

New Sinhala extremist party fields Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan elections

By Panini Wijesiriwardana and K. Ratnayake
1 April 2004

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party have repeatedly warned that President Chandrika Kumaratunga's chauvinist agitation against the "peace process" and the United National Front (UNF) government would set in motion dangerous communal forces that threaten to plunge the country back to war.

That warning has been more than vindicated by the formation of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or Pure Sinhala National Heritage shortly after Kumaratunga sacked the government on February 7. The JHU was established by two extreme rightwing outfits—the Sinhala Urumaya (SU) and its associated organisation of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya (JSS)—to push the president and the entire political establishment even further to the right.

The JHU is standing 252 Buddhist priests as candidates in 21 of the country's 22 electoral districts on an explicitly Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist program. It is critical of Kumaratunga's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) for not taking a tough enough stand against the UNF and its peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

JHU's criticisms have exposed Kumaratunga's precarious balancing act. While attacking the UNF for conceding too much to the LTTE, the president has also been careful not to alienate sections of big business and the major powers that have been pushing for a negotiated end to the country's 20-year war. The UPFA program leaves the door open to maintaining the present ceasefire and starting its own talks with the LTTE.

The JHU on the other hand is opposed to any resumption of peace negotiations. The SU and JSS have repeatedly condemned the terms of the ceasefire, denounced the Norwegian mediators as LTTE stooges, and demanded a strengthening of the Sri Lankan military in preparation for war. The JSS applauded Kumaratunga for ousting the UNF but demanded an audience to discuss the terms of their support for the UPFA. When she stalled, the JSS leaders formed the JHU to ratchet up the pressure.

The JHU's modus operandi is intimidation and thuggery. Last September and October, the JSS-SU organisations staged two highly provocative demonstrations: an "inspection" of ruins of Buddhist temples in LTTE-held territory in the east, and a march to an LTTE camp in the eastern Batticaloa district. Both protests had the potential to provoke a violent clash with the LTTE.

The JSS-SU has also engaged in a vicious anti-Christian campaign, demanding a ban on missionaries and so-called unethical conversions. The Buddhist hierarchy was particularly incensed that Christian groups were offering welfare and education programs to the poor as a means of gaining converts. More than 100 churches of various Christian denominations have been attacked by thugs in Colombo and other parts of the country over the last six months. Several victims have accused Buddhist monks of being directly involved.

The campaign became even more frenzied after its leader, Buddhist prelate Gangodawila Soma, died suddenly in December during a trip to

Russia. Without a shred of evidence, the JSS-SU claimed that Soma's death was the result of a conspiracy—by implication, on the part of Christians—and stepped up its attacks on churches and its pressure on the government and the president. An end to "unethical conversions" is one of the JHU's central demands.

The JHU makes a reactionary appeal to disaffected layers of small business, farmers and the state apparatus on the basis of establishing a state founded on the supremacy of the Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese majority. Its program would further entrench discriminatory measures against other religions and ethnic minorities, particularly Tamils.

JHU general secretary, the monk Uduve Dhammaloka, told the media: "We do not see this [our campaign] as contesting elections but as a measure to safeguard the Buddha Sasana [Buddhist religion] and [to prevent] the country from falling into enemy hands." Reflecting the attitudes of the most militaristic layers of the ruling elite, the JHU blames past the army's past defeats on "political interference" and calls for the military to be given a free hand to crush the LTTE.

The JHU unveiled its program at a gathering in Kandy on March 2. The date and place were deliberately chosen to underscore its calls for Sinhala-Buddhist predominance. Kandy was the last capital of the Sinhala kingdom prior to its defeat by the British and March 2, 1815 was the date when control was formally ceded under the Kandyan convention. Prior to the meeting, the JHU monks organised a religious ceremony near Dalada Maligawa or the Temple of the Tooth, which plays a pivotal role in Sri Lankan Buddhism.

While its 12-point program pays lip service to the rights of minorities, the JHU declares that "the Sri Lankan state should be built, as in the past, according to Buddhist principles." Moreover the "national right of the Sinhala nation" is asserted above others on the basis that "national ownership of a country lies with the people who habitated it and built its civilisation and its culture."

This is a recipe for an anti-democratic, theocratic state, akin to the rule of the Islamic mullahs in Iran or the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The JHU envisages the establishment of a "Dhamma kingdom"—a country ruled by the principles of Buddhism, in which the priestly hierarchy would effectively sit in judgement over government policy. Other religions and ethnic groups would be relegated to a second class status, subject to systematic discrimination and repression.

The JHU receives significant financial and political support from those sections of business, the military establishment and state bureaucracy whose careers and profits have derived from the civil war. By Sri Lankan standards, it has spent lavishly on its election campaign. JHU candidates have access to dozens of vehicles to travel around the country and have broadcast frequent TV advertisements, which cost around 20,000 rupees for 15 seconds—roughly three times the monthly wage of a factory worker. The JHU has also distributed hundreds of thousands of leaflets and pamphlets throughout the country.

A history of communal politics

The centrality of monks in the JHU reflects the pivotal role of the Buddhist hierarchy in promoting Sinhala communalism—the ideological linchpin of the Sri Lankan state since independence in 1948. Buddhist revivalism, which bewailed the social evils introduced by Europeans and looked back to a glorious Sinhala past, was always an element of the chauvinist politics employed by the capitalist class, particularly against the growing influence of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

The 1953 Hartal movement of strikes and protests that brought the United National Party government to its knees marked a turning point. Terrified at the extent of the LSSP-led opposition, sections of the ruling class threw their weight behind the Sri Lanka Freedom Party headed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's father. He appealed to the Sinhala rural poor on the basis of populist demagoguery and the chauvinist demand to make Sinhala the sole official state language.

During the 1956 elections, the Buddhist clergy, organised under the United Front of Buddhist Clergy (Eksath Bhikku Peramuna), became proselytizers for Bandaranaike. More than 12,000 monks fanned out across the island calling for an SLFP victory to defend Buddhism from Christianity and the Europeanised elite of the UNP. The SLFP won office but Bandaranaike fell victim to the reactionary forces that he himself fostered. In 1959, he was assassinated by a monk who was outraged that he had not gone further in creating a Sinhala Buddhist state.

The LSSP gradually adapted to Sinhala chauvinism and, in 1964, completely abandoned its socialist principles by joining the bourgeois coalition government of SLFP Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. Its complete capitulation to communal politics was graphically demonstrated when LSSP leaders trooped off to Kandy to worship at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth and to receive the blessings of the Buddhist hierarchy.

The LSSP's betrayal directly encouraged the growth of chauvinist politics. As part of a second Bandaranaike coalition from 1970 to 1977, the LSSP was responsible for drawing up a communal constitution which enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the state language. The widespread discrimination against Tamils directly fostered the emergence of armed Tamil groups such as the LTTE demanding the establishment of a separate Tamil state in the North and East of the island.

State-sanctioned discrimination was continued and deepened under the UNP, which set the stage for the country's civil war by unleashing a vicious anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo in 1983. Throughout the devastating conflict, the Buddhist hierarchy has backed the war effort and, at times, actively campaigned for new recruits for the army. The most rightwing monks have treated the war as a religious crusade to ensure the unchallenged supremacy of Buddhism and the "Sinhala nation." Time and again elements of the Buddhist hierarchy have joined forces with Sinhala extremist organisations in various fronts to oppose any peace moves or any, even limited, concessions to the Tamil minority.

In the past, the Buddhist clergy has supported or campaigned for one or other of the major parties—the SLFP or the United National Party (UNP), the major component of the UNF coalition. Now a section of the clergy is responding to the deep-going alienation of broad layers of the population from the existing parties and seeking to turn it in an entirely reactionary direction. Its decision to form the JHU and participate in the April 2 election is part of the breakup of the political establishment and the country's deepening political crisis.

Like all religious fundamentalists, the JHU blames every social problem on immorality. It appeals particularly to insecure and disorientated layers of the middle class, frustrated with corruption and fearful of growing social unrest, by pledging to "clean up politics" and reestablish a "righteous society." Its program also resonates with layers of small businessmen and traders who are being ruined by more competitive foreign and local corporations. Its economic program is limited to calling

for "a righteous national economy" based on the local farmer and entrepreneur.

The JHU's program and methods are completely anti-democratic. As its violent campaign against Christian churches demonstrates, the organisation is prepared to use physical intimidation and thuggery against anyone it regards as an enemy. Last October, the JSS and SU mounted a malicious campaign against a Sinhala-Tamil art festival, denouncing it as a front for the LTTE. When Colombo authorities failed to shut down the event, SU and JSS leaders mounted a provocation, then unleashed a gang of thugs on the gathering, injuring four people.

The JHU's emergence has split the Buddhist hierarchy and created political unease in ruling circles. Those layers of the ruling elite that back Kumaratunga have hinted that it is a plot aimed at splitting the Sinhala vote and allowing the UNF to return to office.

Top prelates and sections of the media have objected to the monks being directly involved in politics. A *Sunday Times* editorial, for instance, meekly commented: "The Kings of Lanka would constantly seek the advice of the monks in order that they guide the destinies of their people righteously: And that is the way that ought to be today. Nowhere is it said that a monk should be the king himself."

But no one in ruling circles has criticised, let alone denounced, the communal program on which the JHU candidates are standing. This universal silence points to the dirty secret of Sri Lankan politics: the entire political establishment in Colombo has exploited Sinhala chauvinism to divide and weaken the working class, with complete disregard for the disastrous consequences. All of the major political parties are directly responsible for creating the poisonous political climate that has allowed the JHU to emerge unchallenged.

The establishment of the JHU is a further warning of the dangers confronting the Sri Lankan working class. By stirring up chauvinist sentiment and undemocratically ousting the UNF government, President Kumaratunga has only inflamed what was already an explosive situation. Whatever the outcome of the April 2 election, the next government will confront a deepening social and political crisis. As in the past, the ruling elite will not hesitate to mobilise outfits like the JHU to shore up its rule.

To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>