

Sri Lanka: JVP grovels to the Bush administration

By Nanda Wickremasinghe
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A recent meeting in Colombo between the representatives of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and top US officials has exposed the sham character of the Sri Lankan party's anti-imperialist rhetoric and socialist posturing.

The JVP or National Liberation Front was formed in the 1960s by appealing to impoverished rural youth in the south of the island with a radical ideological brew mixed from Maoism, Guevarism and Sinhala communalism. Today it is part of a bourgeois government for the first time—a junior partner to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, a pillar of Sri Lankan capitalism—and several ministerial posts are held by JVP members.

The JVP's political stance is characterised by its reactionary Sinhala chauvinism and its hostility to any talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's civil war. Its occasional references to socialism are saved for university campus meetings and overseas trips to India or China where it rubs shoulders with fellow "communists" in the Stalinist parties of those countries.

The meeting at the US embassy on April 20 involved Somawansa Amarasinghe, the JVP's top leader and ideologue, and Vijitha Herath, a JVP MP and cultural affairs minister, together with US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, Christina Rocca and US ambassador Jeffery Lunstead. It is not the first time the JVP has been to the embassy for discussions—in recent years, it has become a well-worn path—but these were the highest level talks so far.

Rocca was in Colombo to push for the formation of a joint mechanism between the government and the LTTE to distribute tsunami relief aid to badly hit areas in the north and east of the island. The bid has stalled in large part because the JVP opposes the plan and has threatened to split from the government over the issue. The JVP regards any, even limited, concessions to the LTTE as treachery to the Sri Lankan, that is Sinhala, nation state.

The Bush administration is seeking a negotiated end to the island's 20-year civil war, not out of concern for the Sri Lankan people, but because the conflict is a destabilising

influence in South Asia and thus threatens US economic and strategic ambitions in the region. After meeting with senior government and opposition leaders, Rocca invited the JVP representatives for talks to urge their support for the joint mechanism and for the restarting of the so-called peace process.

Rocca was well aware that she was not dealing with socialists. She is a hard-nosed and ruthless former CIA operative who cut her teeth in the huge clandestine US campaign in the 1980s to finance, arm and train Islamic fundamentalist fighters against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Media reports of the discussions are limited and vague. Rocca argued that a joint aid mechanism would be a step toward peace talks with the LTTE. The JVP did not support that view. Amarasinghe called on Rocca to give an assurance that the US would pressure the LTTE to join "the democratic mainstream" in Colombo. Rocca refused to back the JVP proposal, which cuts across the "peace process" and the LTTE's demand for regional autonomy in the North and East.

Far more revealing, however, was a two-page letter signed by Amarasinghe and handed to Rocca. The letter was obtained by and posted on a Sri Lankan web site. In this remarkably frank document, the JVP shamelessly grovelled to the Bush administration in a bid to secure US support for Sri Lanka's own "war on tyranny"—that is, to restart Colombo's war to suppress the democratic rights of the Tamil minority.

Just in case Rocca was under any illusions, the letter began by making clear that the JVP had nothing to do with revolution or socialism. "We wish to be a revolutionary party to make the transition to a parliamentary party and to a mixed economy," it declared. "Mixed economy" is a code phrase for capitalist economy.

The document reiterated the JVP's gratitude to the Bush administration for sending American marines to Sri Lanka to take part in the "humanitarian effort" in providing aid to the victims of the December tsunami. No mention was made of

the real motivations behind the US operation. The tsunami provided a convenient pretext for advancing Washington's long-held ambition to reestablish a military presence in southern Asia. The dispatch of marines to Sri Lanka was part of the largest US military deployment to the region since Washington's defeat in Vietnam in 1975.

Most significantly, however, the JVP embraced the Bush administration's big lie: to be fighting for "democracy" and "freedom" against "tyranny". Amarasinghe's letter approvingly quoted the portion of Bush's second inauguration speech that states: "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands." It also lauded Bush's declaration that the US aims to "seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture ... ending tyranny in our world."

There is no ambiguity in these references. By hailing these utterances as legitimate, the JVP is not only supporting the Bush administration's past crimes, including its subjugation of Afghanistan and Iraq, but its preparations for new military adventures. Bush's aim in broadening the "war on terrorism" to the "war on tyranny" was to provide an overarching justification for US aggression anywhere in the world.

Even for the JVP, this marks a shift. While it backed the US military intervention in Afghanistan, the JVP offered muted criticisms of the US-led invasion of Iraq and encouraged the illusion that America's great power rivals France and Germany would stop the war. At an antiwar rally in Colombo in March 2003, JVP demagogue Wimal Weerawansa provided a taste of the old JVP rhetoric, denouncing Washington for its "imperialist war" and leading a chant lauding the Baghdad dictatorship: "Victory to the heroism of Saddam Hussein. Victory to the power of determination of Saddam Hussein".

Amarasinghe's letter makes clear that the JVP has since dropped any opposition to the US occupation of Iraq. In hailing Bush's "war on tyranny", the organisation is not only backing Washington's ambitions for global hegemony, but inviting and offering to assist US intervention in Sri Lanka. The letter denounces the LTTE for recruiting child soldiers and for violating democratic rights, obviously seeking to make the case that the US should fight against this "tyranny".

In one passage, Amarasinghe makes an appeal to the White House to take legal action against a LTTE financial contributor in the US, declaring that failure to do so "goes against both spirit and intent of the US president's inauguration speech as well as the post-9/11 laws on homeland security of your country aimed at arresting those who help terrorist organisations".

The JVP's support for the Bush administration's thoroughly anti-democratic homeland security legislation demonstrates the type of "democracy" the JVP has in mind for Sri Lanka. The party has long supported the island's draconian emergency laws that provide for the arbitrary detention without trial of "LTTE suspects"—a measure that led in the past to the round up and in some cases torture of thousands of Tamils.

Although in a more guarded fashion, the JVP's appeals to the US and other powers to intervene in Sri Lanka on the side of Colombo against the LTTE have been repeated publicly. On April 26, Amarasinghe called on the "international community" to provide a "road map for peace" on the island—without the establishment of a joint tsunami aid body with the LTTE. He reminded the assembled media that the "international community" had provided "road maps to other conflict-ridden countries" and should do the same in Sri Lanka. The best known "road map" is in the Middle East where the US has consistently pushed Palestinian representatives to accept the dictates of the right-wing Sharon government and to crush any armed opposition to Israel.

The meaning of Amarasinghe's declarations is evident to every literate political observer. Columnist Keith Noyahr writing in the *Daily Mirror* on April 23 quoted the JVP's letter to Rocca at length and approvingly explained its significance: a call to the Bush administration to intervene against the LTTE. The comment concluded with the rhetorical flourish: "Could the LTTE or for that matter the UNP or SLFP (the two traditional parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie) beat that?"

For sheer grovelling to US imperialism, probably not. But the JVP did not immediately get what it was after. At present, Rocca is supporting Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's half-hearted efforts to establish a joint aid mechanism and to restart talks. But there is no doubt that Rocca will have noted the JVP's willingness to work with the Bush administration and the fact that it could yet prove to be a useful tool for US imperialism in the future.

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