

# Sri Lanka: JVP calls for state of emergency in response to flood disaster

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sri Lankan opposition party, has urged the government to impose a state of emergency, ostensibly to deal with the recent flood and landslide disaster.

The draconian emergency laws, which give wide powers to the government and security forces, have always been used to trample on the democratic rights of the people. The JVP's proposal is an open display of its backing for the strengthening of the capitalist state against workers and poor.

During early May, in Sri Lanka's worst flood disaster for decades, more than 200 people died. Thousands of homes were destroyed or damaged. Tens of thousands of people are still languishing in makeshift camps without adequate facilities.

The disaster has intensified the anger among the poor and working masses against the government, which has been making continuous attacks on their living conditions.

JVP propaganda secretary and parliamentarian Vijitha Herath feigned sympathy for the flood victims at a May 24 press conference. He criticised successive governments for not preparing proper disaster management, then declared: "We of the JVP emphasised in the parliament that the disaster was of a gigantic proportion and asked the government to declare a state of emergency."

Herath said the government had indicated in parliament it would consider the JVP proposal, but "no state of emergency has been declared yet." He claimed that if such laws were in operation the government could ignore red-tape, mobilise sufficient financial resources and provide relief to the people. He insisted: "The situation was not simple. Instant operations were necessary [for flood relief]. State officials could have acted promptly and efficiently if a state of emergency

was declared."

The JVP's claims that the emergency laws would be beneficial for flood victims in providing relief, and that the party's concerns are for workers and the poor, are completely bogus. Even in the same press conference, the JVP backed President Maithripala Sirisena's anti-democratic declaration of flood-affected areas, particularly in Colombo, as high security zones (HSZ).

Sirisena issued this declaration to prevent the city's poor returning to their shanties. He blamed "unauthorised constructions" built by residents along the Kelani River bank and canals for the flood disaster. The HSZ declaration is part of the government's broader plan to convert Colombo into a megapolis—a commercial, financial, tourist and investment hub—by clearing the shanties to offer lands to investors.

Herath welcomed Sirisena's action. "The government states that reclaiming lands will not be allowed. There is politics behind unauthorised constructions and the reclaiming of land... We are happy that the government has realised its folly at least after all the happenings," he said.

Sri Lanka's ruling elite has not used emergency powers for the benefit of the ordinary masses at any time, contrary to the JVP's claims. The hated provisions are part of the Public Security Ordinance that was used by the successive governments to unleash the military against people, including the Tamil minority, and suppress democratic rights.

Successive governments have kept the country under emergency laws for more than half of its history since it was declared independent in 1948. During the communal war that started in 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the emergency and Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) laws were used routinely. In November 2011, two years

after the defeat of the LTTE, former President Mahinda Rajapakse withdrew the emergency laws, facing domestic opposition and international criticism, but incorporated the harsh regulations into the PTA.

The JVP has systematically backed the anti-democratic rule of successive governments, particularly during the war against the LTTE, which the JVP fully supported. While proclaiming itself socialist, the JVP has been mired in Sinhala communalism since the party's inception in 1965.

There are many examples of the JVP's anti-democratic role.

\* In 2003, President Chandrika Kumaratunga declared a state of emergency and used executive powers to seize key ministries of the United National Party (UNP)-led government in order to scuttle peace talks with the LTTE. The UNP government had lined up with the US Bush administration's reactionary "war on terror" and began negotiations with the LTTE to enlist it as a junior partner in Colombo's rule.

Kumaratunga was backed by military and chauvinist groups. JVP secretary Tilvin Silva supported her blatant authoritarian actions against an elected government, saying she "saved the country from disaster." Silva declared: "We call upon the president to go ahead with courage for the benefit of the country and not step back but destroy all evil elements."

\* During 2004, the JVP became a partner in the coalition government formed under Kumaratunga, with its leaders taking three ministries—agriculture, rural industries and fisheries. The 13 months of this coalition glaringly displayed the JVP's real character. Its pro-poor posture was exposed when its ministers failed to provide promised relief to peasants, fishermen and youth. Instead, they helped the government implement austerity measures.

\* In December 2004, Sri Lanka was among countries worst affected by the Asian tsunami. The disaster killed more than 30,000 people, mostly in the country's northeast and south, and left half a million homeless. With the JVP's approval, Kumaratunga declared an emergency in flood-affected districts, not to help the victims but because she feared social unrest fuelled by the catastrophe and the lack of aid.

Kumaratunga was forced to announce a post-tsunami program to distribute aid to victims in the northeast jointly with the LTTE. The JVP leaders seized upon her

proposal to provoke communalism, trying to scuttle the delivery of aid to tsunami victims in the northeast. The JVP declared that the program was a betrayal of the country and a concession to the LTTE's demand for a separate state.

\* The JVP split from the Kumaratunga's coalition government on this issue and in November 2005 backed Rajapakse to win the presidential election. Over the next four years, the JVP was in the forefront of helping Rajapakse resume the war and impose emergency rule to ruthlessly suppress political opponents, workers and youth.

The JVP's call for a state of emergency, under the cover of the flood disaster, is politically significant. The JVP has functioned as a party of the political establishment for the past quarter century, seeking to defend capitalist rule. Last year, it backed Sirisena's installation as president in a regime-change operation orchestrated by the US. Far from being concerned about the plight of the flood victims, the JVP fears the impending struggles of workers, youth and poor and wants the ruling class to strengthen its hand.



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