

The Sri Lankan elections: JVP assumes responsibility for defending capitalism amid a deepening revolutionary crisis

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The election of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—People’s Liberation Front) leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake as president of the South Asian island country of Sri Lanka warrants careful examination. It portends abrupt political shifts globally, as the capitalist elite’s traditional political parties and mechanisms of rule break down under the weight of mounting class antagonisms and the imperialist drive to repartition the planet through global war.

Two years ago, Sri Lanka was convulsed by popular uprisings fueled by acute economic deprivation after the government defaulted on massive foreign debts. The mass protests culminated in President Gotabhaya Rajapakse being forced to flee the country and resign—only to be replaced by Ranil Wickremesinghe, a notorious pro-US stooge, who promptly imposed savage IMF austerity measures.

Now Disسانayake, who heads both the JVP and its broader “national unity” front, the National People’s Power (NPP), has been catapulted into office. A scant five years ago, Disسانayake, standing as the JVP-NPP presidential candidate, won just 446,000 votes, 3.8 percent of the total vote. In last Saturday’s election, he polled 5.63 million, or more than 42 percent. Wickremesinghe and two other leaders of the traditional political establishment, Saijith Premadasa and Namal Rajapakse, went down to humiliating defeat.

The international press is proclaiming in banner headlines that Sri Lanka has elected “a Marxist president.” This is a grotesque lie.

The JVP is a right-wing, nationalist and communalist movement, steeped in Sinhala populism and hostility to the island’s Tamil minority. For decades, the JVP has served as a crucial prop of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, including in 1988-89 when it carried out murderous assaults on leftist and workers’ organizations.

Disسانayake’s claim that a JVP-NPP government will regulate relations between all the various social groups and interests that make up Sri Lankan society (that is, the contending classes), so as to reconcile them and make all “work for the nation,” is more akin to fascism than anything resembling socialism.

Trading on its image as an “outsider,” the JVP made limited promises of increased social spending, while railing against the manifest corruption of the traditional political elite.

All of this was utterly disingenuous. The JVP is publicly

committed to working within “the parameters” of the IMF bailout negotiated by Wickremesinghe. The IMF bailout calls for the Sri Lankan government to eliminate hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs and record large budgetary surpluses for years to come through regressive tariffs, tax hikes and the continued ravaging of public health care and education.

Since 2022, the JVP has assiduously courted big business and continued its longstanding efforts to cultivate ties with the security forces. It has also repeatedly met with US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung and senior Indian officials. In a silence that bespeaks consent, the JVP has made no public comment on Sri Lanka’s increasing integration into the US-led, Indian supported military-strategic offensive against China.

Imperialism and the Sri Lankan ruling class have taken the measure of Disسانayake and the JVP. In conceding defeat, Wickremesinghe, who had spent the election campaign thundering against the supposed threat a Disسانayake presidency would pose to the economy, promptly proclaimed he was “confident” that he would “steer Sri Lanka on a path of continued growth and stability.”

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the US State Department issued laudatory statements, expressing their eagerness to work with the new president in “strengthening” ties.

That said, an explosive class dynamic is at work that will soon bring the working class and rural toilers into headlong conflict with Disسانayake’s self-proclaimed “people’s government.”

Whatever hopes broad sections of working people have placed in the JVP will invariably be dashed as it enforces IMF austerity.

Moreover, in the Tamil-majority north and east and the plantation districts there is already great wariness, if not open hostility, toward the incoming government because of the JVP’s record of communal incitement. In majority Tamil districts, Disسانayake finished third or fourth, with 10 percent or less of the vote.

As a crucial contribution to politically preparing the working class for the next stage in the struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site* will explain and document in the coming days and weeks the political record of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Sri Lankan section in combating the JVP and its petty-bourgeois nationalist politics.

Subjecting the JVP’s evolution and political gyrations to Marxist

class analysis has been and is crucial to the struggle for the political independence of the working class and the rallying of the rural toilers behind it in the struggle against the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and world imperialism.

The JVP was founded in 1966 on the basis of an admixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. In April 1971, it led a disastrous uprising of rural Sinhala youth against a Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led coalition government that it supported and lauded as “progressive” upon its election less than a year before.

The Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), defended the JVP against vicious state repression. At the same time, in *The Politics and Class Nature of the JVP*, the RCL’s founding general-secretary, Keerthi Balasuriya, exposed the virulent anti-working class character of the JVP, which derided workers’ economic struggles “as struggle for cups of porridge” because they distracted from the “patriotic” struggle against imperialism. The JVP claimed, in Maoist-Stalinist Popular Frontist-style, that imperialism “pooled” all “social classes together.”

Balasuriya also pointed to the JVP’s denunciations of Tamil-speaking plantation workers as “privileged” and agents of “Indian expansionism.” He warned that with its promotion of virulent anti-Tamil racism, “The JVP is creating an anti-working class movement” that “could well be utilised by a future fascist movement.”

These warnings were more than vindicated. In the 1980s, the JVP emerged as the most trenchant advocate of the Sri Lankan ruling class’ war on the Tamil minority. In 1988-89, it led an armed rebellion against the reactionary Indo-Sri Lankan accord on the grounds that it threatened the unity of the Sinhala-dominated capitalist state. Initially in connivance with Prime Minister (later president) Ranasinghe Premadasa and sections of the state apparatus, the JVP carried out a campaign of assassinations, in which hundreds of left-wing political opponents, trade unionists and workers, including members of the RCL, were killed.

Premadasa’s plan was to bring the JVP under the wing of the government and use it as an auxiliary of the state. When this proved impossible, the Sri Lankan state captured Rohana Wijeweera and the two other principal JVP leaders and within hours summarily executed them. This anti-democratic act was then followed by a massive campaign of state repression aimed at suppressing discontent in the rural south of Sri Lanka in which tens of thousands died.

Nevertheless, in 1993, in the name of “uniting the nation” against the renewed Tamil insurgency in the north and east, the JVP was allowed to resume political activity with the aim of once again using it as a prop of bourgeois rule. In the 1994 election, the JVP helped the ruling class give itself a governmental face lift, so as to continue the anti-Tamil war and the assault on the social position of the working class. It helped bring Kumaratunga and her SLFP to power in place of the deeply hated UNP regime that had held office for more than 15 years.

Thereafter, the JVP integrated itself ever more fully into the political establishment, while remaining the staunchest advocates of the racist war until it ended in the May 2009 massacre of 40,000 Tamils. In 2004, in an electoral alliance with the big business

SLFP, the JVP won 39 seats—far and away its electoral high-water mark till last Saturday’s election. It was awarded 3 cabinet seats and enforced a big business-drafted program of austerity measures, but subsequently withdrew because it vehemently opposed any cooperation with the LTTE insurgent administration in aiding victims of the devastating December 2004 tsunami.

Workers must beware. In recent years, the JVP has publicly tempered its anti-Tamil chauvinism. But nationalism and communalism are bred into its bone. Chauvinist appeals have animated its longstanding efforts to court the military-security apparatus, including through the establishment of NPP “collectives” of army and police veterans.

Faced with rising popular opposition, the JVP will draw on its own reactionary traditions and those of the ruling class, inciting chauvinist reaction and deploying police-military repression.

Developments in Sri Lanka often presage or reveal in embryo sharp shifts in the world situation.

Sri Lanka’s “political shock” will be repeated elsewhere. The ruling class will find itself increasingly compelled to rely on, including in the executive offices of government, nationalist and pseudo-left parties it hitherto held at arm’s length. In Europe, the working class has already had repeated experiences of such forces in power, most notoriously in Greece where Syriza, elected on a pledge to oppose the evisceration of social spending, promptly imposed the most draconian European Union austerity.

No shortage of opportunists, impressed by the sudden rise of this or that anti-working class force, will seek to corral workers into supporting or otherwise adapting to such movements.

Political war must be waged on such forces as part of an intensified political, theoretical and organizational struggle for the political independence of the working class. This requires intervening energetically in all its struggles, so as to arm it with a socialist-internationalist program and the critical lessons of the great class struggles of the past century and a half.

It was on this principled basis that the SEP mounted a powerful intervention in the Sri Lankan election, standing retired teacher and longtime party leader Pani Wijesiriwardena.

And it is on this basis that the SEP will now develop the struggle to unite and mobilize the working class as an independent political power, rallying the rural masses and other oppressed behind it, to meet the blows of the incoming JVP government and advance the fight against war, IMF austerity and for social equality—that is, revolutionary socialism.



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