

JVP/NPP leader elected as new president of Sri Lanka

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The election of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Disanayake as Sri Lanka's new executive president, announced yesterday, is a reflection of the profound economic, social and political crisis impacting the country since its debt default in 2022 and the subsequent mass uprising that forced former President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the island and resign.

The magnitude of the political shift is indicated by the fact that the JVP and its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP), has never before held the presidency and has only ever been a junior partner in government. In the 2019 presidential election, Disanayake won just 3 percent of the vote as compared to 42 percent in the election on Saturday.

The fact that counting had to go to second preferences to decide the result underscores the disintegration of the Colombo political establishment in recent years under huge economic and political pressures. The two parties that have ruled Sri Lanka since formal independence in 1948—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—no longer exist in their past form.

The previous president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was anti-democratically installed by parliament to replace Rajapakse, heads the rump UNP which split in 2020, with the breakaway forming the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Wickremesinghe received just 17 percent of vote on Saturday, while SJB candidate and leader Sajith Premadasa gained 33 percent.

Wickremesinghe, who has been instrumental in imposing savage austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has been ruling with the support of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—the major component of a split in the SLFP. The SLPP vote on Saturday was divided—some supporting Wickremesinghe while others backed its candidate Namal Rajapakse, who received just 2.6 percent of the vote.

The dramatic increase in the vote for the JVP/NPP is a product of two inter-related processes—the seething hostility and anger of broad layers of the population over the economic and social crisis that continues to worsen, on the one hand, and significant support for the JVP/NPP in sections of the ruling class as the means for preventing any revival of the 2022 uprising from taking a revolutionary road, on the other.

The JVP and Disanayake were able to exploit the mass opposition to the political establishment, long dominated by figures and families such as Wickremesinghe, the Rajapakses and

Premadasas, by posturing as a radical alternative and making false promises to alleviate the suffering of the masses. Its election rhetoric denounced the greed and corruption of previous governments in order to cover up the root cause of the plight facing millions in the global crisis of capitalism.

While often referred to as “Marxist” or “leftist” in the media, the JVP long ago jettisoned its socialistic pretensions and rhetoric. Formed in 1966 on the basis of an admixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism, the JVP led two disastrous uprisings of rural Sinhala youth that resulted in the slaughter of tens of thousands. It has since abandoned its weapons for seats in parliament and a place in the political establishment, but undoubtedly retains a certain radical aura.

Disanayake's promises to rebuild the economy and uplift the living conditions of the masses through the elimination of corruption and privileges for the ruling elites are based on a lie. The JVP/NPP has insisted that it will impose the IMF's austerity agenda in return for a \$US3 billion bailout that will mean a fire-sale of state-owned enterprises, the destruction of half a million public sector jobs, deep inroads into essential services such as health and education, and continuing inflation as price subsidies are eliminated.

Disanayake has declared that he will renegotiate the terms of the loan, but the IMF has already made abundantly clear that there is no room for alterations. In fact, the IMF mission will return to Colombo in the next fortnight. Last month, mission head Peter Breuer bluntly declared that “Sri Lanka's knife-edged recovery [is] at a critical juncture,” and “timely implementation of all program commitments are critical... [to] put the economy on a firm footing.”

While promising social improvements to working people, the JVP has been reassuring the ruling class that it will act in its interests. Addressing a meeting of industrialists and businessmen convened by the NPP's Business Forum on September 4, Disanayake pledged full protection of the profit interests of local and foreign investors under his government and assured them that an NPP/JVP government would not repudiate the IMF program.

In another sign that the JVP has the support of sections of the ruling class, outgoing President Wickremesinghe was quick to congratulate Disanayake, declaring he was “confident” the politician, whom he referred to as “my president,” would “steer Sri Lanka on a path of continued growth and stability.” While Wickremesinghe warned during the campaign that an NPP-led

government would crash the economy, his ringing endorsement of Dissanayake is an acknowledgment that a JVP government will quickly abandon any election pledges that conflict with the demands of international finance capital.

At the same time, having long ago abandoned its “anti-imperialist” demagoguery, the JVP/NPP will continue the integration of the island into the US-led confrontation and war drive against China. Dissanayake has met with US ambassador Julie Chung several times, including in the midst of the 2022 uprising when she made a point of visiting the JVP offices. Obviously reassured that US interests would be supported, she declared that the JVP was “a significant party” that resonated with the public.

In another sign of the JVP’s foreign policy alignment, Dissanayake was congratulated by right-wing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who emphasised Sri Lanka’s strategic significance and declared that he looked forward to strengthening cooperation with the island. In the lead-up to the election, Dissanayake visited India, a key strategic partner in the US war drive against China, to reassure New Delhi that the JVP was on board.

In his address to the nation on Sunday evening, Dissanayake appealed for national unity in a bid to obscure the JVP’s pro-business and pro-imperialist orientation and to delegitimise any opposition to its pro-capitalist policies. “Everyone—those who voted and didn’t vote for me—we have a responsibility to take this country forward,” he declared.

Significantly, the island’s Tamil and Muslim minorities do not regard the JVP/NPP with anything but deep suspicion and outright hostility. The JVP is steeped in Sinhala chauvinism and was a trenchant supporter of the devastating 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It defended the military’s war crimes, including the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final months of the war in 2009. Dissanayake received only 10 percent of the vote or less in the Tamil-majority North and East of the island.

Moreover, the widespread support for the JVP/NPP in other areas of the island will quickly evaporate as masses of working people realise that Dissanayake’s promises were a pack of lies when living conditions worsen. The Socialist Equality Party has warned that the JVP/NPP, like Wickremesinghe, will resort to police-state measures to suppress the inevitable renewal of strikes and protests. The NPP has been building collectives of retired military and police officers in preparation for repressive moves under its government.

Workers and youth should recall that in the late 1980s the JVP backed its reactionary nationalist campaign against the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord with the assassination of hundreds of political opponents, trade unionists and workers. It opposed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord on the basis of denouncing “Indian imperialism,” which it has now dropped. However, Dissanayake will not hesitate to resort to anti-Tamil chauvinism, which is deeply embedded in the JVP’s political DNA, to divide and derail any mass movement against his government’s policies.

As he prepared to take office, Dissanayake indicated that he would dissolve parliament shortly and hold parliamentary elections so as to have a government with a “mandate.” Currently, the

JVP/NPP holds just three seats in the 225-seat parliament, and Dissanayake clearly wants an early election to strengthen his position prior to ruthlessly implementing the IMF austerity agenda.

The election of Dissanayake demonstrates that the island is in a state of immense political flux. None of the issues that were raised in the 2022 uprising have been resolved, nor can they be resolved under a JVP-led government. Indeed, popular anger has welled up time and again in strikes and protests against the IMF austerity policies. The key role of the JVP and its trade unions in limiting and suppressing the opposition is undoubtedly one reason the ruling class has turned to Dissanayake.

As in 2022, however, when working people repeatedly defied the Rajapakse government in their millions, the masses will come into confrontation with the Dissanayake government, sooner rather than later. The SEP stood its candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena in the presidential election to prepare the working class for the class battles ahead on the basis of a genuine revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

Wijesiriwardena warned workers and youth that none of their pressing needs nor the dangers of an emerging world war could be resolved within the framework of capitalism or through parliament and elaborated a strategy for the working class that now takes on an urgent necessity. He emphatically rejected all forms of nationalism and communalism and stressed the need to build an independent unified movement of the working class in Sri Lanka, throughout South Asia and internationally to fight for socialism.

The SEP calls for the building of action committees of workers in every factory, workplace, plantation and neighborhood, independent of all capitalist parties and their trade unions, as well as among the rural poor. The SEP advocates a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural masses based on representatives of these action committees. This is aimed at developing an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor, to overthrow bourgeois rule and establish a government of workers and peasants to implement socialist policies.

In a field of 38 presidential candidates, Wijesiriwardena received 4,410 votes. The fact that to cast a ballot for the SEP, voters had to reject the major candidates, as well as those of various fake-left organisations, meant that workers and youth made a class-conscious decision based on an attraction to the SEP’s socialist and internationalist perspective. What is necessary now, however, is for each of those voters and others to seriously consider the immensity of the current political crisis and to take up the SEP’s call to build action committees and to join the party as the means to fight for a socialist solution to the disasters facing working people.



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