

Sri Lankan president appoints cabinet committed to IMF austerity

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Sri Lanka's new president, Anura Dissanayake, formed his new cabinet on Monday after his National People's Power (NPP)/Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) obtained 159 of the 225 parliamentary seats in last Thursday's general election.

The JVP/NPP exploited a tidal wave of popular anger against the traditional political establishment, whose ruinous capitalist policies have plunged the country into a devastating, ongoing socio-economic crisis. The new government, however, is committed to implementing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as aligning Sri Lanka with the aggressive US-led confrontation against China.

The JVP/NPP campaigned in the election for a "strong" government, supposedly to root out corruption and promote a "national renaissance." Dissanayake's real objective was to strengthen the government's use of the levers of state power to suppress the inevitable opposition to its agenda of class war at home, and integration into US imperialism's wars abroad.

Dissanayake, who is also the commander of the armed forces, retained the powerful defence and finance ministries, bringing the implementation of the IMF's austerity measures under his direct purview. After appointing the ministers, he met the visiting IMF delegation and reaffirmed his readiness to collaborate with the IMF "to advance Sri Lanka's economic recovery within the context of the mandate."

The main ministers in the 21-member cabinet are leading members of the JVP and the NPP. Among them are long-standing JVP leaders who are identified with the party's fascist, anti-Tamil campaign in the late 1980s and fierce support for the racist war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009.

The JVP deliberately buried its past crimes in an effort

to woo Tamil voters during the election campaign. It achieved the largest vote in every Tamil-majority district except one, as a result of widespread disaffection with the all the traditional parties, including the bourgeois Tamil parties.

Working people as a whole are in for a shock as Dissanayake implements austerity measures that will inevitably produce major class struggles. The appointment of diehard JVP leaders to the cabinet makes clear that the government will not hesitate to resort to police-state measures and will also step up chauvinism to vilify Tamils and Muslims and divide the working class.

Harini Amarasuriya, who was appointed prime minister after Dissanayake was elected and sworn in as the president in September, continues as premier and has the education portfolio. An academic, she is a key figure in the NPP, which was established by the JVP in 2019 to draw in layers of the upper-middle class—including fellow academics, business layers, former police and army officers—and to prove itself a trustworthy political tool of the ruling class.

Amarasuriya undoubtedly had a hand in orienting JVP/NPP foreign policy towards US imperialism and its strategic partner in South Asia—India, where she studied and had strong connections. In 2015, she played an important role in the US-orchestrated removal of the regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse, regarded as too close to China, and its replacement with the pro-Washington Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

Vijitha Herath, a prominent JVP leader, is the remaining member of the three-person JVP/NPP cabinet formed in September pending parliamentary elections. He continues in the key role of foreign minister as well as holding the tourism and foreign employment portfolios.

Both Herath and Dissanayake were members of the JVP/NPP team that met regularly with Western diplomats in Colombo, most significantly with US Ambassador to

Sri Lanka Julie Chung in the past few years. The JVP's past radical posturing against US and so-called Indian imperialism has been completely dropped.

As MPs in the previous parliament, Dissanayake or Herath did not utter a word against the US or India when the previous pro-US Wickremesinghe government banned Chinese research ships from Sri Lankan ports in 2022–23. The JVP also gave support to Wickremesinghe's decision to send a Sri Lankan navy vessel to the Red Sea as part of the US-led operation against Houthi rebels in Yemen who were threatening supplies to Israel as it carried out genocide in Gaza.

Significantly, Herath has announced that Dissanayake will make his first trip as president to India to consolidate ties. The Sri Lankan president has already pledged that he will work with the incoming US administration of the fascist president-elect Donald Trump.

Just as the JVP/NPP government is making clear that it will carry out the dictates of the IMF and international finance capital, so to it is aligning itself with US imperialism and its allies and partners as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the confrontation with China, intensify.

The government's hostile attitude to the working people has been signalled by the appointment of K.D. Lalkantha, the JVP's National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) president, as the Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation. This longstanding JVP leader and union bureaucrat was instrumental in banning strikes prior to the presidential election. He declared that even the suggestion of industrial action would cut across the JVP's electoral plans and would be "a blatant reactionary act."

Another prominent JVP leader, Nalinda Jayathissa, who was appointed Minister of Health and Media, went further, stating prior to the parliamentary election that under a JVP/NPP government strikes would be "a thing of the past." In statements that recall the corporatism of the fascist regimes of the 1930s, he has suggested that the party and the state would merge and emphasised the closest collaboration between management and the trade unions.

Other significant appointments include:

* Professor Chandana Abeyrathna, who is now Minister for Public Administration, is a longtime JVP figure who was a leader of the Patriotic National Movement formed to prosecute the JVP's chauvinist campaign in support of the communal war against the LTTE.

* Ananda Wijepala, who is Minister of Public Security in charge of the police, is a longtime JVP member and

associate of Dissanayake, having served as his personal secretary when the latter was a cabinet minister in the 2004 coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

* Dissanayake had earlier announced that Aruna Jayasekara, head of NPP's Retired Military Collective, would become defence minister if the JVP/NPP came to power. He is a former major general who served as Eastern Province Commander during the war against the LTTE. He is tipped to become the deputy minister for defence today under Dissanayake as defence minister.

* Former DIG Ravi Seneviratne, a leading member of the NPP's Retired Police Officers' Collective, has been installed as secretary, the top administrative post in the Ministry of Public Security.

These appointments made clear that Dissanayake and the JVP/NPP intend to keep a strong grip on the key levers of state repression—the defence and public security ministries—as they proceed with their program of austerity.

Just as the Dissanayake government and the ruling class are preparing for the class battles ahead, so must the working class develop its own organisations and strategy to fight for its social and democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers and rural toilers to establish action committees in every workplace, plantation, suburb and town independent of the trade unions and all capitalist parties to defend its class interests. We advance the demand for the repudiation of all foreign debts and reject all claims that working people must sacrifice for the benefit of the profits of the super wealthy few.

The SEP is calling for the establishment of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on representatives of the action committees. This is the essential mechanism to unify the struggles of working people in the fight for political power and the formation of workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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