

JVP enters Sri Lankan election with an eye to a deal with the major parties

By Vilani Peris
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In the Sri Lankan presidential elections to be held on December 21, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front has nominated as its candidate, Nandana Gunetilleke, a lesser-known member of its Politburo, and is campaigning for him as "the common candidate of the left". From the outset, however, the JVP campaign has been oriented to seeking a deal or even an alliance with one of the two major bourgeois formations—the People's Alliance (PA) and the United National Party (UNP).

Speculation has been rife that the JVP nominated Gunetilleke rather than one of its more high profile leaders so as not to draw votes away from the People's Alliance (PA) candidate—the current president Chandrika Kumaratunga. In an interview in the *Sunday Leader* on November 7, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva rejected the allegations, saying that it had chosen a compromise candidate to accommodate the other parties in the front.

Tilvin Silva also denied the interviewer's suggestion that the JVP had met and done a deal with the media minister Mangala Samaraweera to field a low-key candidate in return for control over the administration of the Southern province. But the JVP engaged in similar manoeuvres prior to the last presidential election in 1994. The party withdrew its own candidate and called for a vote for Kumaratunga, accepting her assurances that the presidential system would be abolished within six months.

The JVP is part of the so-called Common Left Front, with the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which is affiliated internationally with the pseudo-Trotskyists of the United Secretariat, and the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), an offshoot of the NSSP. The JVP is known for its murderous attacks on the working class, trade unions and political parties in the

late 1980s, and so relies on the credentials provided by the NSSP to be able to present itself as "left" and "socialist".

Statements by its presidential candidate Gunatileka indicate that the JVP may be prepared to collaborate with the conservative United National Party (UNP) as well. Commenting in the *Sunday Times* on November 7, he said: "He (the UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe) has shown that he is weak in politics. We cannot forget the leadership qualities of President Jayawardena, President Premadasa or even Gamini Dissanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali. They would have been crafty but they possessed all the qualities of good leaders."

The praise for previous UNP presidents and ministers is significant. These right-wing leaders, who had close ties with the US, were responsible for starting and prosecuting the protracted and brutal war against the Tamil population in the North and East. Even more significant is the reference to Premadasa in such terms. In the late 1980s, Premadasa, after initially seeking to use the JVP against the working class and rural masses in the south, turned on the party. The Sri Lankan security forces murdered JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera and his deputy in November 1989, and under the pretext eliminating the JVP and its guerrilla forces, carried out a genocidal campaign in which tens of thousands of peasant youth were tortured and murdered.

Since the murder of Wijeweera, the JVP has rapidly sought to integrate itself back into the mainstream of bourgeois politics and was permitted to formally do so during the 1994 election campaign. While at times it still seeks to use its amalgam of peasant radicalism, Castroism and Stalinism to appeal to the rural poor, more and more it has openly accommodated its

program to the demands of sections of big business.

The JVP recently held discussions with Lalith Kotalawela, a prominent member of the business community, who is seeking to bring the PA and UNP together to negotiate with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the war.

The JVP's main demand in the present election is "the abolition of the executive presidential system of government". Instituted by the UNP under Jayawardena in 1978, the executive presidency places enormous powers in the hands of a single person and has been an effective means for prosecuting the war and implementing the austerity measures demanded by the IMF and World Bank. The JVP seeks to exploit the widespread hostility to the impact of these policies by attacking the presidential system. The JVP is keeping its options open: it has little to say about policies of the UNP and PA or about the program it would implement.

In an interview in the *Daily Mirror* on November 8, Nandana Gunetilleke claimed that the JVP was for "a socialist economy," but then immediately qualified his remark with the statement that "this does not mean that there won't be any private enterprise". The JVP, which has always been based on a narrow nationalist outlook, justifies its support for privatisation and foreign investment as essential because of changes in global economy. Its role model is Cuba where the Castro regime has opened the door to major corporations to exploit workers on poverty level wages and appalling working conditions.

Neither Gunetilleke nor other JVP leaders have referred to the continuing war against the Tamil population in the North and East in their interviews during the election campaign. The 16-year war has resulted in 55,000 deaths, 30,000 missing and one million displaced, yet the JVP does not call for its end. The JVP has repeatedly changed its position in relation to the Tamil minority. In its publication "What is the Solution to the Tamil Eelam struggle," its late leader Wijeweera denies that Tamil people suffer any particular oppression and opposes outright any struggle for a separate "Eelam" as totally unjustified.

But in the midst of a presidential election, with an eye to Tamil votes, the JVP has changed its tune, saying that Tamils have their own culture and should have a system of self-rule. In the past, they violently opposed anything that would "divide the motherland"

including the provincial council system implemented in 1987 and the current devolution package proposed by Kumaratunga.

While calling for "self-rule" within the capitalist nation state, JVP is opposed to any negotiation with the LTTE and tacitly supports the Sri Lankan army's ongoing military operations. Through all its twists and turns, the JVP has always been hostile to a class solution based on uniting Tamil and Sinhalese workers and poor in a common struggle against the profit system.

The remaking of the JVP from guerrilla outlaws to parliamentarians is in direct proportion to the political crisis of the UNP and the People's Alliance. In the current campaign, the JVP has received considerable attention in the media. Under conditions where there is widespread disaffection with the major bourgeois parties, the JVP is being groomed for a role, if not directly in government, then as part of an opposition that will contain the growing anger of workers as well as urban and rural poor.

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