

Sri Lanka's JVP-NPP collaborates with ex-military officers and business representatives

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Posing as champions of democratic and social rights, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) in Sri Lanka is intensifying its campaign for an immediate general election.

The NPP and the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), are both attempting to exploit the rising mass opposition to the Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures and associated attacks on democratic rights. Two weeks ago, the government blocked local government elections, violating the Sri Lankan constitution and the people's elementary right to vote.

The NPP and SJB are both calling for a general election, not because of their love for democratic rights, but because they fear the Wickremesinghe regime will not be able to prevent a resumption of the mass working-class struggles that eight months ago brought down the former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. Both parties want to divert the rising popular anger into parliamentary electoral politics and a new bourgeois government to implement the same IMF-dictated measures.

The NPP is a parliamentary front launched by the JVP in 2015, bringing together sections of the upper-middle class, including academics, professionals and a layer of small businessmen. The organisation is being used to hide the JVP's discredited past—its support for the 26-year anti-Tamil communal war since 1983 and its support for, and participation in, various bourgeois coalition governments. Anura Kumara Disanayake is the leader of both the JVP and NPP.

In January, the NPP met with business representatives to explain how its policies will boost profits. Last month, it held a conference of retired military officers and soldiers. Both events reveal the sort of ruthless pro-capitalist regime the NPP will impose on workers and the poor if it comes to power.

Pledges for big business

The business event, entitled "National Economic Forum," was held on January 24 at the four-star Galadhari Hotel in Colombo. Around 500 people attended, ranging from big business representatives to small and medium entrepreneurs.

Disanayake told participants that the main purpose of the meeting was to "dispel any doubts that the business community" has about his party and its economic policies. He clearly had in mind the JVP's false claims, long in the past, to be fighting for socialism.

The concept of "equal distribution of economic benefits among

the masses," he declared, was "a utopia," adding: "Some say we will confiscate the major corporations if we come to power. These [claims] are utter lies."

The production economy concentrated in Colombo will be expanded to remote areas, he said, assuring participants that proper infrastructure facilities would be provided to investors in these areas.

The state, he continued, will only engage in the "energy and financial" sectors, with private investors given full opportunities to invest in all the other fields, including the health and education sectors. In other words, what remains of free public education and health will be placed on the chopping block.

"We have to change our lifestyle for a brief period," he said, insisting, "If we want to come out from this crisis, we must do it. We will be forced to take painful actions."

Disanayake did not spell out these "painful actions" but they are the very same IMF measures now being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government. Disanayake used the same phrases as Wickremesinghe—people must endure "painful" measures and change their lifestyle—because capitalism has only one solution to the economic crisis: impose the burden on working people.

Appearing on the Swarnavahini television talk show on October 17, Disanayake said Sri Lanka had "no other alternative to going to the IMF" because the country had defaulted on foreign loans. He also told another talk show that the economic crisis that hit Greece in 2008 indicated the sort of "painful" measures required, including limiting "daily food consumption to two buns a day."

Disanayake assured National Economic Forum participants that "if the people bring a new government to power telling it to 'please save us from this crisis,' the people will give time to such a government. We can implement our program in such a situation!"

However, workers and the poor will inevitably come into struggle against the unbearable IMF-dictated policies. Like any capitalist government, an NPP regime will attempt to suppress these struggles through the trade union apparatuses and by unleashing the police and the military.

Disanayake told the meeting that the root cause of Sri Lanka's economic crisis was the country's "political culture," which, under successive governments, was mired in corruption, fraud, cronyism and wastage. The NPP, he argued, consists of clean people, free of corruption, who will eliminate this.

In reality, the economic and social crisis in Sri Lanka is a

product of the profound historic crisis of global capitalism that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia.

JVP calls for the military's support

On February 11, the NPP held a 1,000-strong conference of retired senior military officers and the lower ranks at the National Youth Council Auditorium located in Maharagama, Colombo. A retired female brigadier told the event that the NPP had begun work among these layers to form a "Collective of Tri-Forces."

Dissanayake, the main speaker, declared that the party had entered a "new mode of freedom struggle" in which "we will accelerate economic development under law and order, and sovereignty."

Many soldiers in the audience were participants in the bloody communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Some were disabled.

At the same time, Dissanayake feigned concern about the plight of Tamils in the north and the families of dead soldiers in the south, declaring that the Tamil and Sinhala people in the country's north and south "have their own stories."

In reality, the JVP, which has always been mired in Sinhala populism and chauvinism, was the most strident backer of the war throughout its nearly three decades. It repeatedly demanded the military be boosted and defended its crimes and atrocities.

Dissanayake directly appealed to the military participants at the conference, saying they would be a mainspring of the party's work. "It is you who can accomplish the main task of the change we are expecting. You are an organised force... [and] such a force is needed to make this change," he said. "The military is a trained human resource... an organisation spread in every sphere."

Dissanayake also announced that Aruna Jayasekera, a retired major general and former commander of the Eastern Province, would be the defence minister in a future NPP government. Jayasekera was on the conference stage.

Jayasekera made clear that an NPP government would lean heavily on the military to ensure there was no political interference in the implementation of its program. "We consider the law and order as a main factor for the existence of a society," he said.

While Jayasekera did not elaborate on what he meant by political interference, it is clear that there will be no room for working-class opposition under an NPP government.

This unprecedented turn to ex-soldiers and Dissanayake's emphasis on the role of the military under an NPP government is a warning to the working class. It is another sign that the ruling class is readying the military to suppress any working-class upsurge.

SJB leader Sajith Premadasa denounced the NPP on February 17, declaring that it had a revolutionary program and would abolish all private property. It was a desperate attempt to block support for the NPP from big business and sections of the middle class.

Furious at Premadasa's accusation, Dissanayake dismissed the allegations as outdated "slanders" taken from a 1980 JVP document. "Vast changes have taken place in the world including collapse of the 'socialist camp.' Communication and technology have changed by leaps. Today is a different world from 1980," he said.

"We are a flexible political movement that understands the changes happening in the world, society and economy very well, assimilates them, and can make changes accordingly," he said.

Dissanayake, however, could not explain the real history of the JVP. Since its inception as a petty-bourgeois radical group in 1966, the JVP was based on a toxic ideological mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. It had nothing to do with Marxism or socialism but used socialistic phrases to hoodwink the masses.

There have indeed been vast changes to the world since the 1980s. The globalisation of production undermined the basis for national economic regulation which led to the collapse of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the liquidation of the Soviet Union, and a sharp turn to the right by bourgeois nationalist organisations around the world.

Like many other petty-bourgeois radical outfits, the JVP responded by exchanging its guerilla combat fatigues and socialist phraseology for comfortable parliamentary seats and integrating itself into the capitalist political establishment.

Last year it played a major role in politically derailing the mass anti-government uprising, proposing an interim bourgeois regime and a general election. Similar proposals were made by the SJB. This agenda was embraced by the trade unions and various pseudo-left groups, and the mass movement betrayed with Wickremesinghe elevated into the presidency.

The workers and youth should reject the JVP-NPP's reactionary campaign for a new capitalist government to implement the IMF dictates. The only way forward for Sri Lankan workers and youth is by fighting for the independent mobilisation of the working class on the revolutionary socialist program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP calls on workers to form of their own action committees, independent of all capitalist parties and trade unions, in every workplace, factory and plantation and the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Such a congress will create the basis for a mass revolutionary movement of the working class, rally the rural poor, to establish a government of workers and peasants committed to a socialist program, as a part of broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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