

Why is Sri Lanka's new JVP president campaigning for a “strong government”?

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Anura Kumara Dissanayake, Sri Lanka's newly elected president, has fervently urged his party's candidates for the country's Nov. 14 national parliamentary election to work for a “strong government.”

On October 13, some 500 candidates and activists of the National Peoples Power (NPP)—the electoral front of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front)—gathered at the posh Grand Monarch Hotel auditorium on Colombo's outskirts to hear Dissanayake speak.

Within 24 hours of his assuming office last month, Dissanayake made use of the sweeping powers of the executive presidency to dissolve parliament and call a snap general election.

Speaking to the JVP/NPP candidates, Dissanayake lamented that whilst “we have come up with a new ideology and program,” the new JVP-led government has just a three-member Cabinet, comprised of himself and the only two other JVP/NPP legislators in the outgoing 225-member parliament. This is “by no means sufficient,” he continued. “The challenge before us is to acquire that political power on November 14. We must acquire a stronger power in the Parliament.”

Dissanayake said nothing about the JVP/NPP's ideology, which, while falsely touted by the Sri Lankan and international media as “leftist,” is steeped in Sri Lankan nationalism and Sinhala chauvinism, and, with its veneration of the military-security apparatus and “law and order,” bears far more resemblance to fascism than to socialism.

Dissanayake also said nothing about the party's program, other than to repeat the JVP/NPP's incessantly recycled lie that the acute socio-economic crisis ravaging the island can be rapidly overcome, if only the “corruption, fraud and nepotism” fostered by the traditional political establishment are rooted out.

In fact, the JVP/NPP is entirely committed to implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity—to slashing government expenditure on healthcare, education, and price subsidies to the hilt; amassing large primary budgetary surpluses through increased taxes and tariffs; carrying out a fire-sale of state-owned enterprises; and eliminating half-a-million public sector jobs.

All so as to achieve “debt sustainability,” that is to ensure global investors are repaid, and the economy is made more profitable for domestic and international capital.

In his speech, Dissanayake said the JVP/NPP must fill the parliament not just with increased numbers, but with members of

“quality.” The NPP/JVP-touted “quality” candidates are largely businessmen, retired military officers, technocrats and other middle class elements who will support IMF austerity under the nationalist rallying call of “rebuilding the country.” They include Aruna Jayasekera, a Retired Major General and former Commander of the East during the Sri Lankan state's racialist war against the Tamil minority, and corporate executives Eranga Udedh Weeraratne and Dr. Harshana Suriyapperuma.

As in the just completed presidential election campaign, the JVP-NPP seeks to obscure its intention to impose the brunt of the crisis of Sri Lankan and world capitalism on the country's workers and toilers by peddling as its election manifesto a glossy pamphlet fancifully titled “Thriving Nation, Beautiful Country!”

Claiming the JVP/NPP victory has already produced positive change, Dissanayake told the gathering: “The idea of retiring from politics” has come up “marking a shift from the old political culture, where losing or dying were the only two outcomes for politicians.”

Here he was referring to the fact that many leading figures in the traditional ruling parties—the United National Party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the SLFP breakaway the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna—including three former presidents, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Maithripala Sirisena and Mahinda Rajapakse, have declared that they are “retiring” from parliament.

In winning the presidency, Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP were able to hypocritically exploit the mass anger and disaffection of working people with the traditional political establishment, which had exploded in 2022 in a mass popular uprising that chased President Gotabaya Rajapakse from power. The vote for Dissanayake increased by more than ten-fold from around 440,000 votes in the 2019 presidential election to 5.6 million, or a more than 42 percent-share, in 2024.

In his Oct. 13 speech, Dissanayake urged the party's candidates to use the “weakness” of the opposition parties to capture a thumping parliamentary majority. The transparent aim of this campaign for a “strong government” is to strengthen the government's hand to meet the inevitable mass opposition that will emerge within the working class to the JVP/NPP government's imposition of savage IMF austerity.

Significant sections of the ruling elite are now signaling that they support Dissanayake's ambition for a “stable” or majority JVP/NPP-led government. This would not just facilitate speedy passage of its program through parliament and insulate it from all

opposition. It would position it, the media and the ruling class to smear mass protests and strikes against its reactionary, pro-imperialist agenda as “illegitimate,” “anti-democratic,” and “anti-national.”

On Oct. 11, the Colombo based *Daily Mirror* ran an editorial that denounced those criticizing the new government. It noted that the “young president AKD [Anura Kumara Dissanayake]” has been attacked for “appointing cronies to particular institutions” and “not fulfilling election promises” like bringing down the cost-of-living and securing changes to the IMF agreement to make it less onerous for the poor.

Acting as an attorney for Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP, the *Mirror* editors argued there has only been a “handful” of crony appointments and the government has to date “had just a single meeting with the IMF.”

It then pointed to the explosive economic and political situation confronting Sri Lankan capitalism. The “presence of warships of competing major regional powers plus US warships...in our ports is proof of the financial, political and international tangle our country is in.” Warning against undermining the new government, the editorial continued, “The actions of some of our previous presidents ... have left little elbow room for the incumbent president to manoeuvre. ... How we vote at this general election,” it concluded, “is therefore very important.”

On the same day, *The Island* ran an editorial that noted that there “is a joke doing the rounds in political circles” that “Ranil (Wickremesinghe) is gone (as president), but he has come back!” The policies Wickremesinghe “courageously implemented,” explained the *Island*, “have remained intact under the new dispensation...”

“The sobering economic reality has had a mellowing effect on President Dissanayake’s thinking, and signs are that the NPP will stick to the IMF bailout package for want of a better alternative even if it succeeds in obtaining a parliamentary majority at the 14 November general election.”

As if to prove the point, Vijitha Herath, JVP Politburo member and spokesperson for the three-member JVP/NPP cabinet, announced soon after that the government was suspending pay increases for more than 1 million public sector workers set to take effect in the new year.

Just before the official launch of the presidential election campaign, Wickremesinghe announced a minimum 25 percent pay increase after years of crushing inflation. In 2022, Sri Lankan workers’ real wages fell 27 percent and in 2023 by 23 percent due to massive inflation.

Herath claimed that Wickremesinghe had not properly consulted with the Finance Ministry prior to announcing the election eve pay rise, and the country’s financial situation had not been duly considered. The JVP/NPP, he continued, “never” pledged “anything like this.”

In fact, addressing an NPP business forum on September 4, Dissanayake criticized both Wickremesinghe and the SJB leader Sajith Premadasa for saying they would increase public sector wages. Pointing to the country’s economic crisis and casting himself as the best enforcer of fiscal discipline, the JVP/NPP leader condemned such wage increases as “deadly.”

Dissanayake and the JVP/NPP government are also following in Wickremesinghe’s footsteps in integrating Sri Lanka, which bestraddles key Indian Ocean shipping lanes, ever deeper into the US-led military-strategic offensive against China. As part of its effort to demonstrate to the ruling class that it could be trusted with the reins of power, the JVP aggressively courted Washington in recent years, including through meetings with the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Julie Chung, and has repeatedly vowed to do nothing contrary to the “strategic interests” of India, US imperialism’s principal ally in the region. Earlier this month, the head of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Steve Koehler, visited Colombo and met with Dissanayake.

The Socialist Equality Party warns working people: In so far as the IMF and the ruling class permit him, Dissanayake is marking time until the conclusion of national election, at which point, he will move forward with the next, still harsher stage of the IMF restructuring program.

Faced with working class opposition, the government will deploy the battery of anti-democratic laws adopted by its predecessors and use the authoritarian powers of the executive presidency, on the one hand, and whip up Sinhala chauvinism, on the other.

The JVP/NPP’s courting of the military-security apparatus and veterans of the anti-Tamil war through its “Retired Tri-forces Collectives” and “Retired Police Officers Collective” must be taken as a sober warning.

The SEP is intervening in the elections, fielding 41 candidates in the Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Jaffna districts to take forward the fight to develop an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural and urban poor to fight the Dissanayake regime’s austerity and repressive preparations.

As our election announcement explained: There is no solution to the social crisis facing the masses and the threat of dictatorship and world war within the capitalist system or on a national basis.

We call on workers to reject the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies, all capitalist parties and fake left groups! The working class must take matters into its hands. We fight to build action committees in every workplace and plantation, urban neighbourhood and village to defend working people’s social and democratic rights, defeat IMF austerity, repudiate all the debts incurred by the ruling class, and fight for workers’ power.

We are fighting for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses encompassing delegates of those action committees, as organs of independent working class power, in opposition to all the parties and institutions of the capitalist elite, including their parliament and authoritarian executive presidency. This is the way forward for a workers and peasants’ government in Sri Lanka as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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