

Sinhala chauvinist JVP promotes itself as alternative Sri Lankan government

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In a *Daily Mirror* interview earlier this month, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Disanayake declared that there was “an urgent need to take over political power” to save Sri Lanka from disaster. “We are ready to take over the leadership,” he declared.

Sri Lankan capitalism is indeed mired in a deep economic, social and political crisis fuelled by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Economic growth has plummeted. Foreign exchange has dried up as exports, tourism and the remittances of overseas workers have dramatically declined, threatening an external debt default.

In a desperate bid to prop up the economy, the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has responded by curbing imports, including of essential items, and is imposing new austerity burdens on the working class.

This has provoked numerous strikes and protests over the past year involving hundreds of thousands of workers in the state and private sectors. In rural districts, farmers, facing ruination, have repeatedly protested against bans on the import of basic agricultural imports, including fertilisers.

The eruption of the class struggle has sent a shiver down the spine of the ruling class. Both of the traditional parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—have split and been reduced to insignificant rumps.

Neither the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna that broke from the SLFP nor the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) that split from the UNP commands widespread popular support. The Rajapakse administration relies heavily on the military and has no answer to mounting discontent, except repression.

The JVP has stepped onto the stage to offer its services to save Sri Lankan capitalism from disaster, and is being promoted accordingly.

The JVP was formed in the 1960s, recruiting disaffected Sinhala youth in the island’s south on the basis of the peasant guerrillaism of Maoism and Castroism, heavily laced with Sinhala chauvinism. Its “armed struggle” led to one disaster after another.

The JVP has long ago abandoned its phony claims to be fighting for socialism. Like similar formations around the world, the JVP has long ago integrated itself into the political establishment, exchanging automatic weapons for comfortable parliamentary seats.

The high-profile interview with the JVP leader in the *Daily Mirror* is part of broader media coverage of the JVP that features its “exposures” of government mismanagement and corruption. One columnist, writing recently on the country’s crisis, declared favourably of Anura Kumara Disanayake: “Is he the answer? Why not?”

Disanayake’s *Daily Mirror* interview is the complete absence of any concern for the plight of working people amid the social catastrophe created by the COVID-19 pandemic. He does not call for the imposition of basic public health measures such as masks, testing and contact tracing, lockdowns or criticize the government’s criminal policy of “opening up,” because he supports its priority of putting profits ahead of lives. The JVP joined the all-party conference on the pandemic convened by President Rajapakse in April 2020 and offered its support for the government’s policies.

Disanayake’s exclusive focus is on salvaging Sri Lanka’s economy from the depths of a crisis that he blames solely on corruption, waste and mismanagement, not the bankrupt profit system. In place of the self-serving politicians of the government and opposition, Disanayake offers a government of technocrats, as if new faces are going to solve an economic predicament that is rooted in the crisis of global capitalism immeasurably intensified by the pandemic.

Disanayake boasted that the JVP and its associated National People’s Power (NPP)—a motley collection of the party’s front organisations and trade unions as well as sympathetic academics, professionals and ex-radicals—could appoint “a cabinet with people who are extremely qualified in the respective subject areas... compared to both the previous and the present regimes.”

The bankruptcy of the JVP’s perspective is evident when Disanayake lays out the party’s “national plan” which is nothing more than a collection of empty hopes and phrases. He makes no mention of the world economic crisis.

* To save the country from imminent default, the JVP is going to seek a three-year moratorium of debt repayments. How it is going to convince international institutions and banks to do that is not explained.

* Disanayake declared it is that not opposed to seeking a bailout from the IMF, which is notorious for imposing austerity demands. Rather, he thought that such an approach should be “cautious,” as if Sri Lanka, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, not the IMF, will set the terms!

* After noting a precipitous decline in the remittances of Sri Lankans working overseas, Disanayake declares that the JVP will offer incentives to repatriate funds. He doesn’t explain how the JVP will stem the out-of-control deflation of the rupee—the source of the reluctance to send funds home.

* In a telling demonstration of its class orientation, the JVP is going to appeal to rich Sri Lankans around the world to invest at home. As for what they are going to invest in, the JVP has come up with the bright idea that traditional Sri Lankan crops and a software industry are lucrative prospects—as if no one has tried these options before.

In reality, this pompous national plan is nothing more than a pledge to big business that the JVP supports Sri Lankan capitalism and will always act in its interests. The real interest of the ruling class in the JVP is whether it can be used as a tool to divert, divide and disorient a growing movement of the working class.

The *Daily Mirror*'s introduction to the interview noted that the JVP "has shown impressive progress in its popularity among all sections of the society." In fact, the JVP's support has plunged as a result of its sordid manoeuvres and alliances over the past three decades with the traditional parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

In 2004, it had 39 parliamentary seats and joined a coalition government headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in which its four ministers were responsible for imposing a pro-market agenda. The JVP contested the last election under the umbrella of the National People's Power, which won only three seats. Two went to JVP members.

Asked how the JVP proposes to form government, given that it currently commands only three MPs, it rejects coalitions with "corrupt" traditional parties, and the present government still has three years of its term, Dissanayake suggested that it come to power by other means.

"With regard to change of government our first option is elections. But in the world we have seen how these corrupt and disastrous regimes have been toppled by people getting on to the streets. That is also democracy. Even though that is not our plan we are ready for that... So there is no necessity to go for another three years."

Asked if the JVP would step in if such a situation arose, Dissanayake declared: "Yes. If there is a danger that the country would become a failed state and if there is a breakdown of social institutions then as a political movement we have a responsibility to do that."

Amid a growing mass movement of workers and the poor, the JVP is offering its services to the Sri Lankan ruling class to show that it poses no challenge to bourgeois rule. Everything that the JVP has done to date demonstrates that it is determined to save capitalism, not overthrow it.

In the past few months, the party through its unions among teachers, health workers, electricity, and in the ports and free trade zones has worked to limit the repeated struggles of workers for improved wages and conditions and to sow the illusion that the government and big business can be pressured to grant concessions.

On November 24 last year, Vijitha Herath, a JVP leader and MP, told a Zoom meeting organised by big business leaders that his party was "prepared to assist the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, temporarily to overcome the grave economic crisis."

Herath pledged that the JVP would "come to consensus on the essential financial discipline and management" if the government was ready. Such "financial discipline" would inevitably mean new austerity measures and new burdens on working people. While the Rajapakse regime did not take up the offer, Herath's comments clearly demonstrate its support for big business and its priorities of profit over lives.

In his *Daily Mirror* interview, as he sought to posture as the champion of the nation, JVP leader Dissanayake sought to disown the party's reactionary Sinhala chauvinist politics, claiming it had turned over a new leaf and upheld equal rights for Tamils and Muslims.

The JVP was always a ruthless proponent of Sinhala supremacism and supported the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) right from the outset in 1983,

following an anti-Tamil pogrom.

In 2005, the JVP backed the President Mahinda Rajapakse regime which unilaterally broke a ceasefire and restarted the reactionary communal war. The party functioned as cheerleaders for the military and apologists for its war crimes to its bloody conclusion in May 2009, when tens of thousands of civilians were killed and surrendering LTTE leaders murdered.

No one should believe Dissanayake's self-serving declaration that the party "should have thought more seriously about the difficulties faced by the ordinary Tamil civilians... we failed in our responsibilities. We have a self-analysis on that." What difficulties are being referred to? What responsibilities did the JVP fail to uphold? What self-analysis has it made?

Dissanayake's *mea culpa* explains nothing and is completely meaningless. The JVP has no intention of fighting for the democratic rights of ordinary Tamils and Muslims. This is an orientation to the discredited parties of the Tamil and Muslim elites—the Tamil National Alliance and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress—which Dissanayake declared that the JVP is ready to work with.

The leopard has not changed its spots. Following the terrorist attack by Islamic extremists on churches and luxury hotels on April 21, 2019, the JVP joined the chorus of filthy anti-Muslim chauvinism whipped up Sinhala Buddhist racists. Dissanayake and other JVP MPs demanded in parliament that all Muslims denounce the attack and assist in the military-led dragnet as though the entire Muslim community was responsible.

A final warning should be made. One of the main attractions that the JVP holds for the ruling class is its past record of murderous physical attacks on the working class. It bitterly opposed the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord, accusing the government of the day of dividing the island by reaching a deal to introduce Indian peace-keepers into the North and East to disarm the LTTE.

The JVP whipped up a filthy Sinhala racist campaign in which it ordered workers to take part in its strikes and protests at the point of a gun. Its gunmen shot and killed anyone who they regarded as a political opponent of their campaign to "save the nation" including workers and trade union officials.

The JVP murdered three members of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, which opposed the Accord, not from the JVP's standpoint of "saving the nation," but of unifying the working class—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—against the designs of the bourgeoisie.

The revolutionary task of uniting the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally now takes on a pressing urgency in face of the deepening crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. To defend the most elementary democratic and social rights, the working class needs to take up the fight for a socialist alternative and win to its side sections of the rural and urban poor to establish a workers' and peasants' government. That is the perspective for which the SEP fights today in opposition to all the political tools of the capitalist class including the JVP.



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