

The JVP/NPP presidential campaign—a trap for the Sri Lankan working class

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—People’s Liberation Front) and its National People’s Power alliance are attempting to come to power in Sri Lanka’s presidential election this Saturday by exploiting the mass hatred for the country’s traditional ruling parties and the tiny cabal of corrupt bourgeois families that have long dominated them—the Jayawardene-Wickremesinghes, Rajapakses, Premadasas and Bandaranaike-Kumaratungas.

Two years ago a mass uprising, fueled by economic collapse and savage government austerity, chased President Gotabaya Rajapakse from power. But under the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe the suffering of the working class and the rural toilers has only intensified. On the orders of the IMF, Wickremesinghe has slashed social spending and subsidies, imposed punitive electricity tariff and tax increases and initiated a fire sale of public assets.

The JVP/NPP and its presidential candidate, the JVP leader and ex-cabinet minister Anura Kumara Disanayake, are often described by the Sri Lankan and international media, as “leftist,” even “Marxist-Leninist.”

This is a monstrous lie, manifestly aimed at duping the population. The JVP is a capitalist party, steeped in Sinhala chauvinism, and bitterly hostile to the working class. It long ago abandoned its socialist pretensions and over the past three decades has completely integrated itself into the political establishment.

The JVP/NPP’s talk of establishing a “people’s government” is a sham. It has been courting big business and Sri Lanka’s bloated, blood-soaked military apparatus, while providing Washington and New Delhi assurances that it will uphold their interests in the region—above all, harnessing the island ever more tightly to US imperialism’s military-strategic offensive against China.

Like the rest of the political establishment, the JVP is committed to imposing the savage austerity dictates of the IMF and forcing working people to pay for the debts that the ruling class incurred in waging its racist civil war against the Tamil minority and financing big business development projects.

Support for savage IMF austerity

The JVP joined all the other parties in parliament in endorsing Wickremesinghe’s turn to the IMF, declaring there was no choice but to submit to the demands of the US-dominated IMF and global investors.

Anxious to gain votes and to contain the seething anger in the working class, Disanayake has claimed he could get the IMF to make adjustments to its draconian emergency bailout program, as has the other main opposition candidate, Sajith Premadasa of the SJB.

But with the approach of the polls, Disanayake has rushed to relieve Sri Lankan big business and global capital of any possible doubts that this was anything but electioneering. Speaking September 4 before an audience of industrialists and businessmen, convened by the NPP’s Business Forum, Disanayake angrily dismissed the claims of Wickremesinghe, who is running to retain the presidency, that a JVP/NPP government would “destabilize” the economy. He pledged full protection

for local and foreign investors; “guaranteed” that a JVP/NPP government would not repudiate the IMF agreement, as such a step would not be “in the best interests of the people”; and would work with the IMF to achieve the “given parameters” of the bailout package.

These parameters include an annual budgetary surplus of 2.3 percent of GDP from 2025, the wholesale sell-off of government-owned enterprises and the privatization of large swathes of public services.

Disanayake and the JVP/NPP support the privatization of education and health care, stating that they would retain public ownership only in a handful of “strategic” sectors bound up with national security, such as energy.

Underscoring their commitment to capitalism and to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, Disanayake and the JVP leadership have repeatedly lauded internationally successful Sri Lankan-based firms as a credit to the “nation,” while insisting that the crisis ravaging the lives of the masses is due to a “political culture of corruption”—not the global capitalist crisis and the manifest failure of three-quarters of a century of independent bourgeois rule.

Thus the JVP election manifesto, entitled “Rich Country! Beautiful Life!”, absurdly claims that all that is necessary is to empower a JVP government to end corruption and Sri Lanka will be transformed into a prosperous country.

The JVP unions are a pivotal ruling-class mechanism for suppressing the class struggle. This was demonstrated writ large during the mass popular upsurge of 2022. Like the rest of the unions, those controlled by the JVP worked to prevent the working class from intervening as a class in the protests. When that proved impossible, they sanctioned a handful of one-day general strikes, while redoubling their efforts to prevent the emergence of a working-class political challenge to the capitalist order. With their calls for parliament to form an “interim” capitalist government, they paved the way for Rajapakse to be replaced by Wickremesinghe and an intensification of the class war assault on working people.

Courting US imperialist support

The JVP/NPP’s wooing of big business has gone hand in hand with their effort to ingratiate themselves with Washington and New Delhi, by signalling their readiness to uphold their geostrategic interests. Disanayake has repeatedly met with US Ambassador Julie Chung and top Indian government officials, including foreign minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

The JVP election manifesto states explicitly that no one will be allowed to use Sri Lanka’s land, sea or air to threaten India’s security interests. Given that India is bound by a web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral alliances to the US and its chief Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, and the only country whose activities in Sri Lanka New Delhi has objected to is China—the JVP pledge amounts to a commitment to support the US imperialist-led, Indian-supported war alliance against China.

In keeping with this orientation, the JVP has not voiced a word of criticism of the military agreements Colombo has signed with the US.

These include the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The former allows US military access to Sri Lanka and use of its military facilities; the latter facilitates the presence of US military personnel in Sri Lanka. Nor did the JVP object to Wickremesinghe's dispatch of a Sri Lankan warship to the Red Sea to join the US-led coalition targeting the Houthi rebels for their attempts to end Israel's genocidal assault on the Gaza Palestinians.

These developments underscore that Dissanayake—no less than Wickremesinghe and Premadasa—is fully on board with the attempt of the craven Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to strengthen its position against an increasingly rebellious working class by harnessing the country ever more openly to the US-led global war that threatens to trigger a third world war. The main fronts in this war are the US-NATO instigated war against Russia, the imperialist-backed genocide of the Palestinians and the US preparations to attack Iran, and the ever-escalating US offensive against China.

The JVP emerged in the 1960s as a petty-bourgeois radical guerrilla group based on an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala chauvinism. Even as it defended the JVP from state suppression in the early 1970s, the Revolutionary Communist League—the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) warned that the JVP's ethno-communist politics, which were exemplified by its denunciation of Tamil plantation works “as Indian agents,” carried the seeds of fascism.

These warnings as to the reactionary trajectory of the JVP were more than borne out. In the 1980s, it emerged as a rabid supporter of the anti-Tamil war. In 1988-89, it targeted leftists, including RCL members, militant workers and union leaders for murderous attack as part of a rebellion against the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, initially conducted with the connivance of the UNP Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, on the grounds it undermined Sinhala dominance and the unitary state.

Subsequently, the JVP leaders were to trade their battle fatigues for business suits and integration into the political establishment. For the past thirty years, they have played an important role in diverting and suppressing social opposition, helping bring to power several governments and even served in the cabinet.

Nevertheless, the JVP continues to trade on its “anti-establishment” image and large numbers of workers, youth and rural toilers will vote for Dissanayake in the mistaken belief he represents an alternative to the discredited parties of government or at least a means of shaking things up.

It is urgent that the working class be disabused of such notions. The JVP is a dangerous trap.

A definite fascistic odour emanates from the JVP's nationalistic and “patriotic” appeals. It claims that under a JVP/NPP government relations between the various social groups and interests that make up Sri Lankan society—beginning with the working class and the capitalists who profit from their labour—will be regulated and reconciled so all “work for the nation.”

A party steeped in Sinhala chauvinism

In recent years, the JVP has somewhat tempered its visceral anti-Tamil chauvinism and Sinhala-First rhetoric, so as to facilitate maneuvers with the Tamil bourgeois parties and in the hopes of winning votes.

But this is manifestly a pose. One made possible by the extent to which Sri Lankan nationalism is intertwined and conflates with Sinhala chauvinism.

The JVP/NPP continues to boast about its role in maintaining the unitary state—that is the full-throated support it gave to the racist war on the Tamil minority instigated by the Sinhalese bourgeoisie. It regularly holds functions to commemorate those who died in the communalist uprising it mounted against the Indo-Sri Lankan accord.

In 2019, it demanded all Muslims prove their loyalty by denouncing the Easter terrorist attacks carried out by an Islamist group as if the Tamil-speaking Muslims were collectively responsible.

Speaking Tuesday before a meeting of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, NPP MP and leader Vijitha Herath vowed that the JVP will uphold the state-sanctified privileged position of Buddhism within Sri Lanka and the unitary state. “Article 9 of our constitution will not be changed in any manner,” Herath declared. “The article 9 says ‘the republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place.’ We will implement that in future as well.

“The second point is: We are a political movement that has done immense sacrifices for the country's unitary state, territorial integrity and national security. Therefore, yesterday, today and tomorrow our stance remains the same.”

While appealing for votes in the majority Tamil north earlier this month, Dissanayake made a veiled threat, warning the Tamils should not be seen as blocking the will of the people in the south for a new government. “Please think,” declared the JVP leader, “what type of mentality could develop among southern people if you become opponents of change when people have lined up for change in the south. Would you like Jaffna (the principal city in the north) to be branded as opponents of that change? Do you want the north to be branded?”

Sri Lankan nationalism and Sinhala chauvinism are bred into the bone of the JVP/NPP.

There can be no question that the JVP would respond to a working-class political challenge to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie or the emergence of mass working-class opposition to a JVP-led government implementing IMF austerity with the most vile communal incitement and repression.

[In this regard, workers should take a serious warning from the close relations that the JVP has established with veterans of the anti-Tamil civil war. Under the banner of the NPP, it has created a “Collective of Tri-Forces” comprised of retirees from the military. Led by Aruna Jayasekera, a retired major general and former commander of the Eastern Province, the Collective has held meetings up and down the country in response to Dissanayake's appeal for the military to play a crucial role in the country's “liberation” through “economic development under law and order.”

“It is you who can accomplish the main task of the change we are expecting,” Dissanayake told the Collective's founding conference. “The military,” he continued, is “an organised force... spread in every sphere.”

Through the courting of military veterans many of whom were mobilized to commit war atrocities on the basis of Sinhala chauvinist appeals, the JVP/NPP is both laying the groundwork for a para-military force committed to enforcing its dictates and establishing closer ties with the military establishment.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the working class in Sri Lanka is going to be propelled into mass struggles. It was to arm the working class with a socialist internationalist program that the SEP stood Pani Wijesiriwardena as its candidate. Wijesiriwardena was the only candidate who, in opposition to IMF austerity and the threat of war, advanced a revolutionary socialist program based on rejection of the capitalist framework and the impossibility of any national solution, the necessity to intensify the class struggle and build independent organizations of workers' power.



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