

The JVP's empty posturing over Sri Lanka's executive presidency

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14 May 2018

A Sri Lankan opposition party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is currently agitating for the abolition of the country's executive presidency via a 20th amendment (20A) to the constitution. The campaign is a political fraud.

JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake told the party's May Day meeting on May 7 that the 20A proposal would be presented to the parliament later this month. (The party did not hold a May 1 meeting in Colombo, following a government ban on May Day celebrations during the Wesak religious festival, in response to a "request" by the Buddhist hierarchy.)

Posturing as a defender of democratic rights, Disanayake told the meeting the JVP would "create a broad dialogue" and "try to win" support for its amendment. He assured the party's Sinhala chauvinist base, however, that the JVP would not do "anything detrimental to the country" and promised to discuss its proposals with the "Maha Sanghas [Buddhist prelates] and intellectuals."

The JVP originally emerged in the mid-1960s as a petty-bourgeois radical group based on an ideological mixture of Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala patriotism, appealing to rural youth. As a logical outcome of these nationalist politics, it has evolved into a thoroughly bourgeois party, deeply integrated into the ruling establishment

Sri Lanka's executive presidency, set up in the 1978 constitution, established autocratic powers for the United National Party (UNP) government of President J. R. Jayawardene. Its purpose was to implement "free market" reforms—i.e., ruthless attacks on the living conditions and social and democratic rights of the people. Jayawardene used these powers to unleash Colombo's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), brutally

suppressing the Tamil minority and the entire working class.

Every government, without exception, has used the executive presidential powers since then. Each parliamentary opposition, at least since 1994, has promised to remove the measures, only to renege as soon as it came to power.

Maithripala Sirisena became president in 2015 by exploiting mass opposition to his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse. He consented to a 19th amendment, which pruned a few powers and was approved by parliament in May 2015. His promise to abolish the presidency was abandoned.

The JVP hopes to capitalise on the deep-seated popular hostility to this autocratic system, but has yet to produce a final draft of its amendment. JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva provided an outline in a lengthy interview with the *Daily Mirror* on May 3.

The president, he said, would be appointed by the parliament and not hold any ministerial position but would "continue to be involved in state affairs" and would remain "the commander in chief of the armed forces." The prime minister would continue to be head of cabinet.

In other words, the JVP is proposing something like the UK's Westminster parliamentary system. Similar proposals have previously been peddled by other Sri Lankan political parties to hoodwink the population. This system, however, does not guarantee the democratic rights of citizens in Britain, nor will it in Sri Lanka, where the ruling elite has issued draconian emergency measures whenever it has faced a political crisis.

Addressing a May 7 press conference, JVP propaganda secretary Vijitha Herath falsely claimed that his party had opposed the executive presidential

system from the outset. In 1994, the JVP withdrew its presidential candidate, accepting a promise by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga to abolish the executive presidency. She dumped her promise soon after.

Kumaratunga used her presidential powers to seize UNP government ministries in 2003 and later sacked the government on communalist grounds, declaring that it was making concessions to the LTTE. The JVP hailed Kumaratunga's moves and entered into a coalition with her in 2004. In 2005, it backed Rajapakse's successful bid for the presidency and then praised him for using the executive powers to conduct the war.

Likewise in 2015, the JVP supported Sirisena's bogus promises to end dictatorial rule and abolish the executive presidency. JVP leader Dissanayake even joined the "national executive council" to stabilise Sirisena's rule. The JVP is now accusing Sirisena of going back on his "January 8, 2015 mandate," and vowing it is ready to "fulfil" this mandate.

The JVP has no concerns for the democratic rights of working people. Recent statements promoting its 20A campaign expose its communalist outlook and the reactionary character of its proposed legislation.

Last week, the Jathika Vidvath Sangha Sabha, a group of extremist right-wing Buddhist monks, declared its opposition to the JVP's 20A campaign. Shocked by this, and criticism by other Sinhala chauvinists, the JVP is bending over backwards to appease the Buddhist establishment.

JVP propaganda secretary Herath responded by insisting that although the bill aimed to do away with the president's "dictatorial powers," there should be no fear. The president, he said, would continue as commander in chief and have all powers under the 13th Amendment, which governs Sri Lanka's provinces.

"We will not make room for the division of the country," he declared, or anything that changed the priority of Buddhism. In other words, the JVP will uphold all the anti-democratic and communalist discrimination laws.

The JVP's 20A campaign is a ploy to divert the growing social opposition of workers, rural poor and youth to the government and the capitalist system. It is yet another attempt to promote the illusion that democratic reforms can be won by exerting pressure on

the ruling class and reforming its governmental system. This claim is refuted by the actions of the capitalist ruling elites in every country—from the US to France and India. Driven by the deepening crisis of world capitalism and preparations for new wars, they are adopting ever-more dictatorial forms of rule.

During Sri Lanka's February local council elections, the JVP adopted an anti-corruption stance. Boosted by the media and various intellectuals, it suggested that all the country's political and economic ills were a result of corruption by the former Rajapakse regime and the current administration of Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

In line with its previous manoeuvres, the JVP's 20A campaign is another desperate attempt to prop-up capitalist rule in Sri Lanka. In order to defend democratic and social rights, workers and youth must reject this trap and take up the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.



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