

Sinhala chauvinist JVP makes significant gains in Sri Lankan election

By Vilani Peiris
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One of the most significant features of the Sri Lankan general elections last December was the growth of the Sinhala chauvinist party known as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples Liberation Party. Feeding off the disaffection with the two traditional parties of the political establishment—the United National Party (UNP) and the Peoples Alliance (PA)—the JVP vote jumped by more than 50 percent from the general election just a year before. The party received 815,353 votes as compared to 518,774 in 2000 and won 16 seats, up from 10.

The rise of the JVP to the position of an established third party poses serious dangers to the working class. Just seven years ago, the party was an outlawed organisation, some of its main leaders had been killed and it was despised among workers for the fascistic methods that it employed in the late 1980s to campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord. The JVP denounced the accord and the deployment of an Indian “peacekeeping” force in northern Sri Lanka, ostensibly to end the war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under the slogan “Motherland or Death,” the JVP’s gun-toting goons forced workers to strike and the rural poor to take part in demonstrations, killing scores of workers, union leaders and party officials who opposed them.

Having initially exploited the JVP’s campaign as a useful means for intimidating the working class, the UNP government turned on the party. In what can only be described as a genocidal campaign, the Sri Lankan security forces, working hand-in-hand with plainclothes death squads, murdered an estimated 60,000 rural youth—many of whom had little or no connection to the JVP. To justify its brutal actions, the government, backed by the media, branded the JVP as a terrorist organisation.

But the state repression solved none of the underlying economic and social problems and opposition continued to grow against the UNP, which lost the elections to the PA in 1994. At the same time, however, efforts were made to rehabilitate the JVP, as a political safety valve for the discontent of the rural masses. The party was legalised and campaigned in the 1994 general elections, winning just 81,560 votes and one seat. Though widely discredited among working people, particularly Tamils and Muslims who despised it as a communal outfit, the major parties, the media and the Buddhist hierarchy showered it with praises, saying it had entered the “democratic mainstream”.

Its gains in the last election were mainly made at the expense of the PA, which includes not only the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga but also the so-called left parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Sri Lankan Communist Party (SLCP). The PA vote fell by 15 percent or nearly

600,000 votes as a result of hostility to its attacks on jobs and living standards as dictated by the IMF, its assault on democratic rights and the continuation of war against the LTTE. The conservative UNP, which called for talks to end the war, was the greatest beneficiary but the JVP made sizeable gains.

Under the Sri Lankan electoral system, parties win seats on a proportional basis—both at the national level and in 22 electoral districts. In the rural south, the JVP’s main base, its share of the vote increased by more than 4 percent in two electoral districts. In the remote district of Hambantota, the JVP won votes from both the PA and UNP, increasing its share by 6 percent to 21 percent. The party made gains in areas where the LSSP previously had a hold, such as Ratnapura and Kalutara. In Ratnapura, its vote nearly doubled and the party won a seat for the first time. The JVP bolstered its position in the north central and central districts, winning seats for the first time in Anuradhapura, Kegalla and Kandy.

The JVP made inroads into PA bases in rural areas by exploiting the widespread discontent among the peasantry. Farmers have been hard hit by high costs of production, low prices for crops, rising debt burden, landlessness and the penetration of multinational companies into the countryside. The JVP has always postured as a radical defender of the small farmer and has carried out protests and agitations on all these issues. Just before the December election, however, the JVP got its first taste of power when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding to keep the faltering PA administration in office. In doing so, the JVP dumped all of its promises to farmers bar one—a paltry pledge to write off the loans of farmers, provided that the sum was less than 20,000 rupees or about \$US215.

The JVP has also gathered a considerable following among university students, particularly those from rural areas. Unlike other Sinhala extremist parties, the JVP had its origins as a radical grouping based on a mixture of Castroism and Maoism, and still claims at times to be “Marxist” and “socialist”. In the universities, where it turns up its radical rhetoric to full volume, it campaigned against the PA government’s plans to privatise universities and slash education facilities. Under the agreement with the PA, the JVP dropped most of its anti-privatisation demands, only retaining its formal opposition to education cutbacks. Its readiness to accommodate on this demand as well was indicated by its appeals over the past month to the new UNP government to appoint a minister for higher education to lay the basis for negotiations.

The most significant aspect of the JVP vote, however, was its support among layers of the working class in Colombo and the neighbouring Gampaha electoral district where it won four seats—two

from each area. In Colombo, the JVP vote rose from 78,110 in 2000 to 117,407 in 2001, while in Gampaha it increased from 73,110 to 113,990. In these areas, the JVP made its gains as a direct result of the betrayals of the old “left” parties, particularly the LSSP, which are now so closely identified with the PA as to be indistinguishable from it.

In 1964, at the height of its influence in the working class, the LSSP openly betrayed the principles of Trotskyism and entered the bourgeois SLFP government of Mrs Bandaranaike. At that time, the party had 15 or more parliamentarians and commanded the allegiance of the most militant and conscious sections of workers. On May Day, the Colombo streets used to be red with the pro-LSSP banners of the hundreds of thousands of workers and rural youth who joined marches, which stretched for miles.

Today the LSSP is nothing more than a bureaucratic shell—a shrivelled appendage of the SLFP—which was able to win only one seat in the last elections and then only barely. A measure of its political cowardice and degeneration is its attitude to the JVP. Following the PA’s deal with the JVP, the LSSP’s newspaper dutifully ran an article praising the JVP as a genuine Marxist party, ignoring the fact that this fascist group had murdered its leaders and members a little over a decade before.

A similar role was played by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), an opportunist breakaway from the LSSP, which, after 1994, expended considerable effort in dressing up the JVP in socialist clothes. The NSSP leaders, some of whom had barely escaped assassination at the hands of the JVP, claimed that the organisation had changed its spots and encouraged workers to enter its trade union organisations. In 1995, the NSSP participated in a JVP conference and, in 1999, supported its presidential candidate. It was only in 2000, after the JVP participated in a chauvinist campaign along with other Sinhala extremists against the PA government’s moves toward talks with the LTTE, that the NSSP decided, without offering any explanation, that they could not continue to support the JVP.

At the same time, the JVP has been able to benefit from the treachery of the LSSP and SLCP who, as partners in the PA government, supported its economic restructuring programs including privatisation and cutbacks to jobs and working conditions. By posturing as opponents of these measures, the JVP has been able to build its own trade union organisations, particularly in government enterprises such as telecommunications, postal, ports and railways, which face privatisation, and in the free trade zones.

While the JVP adopts a more “militant” pose, its trade unions accept the framework of Sri Lankan capitalism and are just as ruthless as their traditional counterparts in implementing the dictates of business. In 1997, the JVP union imposed a collective agreement with the Ansell Lanka, a multinational in Biyagama free trade zone. In return for a pitiful wage rise, the agreement ruled out any industrial action for five years and promised increased productivity. When Ceylon Electricity Board employees went on strike, the JVP branded their industrial action as a “conspiracy” to create the conditions for the government to impose dictatorial measures.

In backing the PA last year, the JVP made its most explicit pledge to act as an industrial policeman for big business, promising not to pursue “industrial disputes” that could lead to economic and political anarchy. Shortly after, its health workers’ trade union issued a leaflet opposing a planned nurses’ strike, saying that the workers would get “discredited among masses”. This provided just a glimpse of what the JVP would do if it came to power.

There is no doubt that sections of the ruling class are grooming the JVP for a more prominent political role in the future, and the JVP is happy with the new relationship. JVP leaders, who in the past thundered anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist demagoguery in their public meetings and media, have been seen over the last two years rubbing shoulders with businessmen, foreign diplomats and other powerbrokers. The country’s top employer groups now invite the JVP for discussions on political and economic issues as a matter of course.

And the JVP is keen to reassure big businessmen that the party will comply with their demands. Last November JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva told the state-run *Business Today* journal that the party was not “against privatisation”. The JVP emphasised in its election program that the party welcomed foreign investment and would guarantee the right to repatriate profits. Its “opposition” to the restructuring demands of the IMF and the opening up of the Sri Lankan economy is not from the standpoint of the working class but to defend a layer of local businessmen who are unable to compete.

The most cynical aspect of the JVP’s attempt to refashion a more moderate, acceptable image is its claim to stand for “equal rights for all communities”. Right from its “Marxist” origins, the JVP was deeply imbued with hostility to the country’s Tamil and Muslim minorities, branding Tamil-speaking tea estate workers as agents of “Indian imperialism”. The party now claims to defend the rights of minorities and has even appointed a Tamil, Ramalingam Chandrasekaram, and a Muslim, Anjan Umma, as parliamentarians.

The JVP slogan of “equal rights” is a complete fraud. The party is above all a defender of the Sri Lankan state and has supported to the hilt the 18-year civil war, which has its origins in the systematic discrimination against the Tamil and Muslim minorities. The bias against minorities finds its sharpest expression in the country’s constitution that entrenches Buddhism as the state religion—a clause that the JVP, which has close relations with the Buddhist hierarchy, fully backs. Moreover, the JVP backs the multitude of repressive laws under which the security forces arbitrarily harass, torture and detain Tamils without trial.

Like the rest of the JVP’s moderate window-dressing, the bogus claim to defend equal rights would rapidly fall away, along with the remainder of its socialist phrases, if the party ever came to power. In the name of “defending the Motherland,” the JVP would not hesitate to use the same brutal methods that it employed in the late 1980s—only this time it would have the resources of the state security forces, with whom it has close ties, at its disposal. That is precisely why sections of the ruling class are cultivating the JVP—to be used in a political emergency when all else fails.

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