

Who is Sri Lanka's new President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake?

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After Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and National People's Power (NPP), was elected as Sri Lanka's president on September 21, the local and international media published scores of articles, in which he was described as a Marxist, a leftist, a "Lenin-loving President" and "a people's president" who defeated the traditional parties that had ruled the country since the 1948 independence.

None of the writers bothered to explain how the JVP, steeped in Sinhala chauvinism and dedicated to defending capitalism, in any way represents Marxism, or its leader Dissanayake could be considered an admirer of Lenin, or a president of the people.

The JVP's own media has in the past quoted from Marx and Lenin, out of context, to justify their pro-capitalist policies and actions. At its May Day demonstrations, JVP supporters carried portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and notably Stalin and its leaders paraded in red shirts denoting socialism.

In reality, the JVP was never a genuine Marxist Party as its embrace of Stalin, who represented the antithesis of Marxism demonstrates. At this year's May Day, as it prepared to contest the presidency, the JVP ditched its red shirts and portraits. Those who present the JVP, its past leaders and Dissanayake as "Marxists," without a word of criticism, are either politically ignorant or engaged in deliberately deceiving working people.

The Marxism of today is Trotskyism, represented alone by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its sections around the world including the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. Trotskyism defended and developed Marxism in the fight against Stalinism, which rejected the world socialist revolution, adopted the reactionary nationalist theory of "Socialism in One Country," and was the gravedigger of 1917 October Revolution.

The JVP emerged in the late 1960s, following the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) betrayal of socialist internationalism when it entered the bourgeois coalition government under Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP betrayal, which was the first by a party claiming to be Trotskyist, opened the door for petty-bourgeois radical groups such as the JVP, and Tamil organisations to thrive.

The JVP was formed by a faction that broke from the pro-Beijing wing of the Stalinist Communist Party and embraced an eclectic mixture of the peasant guerrillaism of Castro, Che Guevarra and Mao Zedong, all bound up with the Sinhala patriotism and supremacism of the island's Sinhala Buddhist majority.

The JVP was responsible for the disastrous uprising of rural Sinhala youth in 1971 that left 15,000 dead, as well as a reactionary campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord in the late 1980s that opened the door for the slaughter of tens of thousands of rural youth. Over the past three decades, however, this petty-bourgeois formation has been thoroughly integrated into the bourgeois political establishment and transformed itself into a right-wing, pro-imperialist party.

Amid a profound economic and social crisis, the JVP/NPP postured

during the presidential election as an anti-establishment party, exploiting the deep hatred among masses towards the longstanding parties of bourgeois rule—the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that have now split to form numerous fragments—and ruling class dynasties that led them.

At the same time, Dissanayake and his party reassure the ruling class that it would defend their interests. He repeatedly declared his support for the drastic International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity agenda and met with US and Indian officials who gave their nod of approval.

The ruling elites received a profound shock in 2022 when a protracted mass uprising against intolerable social conditions forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign. Now significant segments have turned to the JVP as the means for suppressing any repetition by working people as the new government implements IMF austerity and makes even deeper inroads into their living conditions.

During the 2022 uprising, Dissanayake underscored the JVP's hostility to the masses when he called on all parliamentary parties to unite to suppress the "anarchy" that was creating deep "political instability." He proposed an interim administration as the means to derail the mass movement and subordinate it to parliamentary manoeuvres. The result was the installation of pro-US, pro-IMF Ranil Wickremesinghe as president—a figure with no popular support.

Having won the presidency, Dissanayake called a snap parliamentary election with the aim of winning a majority and establishing a "strong government." The JVP has already stressed that its government will retain the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) as part of its repressive arsenal.

Dissanayake's righthand man, former MP Lakshman Nipuna Arachchi, last week gave the clearest indication of the anti-working class character of the new government. He declared that one of its first acts after the election would be to dissolve party-affiliated trade unions and make "strikes" a thing of the past. This measure is not aimed at the trade bureaucracy but against the working class and its democratic right to organise and engage in industrial action to fight for its class interests.

These statements and measures have nothing to do with Marxism and are far more akin to a fascist party that is preparing to take office and crush any working-class resistance against its big business policies.

Who is Dissanayake?

Anura Dissanayake is a life-long JVP member. He was attracted to the JVP in the midst of its virulent anti-Indian, Sinhala chauvinist campaign against the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. He was a 19-year-old GCE Advanced Level student in Thambuttegama Maha Vidyalaya, in the predominantly rural North-Central Province and joined the JVP's

Socialist Student Union (SSU) through his first cousin, Sunil Ayiya.

President J.R. Jayawardene signed the Accord with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987 amid a deepening crisis precipitated by the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which his government had launched. Under the Accord, Indian troops were sent into the north and east of the island to disarm the LTTE while limited powers were to be given to the Tamil elites by establishing a provincial council system.

In what was a continuation of its fervent support for the communal war, the JVP bitterly opposed the Accord based on nationalism and chauvinism, declaring that it was “a betrayal of the motherland.” It denounced “Indian imperialism and declared that devolution of powers would split the nation.

Jayawardene’s UNP regime had banned the JVP in July falsely claiming that it had instigated the savage 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom that had triggered all-out civil war. In reality, UNP goons had instigated the wave of anti-Tamil violence in Colombo and other areas of the island.

In response to the Accord, the JVP launched a fascistic patriotic campaign against the Colombo government under the slogan, “Motherland or Death!” Its underground military wing, Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya (DJV) or Patriotic People’s Movement, organised protests. Thousands of political opponents, trade union and student leaders and workers who opposed their campaign were murdered by JVP gunmen.

The JVP killed three members of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—R.A. Pitawela on November 12, 1988; P.H. Gunapala on December 23, 1988; and Greshan Geekiyanage on June 24, 1989. The RCL opposed the Accord, warning it was directed against the working class and calling for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers on the basis of socialist policies.

Jayawardene and his successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, exploited the JVP campaign as the pretext to unleash a reign of terror aimed not just against the JVP but at suppressing widespread unrest among rural youth. Some 60,000 youth were slaughtered often in the most gruesome fashion by the military and its death squads.

JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera and 13 other Political Bureau leaders were murdered along with hundreds of local leaders and activists. A notable exception was Political Bureau member Somawansa Amarasinghe who fled the country and became the party’s future leader.

The RCL and the ICFI condemned the assassination of Wijeweera and other leaders and massacre of rural youth and launched an international campaign against the Premadasa government’s murderous state repression.

Dissanayake’s family faced harassment and threats by the security forces and their associated goons like tens of thousands of other rural families. However, what Dissanayake was doing at the time remains unknown.

An introduction on the president’s official website notes only that he “participated in widespread protests against the Indo-Lanka Accord signed by the government at the time.” He was a member of the JVP/DJV with the pseudonym Aravinda as it carried out its violent activities around the country.

While Dissanayake and the JVP has sought to distance itself from the murderous, chauvinist campaign, it has always hailed those who led it and participated in it as “patriotic heroes.” What exactly were Dissanayake’s activities during that period?

The JVP’s vicious campaign against the Accord is a warning of the methods that the new government will use in response to any threat to the “Motherland”—above all from the working class.

Dissanayake and the JVP’s regroupment

As the UNP government’s reign of terror eased, Dissanayake was able to enter the Kelaniya University in 1992 to study physical science and became an activist of the JVP student wing.

He was contacted by Amarasinghe, who was living in exile in London after fleeing the country in March 1990 with the assistance of an influential UNP member and Indian High Commission officials. Amarasinghe has never explained why he was given such help from sources towards which the JVP was deeply hostile.

Amarasinghe was assembling JVP cells in a bid to revive the party. In the next two decades, Dissanayake became his righthand man, ensuring his ascendancy in the party as it adopted an openly pro-capitalist orientation and integrated itself into the Colombo political establishment.

The process mirrored political transformations taking place internationally amid the crisis of Stalinism that culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Nationalist petty-bourgeois formations based on the “armed struggle” around the world were exchanging their automatic rifles and jungle fatigues for business suits and seats in parliament or on corporate boards.

Sections of the ruling class also turned to the JVP as a useful tool in containing and suppressing opposition among workers and youth, particularly with the expansion of the communal war following the LTTE’s assassination of President Premadasa on May Day, 1993. Chandrika Kumaratunga, who assumed the SLFP leadership and was preparing to contest in the presidential election was prominent among them.

Dissanayake along with Wimal Weerawansa and Tilwin Silva fully backed the shift and the discarding of its previous anti-imperialist rhetoric and with Amarasinghe’s backing rose rapidly in JVP leadership.

In 1997, Dissanayake was elevated onto the JVP’s Central Committee and the following year onto the Political Bureau, the party’s top decision-making body. In 2000, he entered the parliament via the JVP’s national list and quickly became its main spokesperson.

Prior to his return to Sri Lanka in November 2001, Amarasinghe blurted out the JVP’s renunciation of its former Marxist phrasemongering, derived from Stalinism, in an interview on the *Lacnet.org* website. “Marxism had become old fashioned towards the end of the 19th century,” he declared. “We are not old-fashioned Marxists. We are open to be influenced by any other ‘ism’ that provides us new ideas.”

Dumping the party’s past anti-imperialist rhetoric, JVP leader Amarasinghe wrote to US President George W. Bush praising his declaration of “war on terrorism,” after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and requesting Bush’s support to fight “LTTE terrorism” in Sri Lanka.

The JVP’s election manifesto for the December 2001 parliament election declared that Sri Lanka had to line up with Bush’s “war on terrorism” and “utilising this advantageous situation fully” to “wipe out the Tiger [LTTE] terrorism from Sri Lanka.”

The manifesto also made clear the JVP’s pro-market orientation, promising concessions including generous tax holidays for investors and insisting that trade union activities should not draw public hostility—that is, from the corporate elite in particular. In an interview with *Business Today*, Tilwin Silva warned of “severe unrest among the workforce” and promoted the Chinese regime’s regimentation of the working class as a model for high growth.

The JVP leaders signed an agreement with Chandrika Kumaratunga to support her in the 1994 presidential election and withdrew its own candidate, on the pretext that Kumaratunga had promised to abolish the autocratic executive presidency which she ignored after coming to power.

The JVP sided with Kumaratunga after several of its MPs defected to the UNP enabling it to form a government. In November 2003, under pressure from the JVP, President Kumaratunga seized three major ministries from the UNP cabinet and then sacked its government in March

2004.

The JVP joined the SLFP to form a new electoral alliance, United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) to contest the April 2004 parliamentary election. After the UPFA won and the JVP took 39 seats, it was awarded four ministerial posts, including Dissanayake who became Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Irrigation and Livestock.

Vijitha Herath, K.D. Lal Kantha and Chandradasa Wijesinghe became ministers for Cultural Affairs, Rural Economy, and Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, respectively. Four other JVP members took the deputy minister posts in the same ministries.

The Kumaratunga government was desperate to for the IMF bailout loan that she had suspended earlier as she sought to scuttle the UNP-led government's efforts to reach a peace deal with the LTTE.

Kumaratunga signalled her readiness to impose IMF austerity by removing prices subsidies on essential items and hitting working people hard—measures that were not opposed by the JVP ministers. Prices for petrol, cooking gas, rice—the country's main staple—and powdered milk all increased. The JVP boasted about renovating 1,000 rural tanks, or water storages, and facilities for farmers and fisherfolk but nothing materialized.

The JVP came into conflict with Kumaratunga on racist grounds following the December 2004 tsunami that devastated much of the island's south coast. Specifically, its post-tsunami operational management structure (PTOMS) to distribute aid for victims included the Tamil Rehabilitation Center designed for December 2004 tsunami victims, declaring that it benefitted the "LTTE terrorists." The JVP ministers withdrew from the government.

At the end of 2005, the JVP entered into another agreement with the SLFP's candidate Mahinda Rajapakse for the presidency after he pledged to end the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE. Dissanayake along with other JVP leaders campaigned for Rajapakse's election but did not join the government.

In the parliament, they supported his war budgets and the extension of repressive emergency regulations. The JVP pressed him to reinvoke the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and helped suppress the class struggle, all in the name of waging war.

Dissanayake became the JVP's parliamentary group leader when the party sacked Wimal Weerawansa in May 2008 after he joined the Rajapakse government. In the wake of the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the JVP distanced itself from Rajapakse while defending to the hilt the military's war crimes including against tens of thousands of civilians in the final months of the war.

In the 2010 presidential election, the JVP allied with the UNP in supporting as their "common candidate," the former Army Commander General Sarath Fonseka. Despite his responsibility along with the Rajapakse government for the military's atrocities, the JVP promoted Fonseka as the "democratic alternative" to Rajapakse.

Dissanayake becomes party leader

Dissanayake became the party leader in February 2014, replacing Amarasinghe who led the party since 1992. The majority of the central committee reportedly favoured Dissanayake and compelled Amarasinghe to retire.

The leadership change was associated with an attempt to portray the JVP as a respectable party both in Sri Lanka and internationally that had renounced past violence and stood for "national unity." Support for big business and international capital once again came to the fore.

Addressing a meeting of the Sinhala diaspora in London in May 2014, Dissanayake apologised for the first time on behalf of the party for the

JVP's violence in its chauvinist campaign against the Accord during 1988-1990. In the same breath, however, he justified the party's actions saying it was just reacting to the repression of the UNP government, which was a lie.

Dissanayake cynically blamed past governments for creating the ethnic conflicts, which, while true, deliberately obscured the JVP's own role in backing many of those governments and its demand for a relentless war against "LTTE terrorism."

While attacking Rajapakse for Sinhala communalism, corruption and dictatorial rule, the JVP and its new leader joined with the right-wing UNP in the Washington-backed conspiracy to oust him. Senior SLFP leader Maithripala Sirisena broke ranks with Rajapakse and, with the backing of a UNP-led alliance, won the presidential election in January 2015. The US had backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE but was hostile to his leaning towards Beijing for financial assistance and weapons.

While the JVP did not directly call for a vote for Sirisena, it launched a vociferous election campaign demanding Rajapakse be ousted. So as not to split the vote, the JVP did not field its own presidential candidate.

In an interview to the *Daily Mirror* on December 1, 2014 Dissanayake declared: "Everyone should work together to topple this dictatorship [of Rajapakse]... [even if] we would not be a majority in a government that would form if the opposition wins." He stressed in particular: "We don't have an issue with [UNP leader] Ranil (Wickremesinghe) becoming prime minister."

Alluding to the US pressure to oust Rajapakse, Dissanayake said that one of the problems to be solved was "the risk of being isolated in the international arena."

The JVP did not join the government after the election. However, Dissanayake was appointed to the 13-member National Executive Council appointed by Sirisena to prop up his minority government until after the parliamentary elections. The JVP leader praised the phony good-governance posturing by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, who became prime minister, and had no qualms about their abrupt shift in foreign policy towards Washington.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "national unity" government implemented a brutal austerity program provoking widespread opposition among workers, students and rural poor. Only then did the JVP take a critical attitude towards the government while at the same time blocking workers' struggles to prevent any threat to its rule.

The 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attack on churches and luxury hotels by an ISIS-backed Islamist group graphically exposed the pretenses of JVP and Dissanayake to have put their communalist politics in the past. Speaking in the parliament, Dissanayake not only denounced Muslim "terrorism" but blamed the entire Muslim community, declaring: "This destructive embryo is being developed inside Muslim womb."

In August 2019, JVP leadership announced the formation of an electoral front, National People's Power (NPP), to draw in layers of the upper middle class to further obscure its past and give it legitimacy.

A recent political column in the *Sunday Times* on October 20 shed some light on the collusion in ruling circles behind the NPP's establishment. Months before the 2019 election, Dissanayake met with top UNP leaders as part of a dialogue that was established during the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime.

The *Sunday Times* explained: "During the dialogue, one of the UNP stalwarts... offered a suggestion... to rebrand the party whilst retaining the identity of the JVP. The suggestion to retain the identity was to keep ordinary people happy. He said that a new face would be appealing domestically and to the outside world."

He also advised the JVP leaders that such a rebrand would also "draw away criticism about JVP's previous record linked to violent incidents."

The rebranding gave birth to the NPP was born with prominent

academics and NGO top activists already gathered around the JVP, including Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, who is now prime minister. In the subsequent five years, the NPP has expanded to include academics, professionals, businessmen and former senior military officers.

During this period, particularly following the 2022 mass uprising, the JVP/NPP has developed close relations in Colombo diplomatic circles, especially with US imperialism.

US ambassador Julie Chung, after meeting Dissanayake and other leaders at the JVP office in July 2022, declared: “To me the JVP is a significant party. They have a growing presence. They resonate with the public during recent times... I thought it is my duty to really connect with the JVP leadership as person to person, not just as a party to the US government.”

The history of the JVP in which Dissanayake has played a particular role in its jettisoning of socialistic demagoguery and transformation into pro-imperialist political instrument of the Sri Lankan ruling class is a warning to workers and youth. The Dissanayake government is completely committed to imposing the burden of the deep economic crisis on the workers and the poor and ruthlessly suppressing any opposition, including with police-state measures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, calls upon workers to prepare politically for the class battles ahead against the Dissanayake government’s assault on their basic social and democratic rights. What is required is mobilisation of an independent political movement of the working class, rallying rural poor and youth, in opposition to the JVP/NPP and all the other parties of the bourgeois political establishment and their fake-left hangers on, based on international socialism.

The SEP is intervening in the November 14 general elections, running 41 candidates for three electoral districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the north and Nuwara Eliya in central plantation area. We are calling on workers and rural toilers to form action committees, independent of the trade unions and all bourgeois parties, to defend their class interests and advance the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies. We appeal to workers, youth and rural poor to support our campaign, vote for our candidates and join with us in the struggle for this perspective.



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