry into the military's war crimes. Having blocked an UNHRC resolution in 2009, he fell out with Rajapakse, was transferred to Paris, then dismissed. He has since become a vocal opponent of the government.

Jayatilleka speaks for sections of the ruling class whose interests have been undermined by Rajapakse's cronyism and autocratic methods of rule. They fear that the latest US-sponsored UNHRC resolution in March, establishing an international inquiry into the Rajapakse government's human rights abuses, is the prelude to isolation, sanctions and economic crisis, when social tensions are already at breaking point.

Jayatilleka is well aware that Washington's hypocritical concern for "human rights" is a means for pressuring Sri Lanka to distance itself from Beijing. He advocates a shift toward the West and closer ties with New Delhi by cutting a deal with Sri Lanka's Tamil elites and granting provincial autonomy to the island's North and East.

In an article published last month, entitled "Elections 2015: The Stakes," Jayatilleka warns that under Rajapakse, Sri Lanka is heading for a disaster. If Rajapakse wins the next election, it "will almost certainly thwart the chances for re-opening of space and democratic reforms." The Sri Lankan state would "splinter at its northeastern periphery and the country will be divided," because Rajapakse is not ready to give autonomy. In a veiled reference to rising social unrest, Jayatilleka declares that "[government] repression and anarchy [of working people] will war with each other in the South."

Jayatilleka's article examines possible opposition candidates, but his conclusion is striking. "What is needed to prevent catastrophe is a Hassan Rouhani-type candidacy: a moderate patriot/nationalist i.e. liberal or progressive Sinhala Buddhist." He insists that a leader from the right-wing UNP or another "common candidate" would be no match for Rajapakse.

The reference to Rouhani speaks volumes. It is a recognition that under Rajapakse, Sri Lanka could end up in the same boat as Iran—vilified by Washington as a rogue state. Rouhani was installed as Iran's president last year in a bid to end the international sanctions on Iran, reach a rapprochement with Washington and implement a wave of pro-market restructuring and austerity measures.

Casting around for a Sri Lankan Rouhani to galvanise the opposition, Jayatilleka anoints the JVP leader. "The

country would be better served by rallying round an out-of-the box presidential candidacy from the Left Opposition: Anura Kumara Dissanayake. I regard him as a far more serious moral, ethical and ideological challenge to the Rajapakse ‘Raj,’” he declares.

“If his [Rajapakse’s] margin of victory is whittled down, the dominoes will begin to fall at the parliamentary election,” Jayatilleka declared. Rajapakse would lose his two-thirds parliamentary majority and the power to change the constitution. “This will make it possible to reduce the power of oligarchy around Rajapakse. The resultant return of rationality and realism will resolve the crisis in Sri Lanka’s relations with its neighbours and the world.”

The turn to the JVP is highly significant. The JVP was formed in the late 1960s on the basis of a mixture of Stalinism, Castroism, Sinhala populism, empty anti-imperialist rhetoric and the promotion of the “armed struggle.” It led a disastrous armed uprising in 1971 that was ruthlessly crushed with the killing of at least 15,000 Sinhala rural youth.

Following the outbreak of communal war against the LTTE in the 1980s, the JVP swung sharply to the right, abandoning its Marxist pretensions and backing the army. Its “patriotic” campaign against the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord involved fascistic attacks by its armed gunmen on workers and political opponents.

Like Jayatilleka, the JVP has long since integrated itself into the political establishment and has cordial relations with the US embassy in Colombo. In 2004, the JVP joined the coalition government of Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party predecessor, Chandrika Kumaratunga, held three ministerial powers and supported pro-market restructuring.

The JVP actively campaigned for Rajapakse in the 2005 election and supported his tearing up of the ceasefire with the LTTE and renewal of civil war in 2006. Despite being on the opposition benches by then, the JVP fully backed the war, defended the military’s atrocities and suppressed strikes by workers in the name of “defending the Motherland.”

The JVP announced “a new policy framework” in February, entitled “Our Vision.” Behind its phrase-mongering about “democracy” and “justice,” the party is promoting itself as a reliable defender of investors and the vehicle for a “modernised and industrialised economy.” It presented the document for prior approval

to the representatives of big business at the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce before its adoption at a party conference. Dissanayake, who is known for his connections in ruling circles, was installed as leader at the same conference.

Despite this record, sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite no doubt still consider the JVP untested to hold the reins of power. In an article in March, Jayatilleka pointed to the experience of the Latin American bourgeoisie to convince doubters that his “out-of the box” suggestion is a viable means to defend their interests.

“[R]enewal of the JVP through its new young leader [Dissanayake] brings to mind the electoral renaissance of ex-revolutionary groups in Latin America,” Jayatilleka wrote. “Given the urgency of the Sri Lankan crisis, I have no hesitation in saying ... society may—and should—shift a few steps leftward, to a JVP-centric broad Oppositional project at both Presidential and parliamentary elections ... along the lines of the successful Latin American populist-democratic left.”

There is a growing fear within ruling circles of the explosive social tensions emerging after decades of war and relentless attacks on living conditions and basic democratic rights. A turn to the United States and away from China will inevitably mean an end to cheap loans, and ever more insistent demands for austerity. Amid widespread alienation from the government and opposition parties like the UNP, Jayatilleka’s advice to the ruling class is to “shift a few steps leftward” and rely on the JVP to contain the resistance of workers and the rural poor.

The entire record of the JVP is a warning to the working class that it would be a ruthless defender of the Sri Lankan capitalism.



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