

Sri Lanka: Opposition JVP seeks to divert mass struggle into dead-end of parliamentary politics

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Sri Lankan opposition parties, trade unions and big corporates are desperately making every effort to derail, diffuse and suppress the mass upsurge of the working people against the President Gotabhaya Rajapakse fearing that it threatens capitalist rule.

Mass opposition erupted in early April demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government and defied attempts to use the police and military to suppress protests.

Now the working class has begun entering into struggle as a class. Millions of workers took part in a one-day general strike on April 28 despite roadblocks placed by the trade unions. Amid a groundswell of anger among workers, the unions have been compelled to call another one-day strike on May 6.

The mass protests have been fueled by the spiraling prices and shortages of basic foodstuffs, medicines and fuel as well as lengthy daily electricity cuts. As in every country, Sri Lanka is facing economic turmoil triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Speaking to the media last Tuesday, opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake presented his party's so-called proposals to "solve" the country's crisis. He insisted that "the economic crisis cannot be resolved without alleviating political instability"—in other words, a way must be found to suppress mass protests and strikes.

The JVP was supportive of the proposals made by the main parliamentary opposition party Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and other groups for the president and the government to step down to make way for a short-term interim government, a general election and the opportunity "to build a stable government."

Dissanayake declared that these proposals appear to be "fair solutions," but stopped short of committing the JVP to an interim government, noting those joining such a regime "can break that agreement at any time."

Dissanayake offered a proposal only marginally different. After the resignation of the president and government, "then we have to build some inter-parliamentary administration for a very short period of time and go to the polls very soon." He provided no explanation of how an "inter-parliamentary administration" would be formed, who would participate or indeed how it differed from an "interim government."

However, the political purpose of the JVP's proposals is absolutely clear—to suppress the protest movement. Like the SJB, it

is to divert the anger of workers, youth and the poor into the dead-end of parliamentary elections on the basis of a false hope that a new combination of capitalist parties would alleviate the worsening social crisis.

The JVP's intervention has a particular significance. Unlike the SJB—a right-wing breakaway from the equally right-wing United National Party (UNP)—the JVP had its origins in the petty-bourgeois radical movement of Sinhala youth in the 1960s and 1970s and advocated the "armed struggle" based on a toxic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala patriotism.

Having long ago abandoned its disastrous "armed struggle" and socialistic and Marxist pretensions, the JVP is now thrusting itself forward as the savior of the capitalist class and its rule.

Addressing the JVP's May Day rally on Sunday, Dissanayake shamelessly boasted that his party had kept President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in power in 2001. In 2004, it had backed her decision as president to sack the UNP government. JVP leader boasted: "We offered to support her at that time to ensure political stability in the country."

In 2001, a number of MPs deserted the Kumaratunga government to the opposition UNP to back its call for peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The JVP, a virulent Sinhala chauvinist party, opposed any peace talks with the LTTE, demanded the continuation of the communal war and supported Kumaratunga administration from "outside."

The JVP also backed Kumaratunga's decision to sack the UNP government in 2004 in order to scuttle peace talks with the LTTE. It then entered into an electoral alliance with Kumaratunga to contest new general elections and joined her government, accepting four ministerial posts. Its ministers played a key role in imposing the IMF's pro-market dictates.

Dissanayake refers to the JVP's treacherous past, not to offer any way out of the current social crisis facing working people, but to convince the ruling class that his party is always ready to ensure "political stability" and save capitalist rule.

The JVP leader declared that "the situation has changed." People did not accept the president or the government, he said. The instability would not be resolved by forming an interim government or all-party government. The only solution was to go to a general election.

The call for new elections is at odds with many of the protest

slogans raised in the past month, including “No to the curse of 74-year rule,” “Those who ruled the country for 74 years are responsible for the crisis today!” and the “225 in the parliament are responsible for the crisis.”

These slogans indicate a growing awareness that all of the parliamentary parties are responsible for the current crisis and that the entire bourgeois political establishment defends the interests of the rich at the expense of working people—and has done so throughout the 74 years since formal independence in 1948.

The JVP, like the other establishment parties, is desperate to gag and divert this movement. Dissanayake maintains a guilty silence on what any new capitalist government formed after an election would do, as it would inevitably seek to impose even greater burdens on the population in line with the demands of the IMF.

The Rajapakse government has already sent a delegation to Washington for talks with the IMF for an emergency bail-out package and is now pushing for a full implementation of its dictates. This entails a huge assault on the living conditions of workers and the rural poor, through the slashing of jobs, wages, pensions and social subsidies, and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises as profit-making companies.

While the SJB and UNP have slammed the government for not going to the IMF sooner, the JVP and its leaders have said nothing, well aware that it will have devastating consequences for working people. Instead, the JVP seeks to divert blame for the economic crisis from the capitalist system, based on the private ownership of the means of production and the extraction of profit, onto the corruption and mismanagement of the Rajapakse government.

“The cause for this crisis is the decisions taken by a gangster group, including Gotabhaya Rajapakse, in order to earn hundreds of thousands of money for their cronies,” Dissanayake told parliament recently.

Undoubtedly the Rajapakse government, like all its predecessors, is mired in forms of corruption, but to blame the entire economic crisis on “corruption” is absurd. The JVP is promoting a fantasy—that a new government will simply wave away the immense crisis of global capitalism and thus all the social ills facing working people.

The JVP and other opposition parties, supported by pseudo-left groups including the Frontline Socialist Party, are politically disarming the working people by restricting the protests to demanding Rajapakse resign and peddling the illusion that there is a solution to the social disaster within the capitalist system.

Dissanayake blustered last week that if Rajapakse did not resign, the JVP, its NPP (National People’s Power, an electoral front of intellectuals and professionals), its trade unions and farmers’ organisation will hold a large number of agitations to force him out. All of its demonstrations, however, have the same aim—to divert the masses into the dead-end of electoral politics.

The JVP trade unions are already limiting workers struggles to demanding an interim regime and elections. Last year the JVP unions were also in the forefront of selling out a series of struggles by sections of workers for better pay and conditions, thus strengthening the hand of the Rajapakse regime.

In opposition to the entire political establishment, including the JVP, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has elaborated a program

of action for workers and the poor to defend for their democratic and social rights. There are no solutions for working people within the capitalist system. The working class can defend its rights only by mobilising its independent political and industrial strength.

The SEP calls for the building of action committees by workers at every workplace, large estate and working-class neighbourhood, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties and their hangers-on.

We have elaborated a program to advance the fight by action committees to defend the democratic and social rights of working people.

We demand the immediate abolition of the executive presidency and the repeal of all repressive laws, including the emergency law, Essential Public Services Act and Prevention of Terrorism Act.

To end the present social disaster requires the complete reorganisation of the production and distribution of essential goods to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. Nationalise the banks, big corporations and large estates under the democratic control of the working class. Repudiate all foreign debts.

Building action committees to fight for this program establishes the basis to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies. In this struggle, workers in Sri Lanka need to unite with the international working class in a common fight against capitalism, which is the source of social inequality, the disaster of the COVID pandemic and imperialist war.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and fight for this program.



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