

JVP: Lessons for the Genuine Left

by

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The decline of the left

The greatest tragedy of the left movement in Sri Lanka was that the leadership has consistently demonstrated an unwillingness to learn from mistakes. The old guard, in particular, has always thought of itself as infallible and shown bitter hostility towards any criticism. The decay and degeneration of the Trotskyite tradition occurred almost as a matter of course with the great names of an earlier era queuing up before the two parties of Sinhala nationalism to secure for themselves a cabinet post or a seat in parliament. This fate was slower to befall the revisionist communists, but not much slower.

Once the LSSP and the revisionist Communist Party decided to take the parliamentary road to socialism, in the footsteps of the father of Trotskyism, Philip Gunawardane who abandoned revolution at least as early as 1956, there was no looking back. Every compromise that they made with the bourgeoisie led to further weakening of the two parties and the affiliated mass organisations, including the powerful trade union organisations that they had behind them. Instead of the LSSP and the revisionists making inroads into the mass base of the bourgeois parties, the bourgeois parties were able to take over large chunks of the trade union membership in the left-led trade unions. What was amazing was that the UNP, the more reactionary of the two bourgeois parties and well known for its bitter hostility towards trade union rights, was able to build a trade union base that proved to be bigger than that of any left party. This undoubtedly was the result of the stripping of the trade union movement of working class ideology.

The old left was in trouble either way, since acknowledgement of the revolutionary line would mean abandoning the parliamentary path, for which they were ill prepared, while continuing with the manipulation of the state apparatus to secure their position of influence would mean that the already corrupt trade union leadership could not compete with the ruling parties in dispensing favours.

The treachery of the old left reached its peak in 1963 when a united left front was formed and a set of 21 demands were put forward by the trade unions behind the left parties. Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike, the then Prime Minister of a troubled SLFP government, made a shrewd move of negotiating a coalition with the left parties. She cunningly carried out separate negotiations with Philip Gunawardane, the leader of the MEP, and with NM Perera, the leader of the LSSP, exploiting their weakness for power and position, and thereby wrecking left unity. The parliamentary left never recovered from the damage done by this let down of a working class struggle.

There were genuine leftists within the LSSP who resented what the leadership did, but were reluctant to abandon it for fear of losing touch with the working class base of the party. Those who split and formed a rival party were soon isolated and further weakened by internal quarrels and further splits. In this climate, the only credible revolutionary left party was the Marxist Leninist section of the Communist Party led by N Sanmugathasan. Political work done by the Marxist Leninists, Sanmugathasan in particular, enabled the Marxist Leninists to be a major political force that posed a serious challenge to the bourgeois parties as well as to the treacherous old guard.

It is significant that the split that occurred in the Ceylon Communist Party was part of the split in the world communist movement: a split between a revisionist camp led by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led by Nikita Khrushchev and the revolutionary camp led by the Communist Party of China, led by Mao Zedong. It was natural that the leaders of the CPSU and of the Soviet Union spared no effort to wreck the revolutionary Marxist Leninist party before it could overshadow the parliamentary left.

Within the country, Pieter Keuneman, the chief culprit in pushing the revisionist line, spat venom at Sanmugathasan and even went to the extent of drawing special attention to the fact that the Marxist Leninists were led by a member of a minority nationality. Such efforts of the revisionists failed to have any effect on the growing strength of the Marxist Leninists, and the goodwill that existed between China and Sri Lanka at state-to-state and people-to-people levels did not help to give credibility to the anti-China campaign by the revisionists. Among the Tamils, however, the Tamil nationalists and the reactionaries alike exploited the cultural affinity to South India to create a substantial body of anti-China opinion.

The emergence of the JVP

The revisionists failed to hurt the Marxist-Leninist-led Ceylon Communist Party in direct political confrontation. They were, however, more successful in damaging it by subversion. Certain individuals encouraged by the Soviet revisionists to sabotage the party from within, including Rohana Wijeweera who was trained in the Soviet Union, infiltrated the party and sowed the seeds of Sinhala chauvinism within the organisation. While the more seasoned and politically mature members of the party were immune to the virus of chauvinism, the new, the young and the uninitiated fell prey to it. Before Wijeweera was discovered much damage was done to the youth sections of the party, and agents had been planted in various mass organisations of the party.

Wijeweera and a few others, including elements from the revisionist party, founded the Janathaa Vimukthi Peramuna around 1968. It operated as a 'clandestine' organisation initially, and functioned openly following the victory of the SLFP-LSSP-CP alliance 1970. Even during its early years, the JVP betrayed its chauvinistic streaks. Serious political criticism of the JVP came from the Marxist Leninists, Sanmugathasan in particular. This was readily dismissed by the parliamentary left, which was intoxicated by its electoral success in 1970 and unwilling to recognise the potential threat that the JVP posed to their political survival.

Waving the red flag to subvert the red flag

Among the main features to which the Marxist Leninist criticism drew attention was the fact that the JVP rejected the working class not only as the vanguard of the revolution but even as a revolutionary force. The hostility of the JVP to the working class was partly because the JVP conspirators who wormed their way into the Marxist-Leninist section of the Communist Party failed to gain any influence in the trade unions allied to the party. The hostility was, more importantly, because accepting working class leadership meant acknowledging a leading role for the Hill Country Tamil workers, who were employed predominantly in the plantation sector and the worst exploited section of the Sri Lankan working class. The JVP portrayed these descendants of landless South Indian Tamil peasants, who were uprooted from their soil over a century ago by the British colonialists to serve as indentured labour in the plantations, as arms of Indian expansionism. The phrase Indian expansionism used by the Chinese leadership to describe the behaviour of the Indian ruling class was cynically taken

out of context and applied to a most oppressed section of the Sri Lankan population, who had been robbed of their citizenship by the UNP in 1947.

The cynicism of the JVP was clear in many other matters as well. It stood beside chauvinists in the UNP and the SLFP in provoking a public outcry about university admissions in 1970 that led to the now infamous 'standardisation' of marks, and remained silent on the issue when Tamil students were systematically discriminated against in the years that followed.

The adventurism of the JVP in 1971 April led to the massacre of over 5000 youth (over 15 000 according to some estimates) by the armed forces. The JVP proudly talked of the sacrifice of as many as twenty or thirty thousand youth, but never explained how such an insurrection that was doomed in its womb could have been launched by a leadership that very well knew that it was ill prepared for a confrontation and admitted later that it was 'forced into' confrontation. What was most significant was that its supreme leader, Wijeweera got himself arrested a few days before the insurrection and several important leaders made sure that they did not get directly involved in the armed conflict that took the lives of thousands of their lesser comrades.

The 'curiouser and curiouser' politics of the JVP

The strange allies that the JVP gained during the years of incarceration of Wijeweera were the late JR Jayawardane, a most reactionary leader of the UNP, and Bala Tampoe, then a Trotskyite and white-collar trade unionist and now an NGO favourite. The electoral success of the UNP in 1977 led to the release of Wijeweera who declared his conversion to Trotskyism and received the blessings of one of many Fourth Internationals to which Tampoe had access. At home, they served as the handyman for the UNP government in wrecking mass political activities of the SLFP and the left parties in the South, including the bogus left.

That the JVP leadership was a clique of unprincipled demagogues was demonstrated in the presidential election of 1982. Wijeweera who tried to woo the North with the pledge of support for self-determination also pledged to crowds in the South that he would under no condition consent to secession. As much as the failure to win over the working class in its early years made the JVP leadership bitterly anti working class and anti Hill Country Tamil, the failure to secure a base among the Tamils of the North and East made it turn to Sinhala chauvinism with a vengeance.

JVP's hostility towards the cause of Tamil liberation struggle did not prevent it from striking deals with certain Tamil militant groups under the patronage of the Indian counter-insurgency and espionage agencies such as the notorious Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The Indian government under Indira Gandhi spared no effort to put pressure on the UNP government led by Jayawardane for reasons ranging from the personal animosity between the leaders to Indian concerns about the pro-US policies of the Jayawardane government that would undermine Indian plans for regional hegemony.

Accord and discord

At no stage during the long history of oppression of the Tamil people had the JVP supported the right of the Tamil people to defend themselves, except for the insincere and short-lived pledge of support in 1982 for the Tamil nationalist cause. The anti Tamil carnage unleashed by the UNP government in 1983 did not bring the JVP to the side of the oppressed Tamils. Instead, the JVP saw its opportunity to pander to Sinhala chauvinism. At best, the JVP was indifferent to the Indian-sponsored peace negotiations between the UNP government and the Tamil nationalists. In reality, they waited to capitalise on the Sinhala chauvinistic sentiments

that had for decades been cultivated by the two Sinhala capitalist parties and which the opportunist parliamentary left failed to combat. Their opportunity arrived in 1987, when the Indian government headed by Rajeev Gandhi, who succeeded his mother Indira, created a situation under which the Sri Lankan and Indian governments struck a deal in the pretext of solving the Sri Lankan national question.

Features that appeared to yield to the demands of the Tamils angered the Sinhala chauvinists and there was opposition to the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987. Interestingly, the objections of the then national bourgeois party, the SLFP, based on Sinhala chauvinist thinking, also concerned concessions to India that meant partial surrender of the sovereignty of the country to India. The JVP campaign was purely based on the national question. The JVP demanded that the accord be scrapped.

The initiative in the campaign against the accord went to the JVP. Soon the SLFP was upstaged, and the JVP became the sole player in the anti-accord campaign, which turned into a virulent anti-Indian and anti-government assault.

Although the 'old left' comprising the LSSP and the CP did not oppose the accord, they did not actively campaign against the chauvinists. Parties such as the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP), which split from the SLFP earlier and whose leaders included the late Vijaya Kumaranatunga and his spouse Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, and the NSSP led by Vasudeva Nanayakkara and Vickramabahu Karunaratne gave unqualified support for the accord. Only the New Democratic Party, a successor to the Marxist Leninist tradition of the Communist Party, known as the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (Left) and led by the late comrade KA Subramaniam, took a balanced view of the accord. The Party welcomed the positive features of the accord, but drew attention to its inadequacies and to Indian hegemonic interests entrenched in it. It was particularly opposed to the use of Indian armed forces, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), in the North-East to implement the accord.

The Tamil nationalists, with the exception of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were enthusiastic about the accord. The LTTE, which formally endorsed the accord, had its undeclared reservations to which it gave vent when it found that India was more interested in appeasing the Sri Lankan government than in implementing the aspects of the accord that concerned the Tamils of the North-East. To the LTTE, the only worthwhile outcome of the accord was the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, but it suspected all along that the Indian government was keen to have its own agents in power there.

Packaging chauvinist terror as patriotism

The accord also had its opponents within the UNP, most significantly the then Prime Minister, R. Premadasa. Thus, several forces were opposed to the accord, but each for its own reason. There was understanding between the JVP and Prime Minister Premadasa, and JVP opposition to the accord had the blessings of Premadasa, but the alliance was not destined to last. The JVP, while proclaiming opposition to the UNP, did all it could to ensure that Premadasa won the presidential election that held in 1988 when President Jayawardane, cleverly outmanoeuvred by Premadasa, stepped down.

The JVP's call for a boycott of the presidential election was most effective in the Southern Province, where the UNP was least popular. This ensured that the main opposition candidate, former Prime Minister and leader of the SLFP, Sirima Bandaranaike was deprived of votes in that province, which could have been decisive in the outcome of the election.

The election of Premadasa as President was to be the unravelling of the JVP's campaign of violence and terror against its opponents. It led to a major bloodbath in which not only well over 50 000 suspected members and supporters of the JVP as well as members of their families were mercilessly killed by the armed forces of the government and goon squads loyal to the President. The justification for this unprecedented act of state terror was provided by the JVP's own actions.

The JVP's campaign against the accord went on for two years, during which it created a terror organisation called the Deshapremi Janathaa Vyapaaraya (DJV), meaning patriotic people's movement. Not only supporters of the government and the armed forces were the targets of the DJV. Potential rivals of the JVP were annihilated. Victims of JVP violence ranged from leaders of rival student organisations to leaders like Vijaya Kumaranatunga, the popular leader of the up and coming SLMP. Vickramabahu Karunaratne of the NSSP survived a near fatal gunshot wound at the hands of the DJV. Karunaratne chose to cover up for the JVP in subsequent years, when between 1992 and 2001, he sought to make deals with the JVP, in the hope that the JVP would help to make him an MP. He argued that one had to make a distinction between the JVP and the DJV, one that really did not exist as far as the intentions of the JVP went.

Paying the price

The JVP seriously misjudged its own strength when through the DJV it called for the killing of the members of the families of army personnel. This destroyed the small but significant amount of support that it enjoyed among the lower ranks of the armed forces, and made it possible for the government to justify its campaign of terror. A wide range of acts of cruelty including the torture and mass murder of school children were carried out by the state. One mass grave in Sooriyakanda was uncovered a year or so after the killing of President Premadasa allegedly by an LTTE assassin on May Day 1993.

The climax of state terror was the arrest and the unlawful execution in 1989 of JVP leaders including Wijeweera, the party leader, who had by then been abandoned by all his former colleagues in the leadership at the time of the 1971 April insurrection and whose following was by now a group of hardened Sinhala chauvinists. The killing of Wijeweera and other JVP leaders, many thought, was the end of JVP. That was not to be as subsequent events proved.

The resurrection

The revival of the JVP was enabled by several factors. The people were tired of the UNP and bitter about the seventeen years of dictatorial misrule under which they experienced untold suffering. More importantly, the burden of the decade long war in the North-East had its effects in the south of the country in economic terms. Equally importantly, the people were angered by the death and disablement in large numbers of soldiers, who were mostly from poor rural families. There was a rise in crime, mainly a result of the open economic policy that upheld profiteering as a virtue. This policy encouraged corruption and the growth of a powerful underworld of crime and extortion, supported by the proliferation of illegally possessed arms and the turning to crime of army deserters, which were direct outcomes of the war. The people wanted an end to war.

The popular thirst for change brought the People's Alliance, comprising the SLFP and several other political parties, including the long discredited LSSP, CP and the chauvinistic MEP, to power, contrary to the claim that this alliance enabled the overthrow of the UNP. The PA won a parliamentary majority in 1994 and President Kumaratunga secured an unprecedented majority in the presidential election that followed, by riding the wave of popular frustration at

the consequences of war, privatisation and liberalisation and gross violation of democratic and human rights by the UNP. In response to the public mood, the PA had promised a negotiated end to the war and a peaceful resolution of the national question. It also pledged a change in the economic policy, but its intentions in this respect were suspect even before the presidential election.

The PA did not take long to prove that it was no different from the UNP, when it came to the main issues that concerned the country. One may argue that there is greater democratic freedom, especially for the media, under the PA, but this was something that an assertive opposition exercised in increasing doses since around 1992, in the months preceding the decline in power of President Premadasa prior to his assassination. The human rights of people in the North-East suffered greater abuse at the hands of the armed forces, and police harassment of members of the Tamil and Hill Country Tamil nationalities got worse.

The bankruptcy of the PA and the absence of a credible and viable parliamentary left option made a sizeable section of disillusioned voters turn to the JVP, which saw an opportunity for influence if not power in parliament. Its performance at the provincial council elections of 1999 indicated the prospect of securing a few seats in parliament, and the JVP modified its electoral strategy accordingly. Parts of the Sinhala chauvinist agenda became part of the JVP's election manifesto, and metamorphosis from a pseudo Marxist revolutionary organisation to a chauvinistic parliamentary party occurred quickly, but clumsily.

Back to conspiracy

The formation of the New Left Front (NLF) in 1998 and the steady growth in support for the NLF caused concern for the capitalist parties and for the JVP. They did everything they could to undermine the NLF, but the JVP succeeded where the others failed. The JVP strategy of driving a wedge between the parties and groups that formed the NLF succeeded mainly because of the avarice of the leader of the NSSP, Vickramabahu Karunaratne. His ambition for power in preceding years had led to a series of splits in the NSSP, including one where Vasudeva Nanayakkara was 'expelled' in 1994 for wanting to contest parliamentary elections as an ally of the PA. The very same Karunaratne negotiated with the JVP, behind the backs of his own party colleagues, to worm his way into parliament with the backing of the JVP.

The JVP proposed negotiations with member organisations of the NLF, but without formally recognising of the NLF. The NLF joint leadership, with the exception of Karunaratne, rejected this approach and insisted that while informal discussion with a member organisation was permissible, formal negotiations had to be with the NLF as a body. The JVP rejected this position with impunity, knowing very well that Karunaratne's loyalty was more to his personal glory than to a genuine left alternative. As a result, the NSSP alone joined the JVP in demonstrations. The NLF partners did not object strongly in the interest of preserving unity.

There is an interesting parallel between the JVP strategy in splitting the NLF and Sirima Bandaranaike's in splitting the ULF in 1963, despite the important difference that the ULF was an opportunistic parliamentary political alliance while the NLF was not an alliance for electoral purposes. In both cases, the enemy used the strategy of negotiating with individual partners rather than with the group as a whole. The result was the same, except that the conduct of the leader of the NSSP was less dignified than that of his Trotskyite predecessors, Philip Gunawardane and NM Perera.

Having achieved their objective of splitting the NLF, the JVP gave Karunaratne the short shrift when the latter sought their support to get him elected to parliament. It was after his miserable failure in persuading the JVP to offer him a seat that he chose to support the PA.

Another left alliance emerged as a result, comprising the discredited LSSP and CP, the chauvinistic MEP and the NSSP (now masquerading as the NLF with only the NSSP in it). This alliance is patronised by President Kumaratunga, and it is no secret what the choice of the three partners from the PA would be, if it came to deciding between Kumaratunga and Karunaratne.

The hazard of opportunistic alliances seems an inalienable aspect of the politics of the parliamentary left, and will be inevitable in any left alliance unless the left parties concerned are sincere about the role of parliamentary politics in advancing the revolutionary movement. This is important, since the growing strength of the JVP as a parliamentary political party has the potential to tempt the more fickle of the left leaders with parliamentary ambitions.

Another opportunistic alliance

The JVP, worked hand-in-glove with the UNP to oppose the antidemocratic actions of the PA in early-mid 2001. However, within weeks, it struck an alliance with the PA, in the wake of the crisis precipitated by the desertion of the PA by a large section of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and by the prospect of some prominent members of the PA leaving the government. The poor handling of the anti Muslim violence in Mawanella in May 2001 by the President angered the Muslim community and the UNP capitalised on their frustration as well as that of the Tamil political parties other than the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), which was a partner in government.

Another factor that made the JVP warm up to the PA government was that the latter had scheduled a series of photographic exhibitions to expose the JVP's acts of terror against innocent masses and, thus, expose as false JVP's claims to democratic principles. The JVP used the weakness of the government to extract concessions and bullied the desperate PA into making some cosmetic changes to the government including a reduction in the number of cabinet members. It even dared to dub the PA regime a 'government on probation'. However, despite the bragging by the JVP that it had save the government from being overthrown by a reactionary conspiracy, desertions from the PA continued and parliament was dissolved.

The JVP leadership, which became devout Buddhists overnight before the general election of October 2000, grew into a fully-fledged Sinhala chauvinist party by the time of the election of December 2001. It was clear by November 2001 that the JVP more than matched the Sihala Urumaya as a Sinhala chauvinist party, and one of its main campaign slogans was that it would oppose any devolution of power based on a traditional homeland for the Tamils in the North-East.

One concession that the JVP extracted from the President, namely enabling its leader-in-exile, Somawansa Amarasinghe, who lived in exile for fear of being arrested in connection with acts of terror by the DJV, to visit Sri Lanka, misfired. Amarasinghe's first campaign speech in support of the JVP contradicted the position of the JVP leadership that they had abandoned violence forever. On the national question, however, his position was no less chauvinistic than that of the 'new JVP'.

The JVP leadership was embarrassed by the militancy of the speeches of the returnee leader, but the speeches themselves did not have a significant effect on the outcome of the elections. The decline in support for the PA boosted the position of the JVP, which increased its representation from 10 to 16 in the new parliament. The departure of the leader to his land of exile, the day after the election, was more to the relief of the JVP leadership than to any other.

Abandoning pretences

The JVP leadership's claim to frugal living and simplicity and the carefully cultivated image of angry young men in search of justice have been thrown to the wind since the JVP increased its representation in parliament. The only significant difference between the JVP and other parliamentary parties is that the JVP leadership decides who is to be MP, rather than let the election rules decide. There is, nevertheless, an advantage in this approach in that squabbles among candidates for 'preference votes' is avoided. What this means for the future and how well it will hold when the JVP makes further compromises to ensure electoral success remains to be seen. If the emergence of the more chauvinistic and charismatic Weerawansa forging ahead of the 'Marxist' theoretician Tilvin de Silva as the chief spokesperson, and increasingly chauvinistic utterances by the latter are anything to go by, this method of appointing MPs could pave the way to new power struggles within the JVP.

Doubts also exist about the JVP's commitment to non-violent parliamentary politics. In fact, the JVP has not rebutted the statements made by their leader. What is of concern to the oppressed masses and the left and democratic forces of the country is the nature of the violence. The JVP is still prone to using violence to secure or to hold on to power in the student's unions of the universities.

What is of serious concern is that, with the JVP abandoning even its occasional Marxist phraseology and increasingly pandering to Sinhala chauvinism and given its petit-bourgeois power base, its populist style of work suggests the possibility of its emergence as a neo-fascist party.

The JVP has again enjoyed Indian patronage since 1995 and refrained from criticising the Indian government on a number of issues in which India had acted in ways that infringed upon the sovereignty of Sri Lanka. The possibility is also strong that the Indian expansionist state would use the JVP as a cat's paw in destabilising the peace process if it goes against Indian interests.

The task ahead of genuine left

It is significant that the genuine left of Sri Lanka has unreservedly condemned the opposition of the JVP to the truce signed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and LTTE leader V. Pirabakaran, and its plans to wreck the peace process initiated by Norway. For example, the statements issued by the Left and Democratic Alliance and the New Democratic Party are clear and unqualified in their support for the peace process and denunciation of JVP mischief.

There are still elements among the left parties outside the PA who are misled by the growth in support for the JVP. They should remember that the JVP is not building itself anymore as a leftist party, let alone Marxist. The kind of populism of the JVP is more akin to that of certain national socialist outfits in the 1930's in Europe. The more successful fascists in Germany and their less successful counterparts in the UK used underprivileged sections of the population to build their organisations. Even today, the neo-fascists the world over have a popular base among the underprivileged sections, especially the *lumpen* proletariat. History has taught us that every concession to and compromise with chauvinism has cost the left dearly.

The responsibility on the shoulders of the left is even heavier now. The openly pro-imperialist UNP is in power. Its search for peace is more out of force of circumstances than out of good will. Opposition to the selling out of the country to the foreigners by the UNP should not mean a stint in support to its efforts to restore peace. What matters is to ensure that the peace

process leads to a lasting peace with justice, based on respect for the right to self determination of the nationalities.

The UNP is not likely to solve the economic problems of the country. Its class interests will not allow it to address the issues that concern the working people, and the World Bank and the IMF are not likely to permit any slacking in the policy of privatisation and liberalised trade. The JVP will combine its demands concerning the economic problems of the masses with its chauvinistic anti-peace slogans in order to destabilise the peace process. Without a credible left alternative to address the national question and the economic issues related to the imperialist scheme of globalisation, the JVP would profit from the economic crisis and advance its neo-fascist programme.

It is time that parties, organisations and individuals representing the left and democratic forces came together, put mass politics above elitist bourgeois parliamentary politics and launch a joint programme to face the major issues facing the country.