

Sri Lanka: JVP election campaign aimed at securing business support

By Vilani Peiris
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The campaign of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the Sri Lankan general elections to be held on December 5 is characterised by two features: extreme Sinhala chauvinism and an attempt to establish its credentials in ruling circles as a responsible party that will provide “good governance”.

Despite the fact that the media routinely refers to the JVP as “Marxist” and “socialist,” the party was never based on Marxism. It appealed to a layer of disaffected rural youth, mainly in the country’s south, on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism, Maoism and Castroism. The party shifted sharply to the right following the outbreak of the country’s civil war in 1983, resorting to terror methods in the late 1980s against all those it accused of “betraying the nation”.

The JVP was brought back into official politics in 1994, after a period of illegality, and since then has been seeking to carve out a role for itself as part of the political establishment. Just prior to the announcement of the election, President Chandrika Kumaratunga struck a deal with the JVP to shore up her minority Peoples Alliance (PA) government. Powerful sections of big business that are seeking a negotiated end to the war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) opposed the arrangement with the JVP and undermined the government.

In the election campaign, the JVP has joined the PA in accusing the opposition United National Party of having a secret deal with the LTTE to “sell out the motherland to the separatists”. Its slogan is “Defend motherland and unitary state from Elephant-Tiger traitorous coalition”—the Elephant is the UNP’s party symbol and the Tiger refers to the LTTE. It has also denounced the UNP’s allies based among Muslims and Tamil-speaking plantation workers, for allegedly working for the division of the country.

In themselves, these accusations are absurd. The conservative UNP initiated the war against the LTTE, prosecuted it with great brutality for over a decade and is just as steeped in Sinhala chauvinism as the PA. Its call for negotiations with the LTTE reflects the interests of business figures who, having supported the war for years, now regard it as a major obstacle to attracting global investment. The chauvinist campaign against the UNP simply underscores the difficulties confronting the ruling elite: any move towards a deal with the LTTE either by the UNP or PA is immediately denounced by Sinhala extremists such as the JVP.

Just over a year ago, the JVP joined other chauvinist organisations and the Buddhist hierarchy in denouncing an attempt by its current PA allies to change the constitution to provide for a

limited form of regional devolution as the basis for talks with the LTTE. Under the pressure of the campaign, the UNP refused to back the constitutional package and Kumaratunga was forced to withdraw it. Until just the last few months, the JVP has been collaborating closely with the UNP—the very party it now roundly accuses of treachery.

Concerned at the possible impact of the JVP’s chauvinist election campaign, sections of the press have hit back. Seizing on a speech by JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe, who has just returned to Sri Lanka after 12 years in self-imposed exile in Europe, a number of commentators have begun to refer to the JVP terrorist rampage in the late 1980s, in which thousands died, including many workers, trade unionists and political leaders. An editorial in the *Island* newspaper, for instance, has denounced Amarasinghe for “glorifying terrorism” and for suggesting that the JVP would again resort to arms.

The comments are completely hypocritical from a number of standpoints. Firstly, the UNP, which the *Island* supports, was in government at the time and worked hand-in-hand with the JVP as its gunmen murdered workers and political opponents. After the JVP had done its dirty work against the working class, the UNP finally turned on the JVP. Secondly, the *Island* and the rest of the Colombo media have maintained a studied silence on the JVP’s terrorist past ever since it was brought back into the political mainstream in 1994. If these issues are now being raised, it is not because the *Island* or its corporate backers have any objection in principle to the JVP’s fascistic character or its inclusion in government but are concerned that the party will cut across immediate plans for a deal with the LTTE.

For its part, the JVP has been at pains to prove itself to big business. In his speech, Amarasinghe was seeking to lay to rest the period of the late 1980s, saying that those who died had been the victims of a war and that a JVP government would compensate their relatives. His suggestion of a new “call to arms” was conditional on a UN vote. “If the United Nations approves a resolution that law and order has broken down in this country then we will take up arms to protect the country,” he said.

Amarasinghe’s reference to an armed struggle can only be understood within the context of the JVP’s response to the US-led war on Afghanistan. The party has dumped its previous anti-imperialist rhetoric and embraced Bush’s “war against terrorism” as a means of seeking the support of the major powers for war against the LTTE. Its election manifesto states: “The

world has arrived at a period in which it unites against terrorism. Utilising this advantageous situation fully, [we] can wipe out the Tiger terrorism from Sri Lanka.”

By stirring up Sinhala chauvinism, the JVP leaders are seeking to retain their social base among disaffected, unemployed rural Sinhalese youth in the south of the island even as the party is junking its “socialist” phrases and accommodating to big business. In an interview with the *Lacnet* website prior to his return, Amarasinghe offered the following reassurance to ruling circles in Colombo: “Marxism had become old fashioned towards the end of the 19th century... We are not old-fashioned Marxists. We are open to be influenced by any other ‘ism’ that provides us new ideas.”

Just which “isms” are now influencing the JVP is clear from its election manifesto. Having previously denounced US imperialism, the JVP now advocates US-style business. “We should learn from United States of America, how it has used the authority and the responsibility of the laws on investments to prevent corruption and wastage,” its manifesto states.

The JVP has all but abandoned its previous opposition to privatisation—the exceptions are state banks and insurance companies. Speaking to *Business Today*, JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva commented: “There is a misconception on the word ‘privatisation’ among people. We approve of a strong private sector.” Its manifesto pledges to allow foreign investment with all concessions, including generous tax holidays, and to strengthen private enterprise in all sectors of economy. The JVP program calls for “efficiency” and “productivity” in the industrial sector and the abolition of “weak managements,” all of which will be implemented at the expense of the working class and poor.

The JVP proposes to “contribute to political stability which is necessary to ensure the economic stability of the country”. What is meant by “stability” was made clear shortly after the party struck its deal to support the PA government. The JVP began issuing statements to its trade union organisations to end any industrial action that threatened the government. In one statement in the course of a nurses’ dispute, the JVP insisted that trade union activities should not be conducted in such a way as to draw public hostility. In his interview with *Business Today*, Tilwin Silva warned of “severe unrest among the workforce” and then went on to promote China as a model for high growth through “political stability, economic discipline”. Amid a deepening economic and social crisis within the country, the JVP is offering its services to discipline the working class in the same repressive manner as the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy.

When the JVP signed its Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the PA in September it was on exactly the same basis. As the JVP explained at the time, the agreement was to end the “instability” and “anarchy” that followed the defections from the ruling coalition in June and advantaged “disruptive forces including separatists.” Having had a taste of power, the JVP is now seeking to expand its influence. Shortly after nominating for the election, Tilwin Silva declared that after December 5 “both the UNP and PA will be compelled to come on bended knees to form a government with the JVP’s support”.

It appears that the JVP already has an informal agreement with

Kumaratunga and the PA to reach a deal after the election. Certainly their campaign is being run along similar chauvinist lines and both parties are appealing to voters on the basis of the previous MoU.

The JVP is trumpeting the constitutional changes pushed through parliament just prior the calling of elections as a great gain for democracy. Under the 17th amendment, “an independent constitutional commission” will appoint commissions for elections, police, judiciary, media and public service. In conditions in which vote rigging, corruption and violence are endemic, the changes are a face-saving device designed to shore up these widely discredited institutions. The so-called independent commission is comprised of representatives of the same parties that have engaged in these practices and will be further used to strengthen the state apparatus.

The JVP calls for even tougher anti-terrorist laws to replace the existing anti-democratic ones, which already provide for press censorship, widespread detention without trial, the banning of strikes and protests, and other draconian measures.

The JVP is also glorifying another measure contained within the MoU—a proposal to write off the debts of small farmers—as long as the loans are less than 20,000 rupees or \$US215. Similar measures were implemented after the PA government first came to power in 1994 but these did nothing to alleviate the desperate situation facing small farmers. After a brief respite, they became just as heavily indebted as previously, due to the impact of low commodity prices, high costs and the lack of land and capital. The JVP’s offer to write off small loans is a crude appeal to its rural base.

The real appeal of the MoU was to business; particularly weaker sections that have been hard hit by the processes of globalisation. They saw the deal between the PA and JVP as a means of ensuring political stability and cracking down on the working class. Alloy Jayawardana, president of the Sri Lanka Chamber of Small Industries, was critical of the way in which the opposition UNP and its corporate backers forced an early election. He said that with “industries teetering on the brink of total disaster,” the opposition should have taken a “more responsible attitude”. “Gains could have accrued,” he said, from the pact between the PA and its fascistic JVP allies.

The JVP campaign is aimed at building on this support in ruling circles.

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