

Sri Lanka: JVP election manifesto woos big business

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The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) released its manifesto for the August 17 general election in Sri Lanka late last month. Entitled “The Accord of Conscience,” its overriding aim is to demonstrate to the ruling elites that it is a reliable and viable alternative to the two main bourgeois parties—the ruling United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The JVP, which was established in the 1960s advocating the “armed struggle” by rural Sinhala youth, has long been integrated into the Colombo political establishment, exchanging its guerrilla fatigues for parliamentary seats. It is seeking to function as a political safety valve for the widespread hostility among working people to the UNP and the SLFP.

The JVP’s ability to do so, however, has been seriously undermined by falling support and a series of debilitating splits since it joined an SLFP-led coalition government in 2004 and assisted in implementing pro-business policies. The number of JVP parliamentarians plunged from 39 in 2004 to 4 in the 2010 general elections. In the latest round of provincial council elections in 2013 and 2014, its overall seat count in the central, north western, western and southern provinces collapsed from 55 to 7.

Conscious of the JVP’s role in diverting public alienation into safe parliamentary channels, the Colombo media gave its manifesto launch on July 22 broad publicity. The state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN) broadcast the entire event live for the cost of just 54,600 rupees (\$4,082)—substantially less than the usual price of around 200,000 rupees.

The discount was undoubtedly for services rendered to President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The JVP backed the election of Sirisena in the presidential election in January—a carefully orchestrated operation backed by the US to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse who Washington regarded as too close to Beijing. Sirisena then appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister to head a minority UNP-led government.

In the current election campaign, the JVP is posturing as an opponent of the UNP and the SLFP. In presenting the manifesto to a special party conference, JVP leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake criticised both the UNP and SLFP, declaring:

“The successive governments over last 67 years have done nothing to develop the country.”

The JVP, however, has since its formation supported one or other of the main bourgeois parties, most recently demonstrated by its support for the installation of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. Since the January election, the JVP has been represented on the 13-member National Executive Council (NEC), the country’s top advisory body that includes the president and prime minister and has overseen the implementation of government policy.

There is no doubt that the JVP is backing the UNP in the election. While making muted criticisms of Wickremesinghe in its campaign, JVP leaders direct their main fire against the “corrupt, nepotistic and dictatorial” Rajapakse and vow to prevent him from coming to power. Both the SLFP and the UNP are capitalist parties that have a long record of attacks on the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class.

The JVP was founded on the ideology of Castroism, Maoism and Sinhala populism but has all but abandoned its previous socialistic and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Its election manifesto is pitched to big business. The JVP promises to promote “public-private partnerships,” provide a five-year tax holiday and other benefits for investors, and to industrialise agriculture with an orientation to exports. Disسانayake blamed successive governments for reducing Sri Lanka’s portion in the world market to 0.45 percent and pledged to reverse the trend.

Under conditions of global economic breakdown and falling commodity prices, the JVP’s promises can only mean that it will implement and enforce the demands of big business for lower wages and greater productivity—that is, higher rates of exploitation. This is already evident in the tea plantation sector where companies are insisting on higher workloads with no wage rises in order to compete on the world market.

The JVP manifesto calls for the country’s economy to be based on “new socialism”—a phrase that it has adapted from the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which justifies its transformation of China into a gigantic cheap labour platform for global corporations as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The JVP, which still maintains party-to-party relations with the CCP, is offering to replicate the brutal

exploitation of Chinese workers in Sri Lanka.

The JVP organised a special meeting for corporate leaders on July 27 in Colombo. Dissanayake assured the audience that the JVP was “ready to join hands with business community” and had organised the meeting to convince businessmen not to regard the party with suspicion. “There is an opinion that JVP is going to have an economic system which takes from the rich to give to the poor,” he declared, but stressed that was wrong.

In presenting the JVP manifesto, Dissanayake offered another assurance to the ruling elites—that the party would not take up arms again. “We have done some actions that should not have been done by a party. We regret these actions. We will not fight with arms. Our fight will be between ideas,” he declared.

The JVP launched an adventurist insurrection in 1971 that was brutally suppressed. Again in the late 1980s, its gunmen killed hundreds of political opponents and workers who refused to support its chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord. The Accord was an agreement between Colombo and New Delhi to allow Indian “peace-keeping” troops into northern Sri Lanka to enforce a ceasefire in the country’s civil war and disarm the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in return for the limited devolution of powers on the provincial level.

The JVP’s empty promises to voters are basically no different from the lies being told by the UNP and the SLFP. It declares that it will ensure democracy by declaring that it will abolish the country’s executive presidency that has been used by successive presidents to underpin their autocratic methods of rule.

The JVP has made the same pledge again and again but has also repeatedly encouraged presidents to use their executive powers. In 2003, the JVP campaigned for President Chandrika Kumaratunga to dismiss the defence and home ministers in the UNP government, and, in the following year, to sack the entire government on the grounds of “national security.” The JVP then campaigned alongside the SLFP in the 2004 election and held three ministries when it formed government.

The JVP now denounces Rajapakse as “corrupt, nepotistic and dictatorial” but in 2005, its leaders campaigned for his election as president. Right up until the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the JVP defended Rajapakse and his executive powers, and was a cheerleader for the military’s ruthless war that cost tens of thousands of civilian lives.

The JVP’s claim that reducing the powers of the president and boosting those of parliament will guarantee democracy is a fraud. In Sri Lanka, as in other countries, parliament is simply the façade for bourgeois rule and the ruthless use of the state apparatus to protect private property and profits at the expense of the working class.

The only new lie that the JVP has added to its propaganda is that it now postures as a party that can heal the divisions produced by nearly 30 years of communal war. At the special

party conference, JVP leader Dissanayake accused governments, past and present, of “sowing racism to establish their power.”

The comment is breathtaking in its cynicism and hypocrisy. The JVP has been mired in Sinhala communalism from its very inception, when it branded oppressed Tamil plantation workers brought to Sri Lanka as indentured labour under British rule as an “Indian cultural invasion” that was a threat to “the motherland.”

The JVP always backed the communal war begun by the UNP in 1983 to the hilt. Its opposition to the Indo-Lanka Accord in the late 1980s was not because it was aimed against the working class, but because it “betrayed the motherland” by allowing an “invasion” by Indian troops. Right up until the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, the JVP demanded that working people “sacrifice” for the war effort to “defend the motherland.” When Rajapakse resumed the war in 2006, the JVP helped build bunkers for the military, voted for the war budgets and denounced all those opposed to the war as “traitors” and “terrorist supporters.”

The JVP leopard has not changed its spots. Its appeal for “national unity” and phony opposition to racism is aimed at winning support among Tamils in the North and East where it is standing candidates. At the same time, it has attacked the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance for calling for a federal constitution, not from the standpoint that it divides working people, but from the chauvinist position that it “divides the nation.”

The JVP’s “anti-racist” posturing is also aimed at presenting a more respectable image in ruling circles in Colombo and internationally. It is de facto aligned with the UNP, which is backed by the US. Washington supported the war against the LTTE until it was defeated, but is now encouraging a political compromise between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites and is seeking to marginalise Chinese influence in Sri Lanka.

The JVP manifesto still contains “anti-imperialist” and “anti-colonialist” phrases but it cultivates close relations with Western diplomats. It backed the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, supported Washington’s bogus “war on terror” and has had a series of discussions at the US embassy in Colombo, including with senior administration officials. In other words, the JVP has not only transformed itself into a useful political tool for the Sri Lankan ruling class but is also offering its services to imperialism.



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