

# The Politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the post-1994, period when it re-created itself as a mainstream parliamentary political party, and came to play a critical role in the collapse of the 2001-2004 peace process. The fundamental analytical enigma of the JVP lies in explaining its hybrid Marxist/Sinhala nationalist persona, which enabled it to craft a highly effective campaign of opposition to the Ranil Wickremasinghe government's two-track agenda of peace with market reforms. This article examines how the JVP's Marxism relates to its Sinhala nationalism, and how it fits in within the Sri Lanka's Marxist tradition as whole. It argues that the JVP's increasing emphasis on Sinhala nationalism in the post-1999 period has occurred in the context of de-radicalisation and parliamentary habilitation, and discusses the relevance of its ideological orientation to the material basis of Sinhala nationalism and its relationship to the social democratic state.

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## 1. Introduction

The Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) is perhaps the most resilient, dynamic and deeply rooted political force in contemporary Sri Lanka. It occupies a unique position in Sri Lankan political hagiography as an icon of ‘anti-systemic’ rage and youth radicalism.<sup>1</sup> Formed in the 1966/67 period as a small Marxist splinter group that emerged out of another such small Marxist splinter group, it had by 1971 recruited and trained thousands of young militants to launch the island’s first such anti-state insurrection for over a century. The April 1971 rebellion was quickly suppressed, with thousands of cadres killed or jailed,<sup>2</sup> but the JVP survived to re-create itself as a parliamentary electoral party that had by the early 1980s become the third force in national politics.

In the mid-1980s, the JVP was once again underground, and had by 1987 launched a second, and far more violent and protracted armed insurgency that had by early-1989 almost brought the government to its knees.<sup>3</sup> This in turn invited a far more brutal and exterminationist response from the state security forces and shadowy pro-state militia groups who, over the second half of 1989, hunted down and summarily executed tens of thousands of JVP cadres and sympathisers (as well as many thousands who were entirely innocent of association with the JVP). Between 1990-93, the JVP had completely disappeared from sight, and many believed that it would never re-emerge.

But within a matter of five years, the JVP had not just re-emerged, but had clearly re-established its position as the third force in electoral politics. From just one parliamentary seat in 1994, the JVP won 10 seats in 2000, 16 in 2001, and 39 in 2004. The JVP gained enormous prominence in the 2001-2004 period as the principal political force opposing the Norwegian-mediated peace process between the United National Front (UNF) government of Ranil Wickremasinghe and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the constitutional theatrics of toppling the Wickremasinghe government were actually enacted by President Chandrika Kumaratunga over November 2003-February 2004, it was the JVP that did all the hard work in creating the conditions for the ouster. While Kumaratunga’s own party lay dejected and exhausted after their resounding electoral defeat in December 2001, it was the JVP that rose to quickly gather and lead the opposition to the February 2002 cease-fire agreement and the ensuing peace process.

In the following months, the JVP articulated a powerful and coherent ideological programme of nationalist opposition to the internationally sponsored peace process, that they propagated energetically and relentlessly. They organised a series of massive street demonstrations in Colombo at the rate of almost one a month over 2003 that brought the capital to a complete halt on several occasions. They successfully capitalised on the growing momentum of economic discontent

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘anti-systemic’, I follow Jagath Senaratne’s description of the JVP as anti-government, anti-state, anti-ruling class, and anti-‘alternative left-wing power centres’. See Senaratne (1987), pp.104-105.

<sup>2</sup> On the 1971 insurrection, see Alles (1977), Kearney and Jiggins (1975) and Obeyesekere (1974).

<sup>3</sup> See Gunasekara (1998), Chandraprema (1991), Attanayake (2001), Moore (1993).

against the UNF's market reform policies and used their influence in the union movement to instigate a series of sequenced public sector strikes in hospitals and trains in late-2003 and early 2004. In doing so, they played a decisive role in mobilising and coalescing public opinion against the peace process, and provided a growing source of pressure on President Kumaratunga that legitimised her subsequent actions in dismissing the UNF government and triggering mid-term elections. In the course of an energetic and persistent campaign, the JVP became instrumental in the April 2004 election defeat of the UNF government that destabilised and ultimately wrecked the peace process.

Even after April 2004, the JVP's influence as a stubborn and uncompromising coalition partner within the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government played a significant, if not decisive part in the failure of all subsequent attempts over the following two years to re-ignite the peace process. They posed impossible pre-conditions to be met before agreeing to support peace talks, refused to tolerate any agreement with the LTTE over joint tsunami aid distribution, backed the (successful) presidential campaign of Mahinda Rajapakse in November 2005 on an anti-peace process platform, and from early 2006 onwards, openly promoted a military solution to the conflict, goading the government to resume the war - which finally occurred in August 2006.

This article examines the role of the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in the collapse of the 2001-2004 peace process. In doing so, it is divided into two parts: the first focuses on the evolution of the JVP in the post-1994 period culminating in their role in the collapse of the UNF government; the second is a more historical and analytical exploration of the JVP phenomenon. The fundamental analytical enigma of the JVP lies in explaining their hybrid Marxist-nationalist ideo-political agenda, which permitted them to craft an effective and coherent campaign of opposition to the pro-market, pro-peace UNF government on both fronts. This article discusses four features of the JVP's Marxist-Sinhala nationalist ideological mix: (i) the JVP's Marxist background has been an asset in its emergence as a leading Sinhala nationalist force; (ii) the mixture of Marxism and Sinhala nationalism is not exceptional to the JVP, but is a long-standing feature of Sri Lanka's Marxist tradition, and is indeed a long-standing issue that Marxism has faced internationally through the 20<sup>th</sup> century; (iii) the JVP's increasingly Sinhala nationalist agenda has occurred in the context of their gradual de-radicalisation and transformation into an electorally-oriented parliamentary party; (iv) the JVP's ideological mix reflects certain important features of the materiality of Sinhala nationalism within the dynamics of class and the social democratic state.

Much of the research for this article was conducted during field-visits to Sri Lanka over 2002-2007, and particularly during an extended period of fieldwork in mid-2006. It makes use of primary materials from the JVP's own literature, field interviews with a variety of JVP and non-JVP personalities, newspaper coverage of their activities over the period 1993-2004, secondary literature on the JVP, and data on their union and organisational strength from several sources.

## 2. The JVP's Rebirth in the 1990s

The JVP's second re-emergence in the mid-1990s proved to be an extremely complicated and challenging task. Tens of thousands of party activists, sympathisers and fellow-travellers had been killed in the white heat of the government's counter-insurgency operations between 1987-90. Virtually the entire national and district level leadership of the JVP, including their iconic founder-leader Rohana Wijeweera himself, had been captured and killed in the space of a few months between late 1989 and early 1990. As of mid-1990 when the anti-JVP counter-insurgency operations were wound down and redeployed in the renewed war with the LTTE in the eastern theatre, forty one of the forty-two members of the central committee had been captured and killed, along with most members of the district level leadership. The only surviving member of the central committee, Somawansa Amarasinghe, had fled to exile in Paris, where he was struggling to re-establish his leadership over the party against a rival faction based in London.

Meanwhile, a large portion of those that managed to survive had either abandoned political activism altogether, fled into exile abroad, or were under suspicion of having informed on their comrades. As a result, the decapitated local remnants of the JVP, who remained underground in a state of paralysis and fear for much of 1990-93<sup>4</sup>, were reluctant to re-emerge into the open, fearful of inviting renewed repression upon themselves. One of the very few historical accounts of the 1987-90 insurgency, written immediately after its defeat concluded:

*Among the remnants, there are of course some people who harbour delusions of building up the JVP once more. But this is a pipe dream. ... After what they did in 1987-90, they will never again be able to build up a mass following. Somawansa Amarasinghe [the sole surviving central committee member] is still alive and at large. This too has no significance.*<sup>5</sup>

In retrospect, this evaluation was proven wrong on both counts, but it signifies the extent to which the JVP lay shattered at the time, and the highly adverse circumstances under which the party's remarkable rebirth occurred just four years later. As with UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe in the same period, the newly re-created JVP after 1994 was constantly forced to explain that they had indeed made a clean break with their recent violent past. Party leaders and activists found themselves having to refute numerous rumours and accusations that they were secretly rearming for another rebellion, and were given to much suspicion that such allegations had been planted to serve as a pretext for a renewed phase of repression against them. Having just emerged from a decade underground, the JVP leadership in the 1993-1999 period was deeply antagonistic to the military and police hierarchy that had only recently been deployed against them, and that was now engaged in Eelam War III against the LTTE. Through the second half of the

<sup>4</sup> Most JVP activists and sympathisers had indeed been underground for an entire decade, since the party had originally been proscribed by the J.R. Jayewardena government in August 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Chandraprema (1991), p 310.

1990s, the JVP vigorously opposed the imposition of emergency war-time or terrorism related regulations, and were genuinely concerned that these special measures could be used against them. Indeed, media reports at the time are awash with stories of former JVP activists and defectors accusing the party of preparing for another revolt.

The difficult task of political reincarnation over 1993-95 was further complicated by factionalism and rivalry over claims to the JVP brand name and party electoral logo. The dominant faction led by the Paris-based Somawansa Amarasinghe was challenged by a London-based group headed by Chandra Fernando, the brother-in-law of the JVP's late founder-leader, Rohana Wijeweera. Over the course of the next year, the Somawansa faction managed to prevail and consolidate its hold over party units, seizing control of the party brand name and electoral symbol. Nevertheless, more than a year after they had begun to re-organise openly, and on the eve of parliamentary elections in August 1994, the factional divisions within the JVP (as well as security concerns) had forced the Somawansa faction to contest the elections under the banner of another party.<sup>6</sup> The Somawansa faction's success in winning one parliamentary seat in Hambantota led them to consolidate their grip on the JVP with a special party conference held in Tangalle in July 1995, that established office bearers and an organisational structure.<sup>7</sup> Somawansa himself remained in exile in Paris, and later London between 1990-2004,<sup>8</sup> so that daily operational control of the party was left under the charge of a new general secretary, Tilvin Silva, one of the few district level leaders who had managed to survive by being in jail during the counter-insurgency of the 1989-90 period.

Over 1995-99, the JVP gradually established their presence as a mainstream force in electoral politics through their performance in local and provincial council elections, which they contested vigorously and with increasing success. In most localities, the JVP polled between 5%-10% of the vote – a return to the levels they achieved in the last district level elections they had competed in 1982, and significantly ahead of all the other smaller non-minority-based parties.<sup>9</sup> Under Sri Lanka's system of (modified) proportional representation, this modest vote share still translated into a meaningful number of elected representatives who often came to control the balance of power. As a result, the JVP was by 1999, poised to assume third position behind the two main parties with the Sinhalese electorate.

In the course of this reorientation as an electoral party, the JVP reacted skilfully to fashion a fluid ideo-political agenda that could be quickly calibrated along the continuum from populist Marxism to populist nationalism as the circumstances

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<sup>6</sup> The JVP contested under the banner of the 'National Salvation Front' of Ariya Bulegoda. See *Sunday Times*, 31 July 1994, 'Five Groups Fight for Control of JVP'.

<sup>7</sup> *Sunday Observer*, 2 July 1995, 'JVP London Accuses JVP Paris – Tangalle Confab Illegal'. Also, interview Wasantha Samarasinghe, Colombo, 2 September 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Amarasinghe first returned to Sri Lanka in November 2001 for a brief pre-election campaigning trip, and eventually moved back to Sri Lanka only just prior to the 2004 elections.

<sup>9</sup> The JVP had competed in the 1982 District Development Council (DDC) elections and in the 1982 presidential elections before their 1983 proscription.

demanded. The party could thus rush to claim the Sinhala nationalist mantle whenever issues of constitutional devolution and minority rights bubbled to the surface, just as they quickly switched to discuss class and worker's rights whenever an issue such as privatization emerged. Indeed, a great deal of the JVP's political momentum in the 1997-2002 period arose from their ability to adroitly mobilise and capture the new spaces that were being ceded to them by others.

For example, much of the JVP's growth in this period related to the specific circumstances of the Kumaratunga government's embrace of both market economics and the devolution agenda. For the first time since the rise of the two party system in the mid-1950s, both the main parties were in broad consensus on the necessity for state reform with regards to the two core issues that had animated Sri Lankan politics: economic policy and ethnic conflict. Both parties advocated market reforms just as they both agreed on the necessity for constitutional reforms to address the ethnic conflict. The remaining differences between them on these issues were largely a matter of emphasis, tactics, and personality rather than principle and direction. But as a direct consequence of this emerging consensus, there was also now an increasingly open and viable space on the populist left for opposition to the market reforms, and also on the Sinhala nationalist right for mobilisation directed at preserving the unitary state and opposing the devolution of powers along ethnic lines.

### **3. 'The Principal Socialist Party in the Country'**

Between 1998-99, the JVP tended to emphasise their Marxist credentials, anti-globalization rhetoric, and worker radicalism over Sinhala nationalism, largely because this was the arena of available political opportunity at the time. Their public pronouncements were often openly critical of Sinhala nationalism, the war, and emergency war-time or terrorism related regulations. In contrast, there was an increasingly viable space opening on the left, and the renascent JVP was one of the very few forces in the political spectrum that could mount any credible opposition to the government's economic reforms.<sup>10</sup> Most of the trade union movement was under the control or influence of political parties of the 'old left', the Communist Party (CP) and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), who were after 1994, compromised by their membership in the ruling People's Alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Kumaratunga had come to power in 1994 with the assistance of these left parties, but had nevertheless decided to continue and indeed accelerate the market reform agenda introduced by the previous UNP governments. It is during this period that some of the most ambitious privatizations of public sector enterprises were conducted, including the massive plantation sector, Sri Lankan Airlines, and Sri Lanka Telecom.

Despite being coalition partners in government, the LSSP and CP were in reality completely sidelined from economic policy and were powerless to affect the pace or direction of the reforms. As one vitriolic critic from the left noted: 'Instead of

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, *Weekend Express*, 'SLFP, JVP Stage Anti-Govt Protest', 9 March 1996.

being watchdogs, the CP and LSSP became lapdogs adjusting themselves to tail behind the President's vigorous pursuit of UNP policies'.<sup>11</sup> The LSSP's press releases and party statements of the time are replete with grave ambivalence and much hand-wringing on issues of subsidy withdrawals, privatization, and the renewal of the emergency provisions.<sup>12</sup> One LSSP leader confessed to the media:

*We are against privatisation, but everybody thinks that we are in favour of privatisation. When our party members went to express their protest about the privatisation of the Steel Corporation we were told that it was no use joining protest campaigns after agreeing to it at cabinet level.*<sup>13</sup>

Workers from unions attached to pro-government parties were constantly frustrated at the inability of their compromised leadership to translate cabinet level influence into tangible benefits – and began looking for more radical alternatives. As the JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva described :

*[The CP and LSSP] betrayed the working classes who for more than half a century had depended on them. After accepting portfolios in the capitalist governments, they have lost both their independence and the confidence of the people. We have come into fill this gap and are today the principal socialist party in the country.*<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, it is at this point that the JVP managed to make significant inroads into the union movement for the very first time in their history, largely out of defections from left-led unions. As a JVP trade union leader described 'Our growth was from other unions, not from newly unionised'<sup>15</sup> – a strategy that a rival non-JVP union leader characterised as an 'aggressive, unethical stance towards building up unions'.<sup>16</sup>

Emblematic of this phenomenon is a news report from May 2000 of how an LSSP-affiliated union quickly shut down two acrimonious strikes involving over 1,000 workers following the promulgation of new emergency regulations. Following this, 'Workers resigned en masse from the [LSSP union] in protest over its betrayal of the strike and formed another union affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)'.<sup>17</sup> As the leader of the CP's trade union wing lamented:

*Our leadership in the unions was compromised as pro-government. They [JVP] had a different image. They are better organised. Their cadres are committed, and all over the country.*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Sunday Times*, 28 November 1999, 'Vasu's LDA stakes claim as third force'.

<sup>12</sup> LSSP (1996).

<sup>13</sup> *Sunday Times*, 27 July 1997, 'LSSP to Quit Cabinet'.

<sup>14</sup> *Sunday Times*, 6 April 1977, 'We are the Third Force in the Country Now – Tilvin'.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Wasantha Samarasinghe, Colombo, 2 September 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Gerald Lodwyk, Colombo, 9 April 2007.

<sup>17</sup> *World Socialist Website*, 'Sri Lankan unions abruptly end two long-running strikes', 30 May 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, D.W. Subasinghe, Colombo, 8 August 2006.

A newspaper article described how:

*The SLFP, LSSP and Communist Party trade union leadership have also complained that all trade union action they organize has been penetrated by the JVP through its members to take over the leadership.*<sup>19</sup>

The JVP's growth in the trade unions was so rapid that it became cause for serious concern among both government and business in the 2000-2001 period. With the violent insurrection of 1987-90 still very much in mind, the captains of industry nursed serious concerns that the growth of JVP influence in their unions would signify a return to disruptive and violent worker radicalism.<sup>20</sup> But most companies have since reconciled themselves to the JVP's presence and have found the party's culture of discipline and firm top-down control of union branches to be a factor for stability rather than unrest in industrial relations.<sup>21</sup> As JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa described:

*The employers did not have a good impression about our trade unions at first when we started them after 1994. They had some fears. But ... those fears were allayed. ... the employers have realized that our unions are disciplined, trustworthy and capable of implementing agreements ... Our unionists are not given to disruptive activities. They will cooperate with the UPFA government to the fullest to help achieve its economic goals.*<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to quantify the extent of the JVP's strength in the unions due to the absence of credible data sources. But the broad trends and their repercussions are substantiated by triangulating between different sources and from interview responses.

Unpublished data obtained from the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC)'s annual member survey shows that the ICEU, which had no branches in any of the more than 400 surveyed companies in 1997, had become the fastest growing union in subsequent years, and had captured 16% of all unionised employees by 2002. These trends are corroborated and extended further by data from the Labour Secretariat which show that ICEU membership grew from 9,747 to 35,116 between 2000-2005.<sup>23</sup>

The EFC data also shows a precipitous drop in the rate of unionisation from 74% to 52% in just the five years 1997-2002, caused to some extent by the increasing casualization of the work force, and also by the increasing number of companies which were completely un-unionised. What this signifies in other words is that

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<sup>19</sup> *Sunday Times*, 24 August 2003, 'SLFP accuses JVP of hijacking operations'.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, *Sunday Times*, 18 February 2001, 'CBK Warns JVP Unions', *Sunday Times* 11 February 2001 'Hearts and Minds to Counter JVP Unions'.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Gotabaya Dasanayake, Colombo, 4 September 2006, also echoed in Interview, Bala Tampoe, Colombo, 6 September 2006.

<sup>22</sup> *Island*, 'Country in a Trap, We Should Act Carefully', 17 May 2004. (Interview of Wimal Weerawansa with Prabath Sahabandu).

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Mr. D.M.S.Dissanayake, Commissioner of Labour for providing access to this data.

the rapid growth of the JVP's trade union strength occurred at a time when trade unionism was in a phase of crisis and contraction.

TABLE 1: SRI LANKA: UNION MEMBERSHIP AND PARTY AFFILIATION OF EFC PRIVATE SECTOR NON-PLANTATION MEMBER COMPANIES<sup>24</sup>

<u>Union</u>	<u>Party</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>%</u>
CMU	-	12,738	28%	8,828	20%
ICEU	JVP	0	0%	6,977	16%
SLNSS	SLFP	8,431	19%	6,101	14%
JSS	UNP	4,318	10%	5,821	13%
CFTU	CP	3,615	8%	2,636	6%
ACC&IWU	LSSP	2,026	5%	1,192	3%
CIWU	NSSP	2,257	5%	2,541	6%
Other		<u>11,426</u>	<u>25%</u>	<u>10,262</u>	<u>23%</u>
Total		44,811		44,358	
% unionised		74%		52%	

Source: Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC)

Wasantha Samarasinghe, general secretary of the JVP's private sector trade union federation, the Inter Company Employees Union (ICEU), claimed that his union [as of the time of interview in August 2006] contained 100,000 members in 492 branches, mostly from large corporates, hotels, and manufacturing enterprises. He also gave some very candid insights into the party's strategy in the trade union wing:

*Most of our trade union members are not part of our party – but we are slowly trying to convert them ... We don't believe in trade unionism – we want to absorb leaders and talented people to the Socialist Workers Union [the JVP's apex union body].<sup>25</sup>*

Indeed, the slow take-over of the CP and LSSP's unions by the JVP is just one example of the way in which the JVP has inherited the mantle of radical politics vacated by the CP and LSSP since the mid-1960s. For example, campus politics, which had since the 1940s been dominated by the old left, had by the early 1980s, passed into the hands of the JVP.

Leaders of non-JVP unions and left party activists who I interviewed were all, without exception, hostile to the JVP and singled them out for strong criticism. Bala Tampoe, a veteran Trotskyite and elder statesman of the trade union

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Gotabaya Dasanayake, Director-General, EFC for providing access to this data.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Wasantha Samarasinghe, Colombo, 2 September 2006.

movement said: ‘They are not interested in building working class organizations. They just want a vote bank.’<sup>26</sup> Leslie Devendra of the SLFP affiliated union, Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS) said ‘I think their influence in the trade unions is very sad for this country. Their style of militancy is very bad for the trade union movement and for the country.’<sup>27</sup> M.R. Shah of the non-partisan Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) charged them with being ‘disruptive elements in the working class’.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. The Principal Sinhala Nationalist Party in the Country**

From June 1998 to December 1999, the JVP temporarily de-emphasised the Sinhala nationalist component of their agenda, and entered into a broader alliance with three other radical left-wing parties that positioned themselves to the left of the ruling PA government. In December 1999 this left front put forward the JVP’s Nandana Gunathilake as a common candidate for the presidential elections, and won third place with 6% of the vote. But in the months following this election, the JVP broke ranks completely with these allies on the left and switched ideological emphasis away from Marxism and towards Sinhala nationalism. The circumstances of this shift occurred in the context of several factors. Firstly, the LTTE’s spectacular military successes since late-1999, and particularly in Elephant Pass in early 2000 had completely destabilised the viability of the government’s military agenda. It marked Norway’s increasing presence as mediator in the conflict, and held out the possibility of ending the war through direct negotiations with the LTTE. Secondly, the government’s landmark constitutional reforms and devolution package – which had been in preparation since 1995 - were finally presented before parliament in August 2000.

These two events expanded the space for Sinhala nationalist mobilisation and fell within areas where the JVP had already staked out their positions, but had not yet fully capitalised upon. The possibility for cashing in their chips and expanding their political influence occurred in the context of the parliamentary elections of October 2000, which was quickly followed by another election in December 2001. These were the first real opportunities for the revitalized post-1994 JVP to translate their carefully cultivated grass-roots strength onto the national stage. In fact, it was the first real opportunity for the JVP to participate directly and meaningfully in parliamentary elections in their entire 35 year history – and they did so with great success. In both elections, the JVP successfully leached off discontented voters from the left-wing of the SLFP-led ruling coalition, and multiplied their presence in parliament.

Between early-2000 to late-2005, the JVP staked out their leadership position over the Sinhala nationalist landscape in a series of campaigns centred on the ethnic conflict. The JVP vociferously opposed any attempt to resolve the ethnic conflict,

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Bala Tampoe, Colombo, 27 July 2006 and 6 September 2006. Tampoe acted as defence lawyer to the JVP leaders following the April 1971 rebellion.

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Leslie Devendra, Colombo, 9 April 2007

<sup>28</sup> Interview, M.R. Shah, Colombo, 28 September 2006.

whether through negotiations and a political settlement with the LTTE, or even through an internally generated package of state reform and devolution independent of the LTTE. Any attempt to disturb the 'unitary character' of the Sri Lankan state was, they charged, a step towards the division of the country, which they characterised as part of a western conspiracy to destabilise, divide and re-conquer their former imperial domains. In effect, (although this was not frequently articulated as such), the JVP advocated a complete military solution to the conflict, and a reversion to the pre-1987 constitutional status-quo ante.

From March 2000 onwards, the JVP initiated a long campaign against the introduction of Norwegian mediators.<sup>29</sup> A few months later in August 2000, they were once again in the forefront of nationwide protests against President Kumaratunga's new constitution and devolution proposals. In the aftermath of the December 2001 elections, it was the JVP, rather than the dispirited and dejected SLFP that remained energised and concentrated on coalescing and leading the opposition to the evolving cease-fire and peace process. In the following months, the JVP effectively stole a march over the other forces in opposition by taking the initiative to categorically oppose the formal cease-fire agreement (CFA) in February 2002, negotiations with the LTTE in September 2002 – March 2003, the government's interim power-sharing proposals in May–October 2003, and the LTTE's counter-proposals in November 2003. Even after the elections of April 2004, the JVP adopted a very inflexible position on restarting negotiations with the LTTE over May 2004 – December 2004, and were instrumental in scuttling P-TOMS, the post-tsunami aid-sharing mechanism that was effectively the last gasp of the peace process over March – July 2005.

The JVP's increasing association with Sinhala nationalism in the post-2000 period did not signify an abandonment of activism on traditionally Marxist issues, for the insecurities generated by the economic crisis of 2000-2001, and the subsequent UNF government's market reform agenda provided the JVP with a growing base of support from a variety of sources, including farmers, the unemployed, and public sector workers. At an ideological and practical level, the JVP's success lay in their ability to fold these often spontaneous sources of predominantly economic opposition as component elements of an over-arching and coherent [Sinhala] nationalist framework such that opposition to economic globalization became part of an encompassing movement of resistance against the political machinations of predatory neo-colonial powers, international NGOs, and international capital – all of whom they accused of conspiring to divide the country through the peace process. The international community assisted greatly in the construction and reinforcement of this logic by offering to release generous quantities of development aid funding conditional upon market reforms and progress in the peace process. By campaigning against both the peace process and the UNF government's market reforms, and by ideologically conflating these two elements, the JVP was in effect mirroring the way in which the ruling UNF had similarly ideologised the same two issues. Just as the government envisaged the

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<sup>29</sup> *Tamilnet*, 13 March 2000, 'JVP to Agitate against Norway's role'.

peace agenda as a component element of an economic development strategy based on market reforms and greater global integration, so the JVP argued that the peace process and market reforms were part of a coherent assault by a constellation of foreign forces and domestic quislings to weaken and fragment the nation. As their General Secretary Tilvin Silva described it:

*On the one side, the country is being sold to transnational corporations through the Regaining Sri Lanka programme while on the other, a separate state is being given to the LTTE.*<sup>30</sup>

One factor behind the JVP's success in mobilising on both issues is that the other elements of the Sri Lankan left who could have competed for control of the economic opposition were torn between the two issues. The LSSP, CP, NSSP and the large majority of the non-JVP trade unions were deeply opposed to the government's economic agenda, but remained very supportive of the peace process. The Ranil Wickremasinghe government was pursuing a number of extremely controversial reforms on land, labour and privatization that they had long opposed, but many non-JVP unions and left-parties held back from capitalising on these issues and mobilising opposition for fear of disrupting the fragile peace process.<sup>31</sup>

On balance, they prioritised peace over economic issues, and many in the Marxist left ultimately decided to support the government. In October 2003 and again in January 2004, when the UNF government (and hence the peace process) appeared in danger of collapsing under the weight of the JVP-led campaign, the main non-JVP left parties met with prime minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and agreed to use their influence to defuse trade union pressure on the government in return for a postponement of the more controversial parts of the reform agenda such as privatization and labour law reform.<sup>32</sup> In practice, very little came of this effort. The non-JVP left was not strong enough to prevent the collapse of the peace process, but nevertheless laid themselves open to the charge of collaborating in the government's unpopular reform agenda at a time of growing worker unrest.

In contrast, the JVP's consistent and unrestrained opposition to the government on both peace and reforms placed them in command of both these arenas. Fortuitously for the JVP, the timing of both these agenda items also closely overlapped, so that controversial economic reform issues were introduced and debated amidst a parallel escalation of anxieties relating to the peace process. For example, in early January 2003, the government introduced four new bills on

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<sup>30</sup> 'Regaining Sri Lanka' was the UNP government's neo-liberal economic blue-print, which was submitted in modified form to the IMF and World Bank as Sri Lanka's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). *Sunday Times*, 21 September 2003, 'SLFP leaders more concerned about astrologers than issues – JVP leader'.

<sup>31</sup> Interview Vickramabahu Karunarathne, Colombo, 21 September 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Vickramabahu Karunarathne. Also *Sunday Times*, 11 January 2004, 'A Government tries to put on a Brave Face', and *World Socialist Website*, 8 March 2004, 'The NSSP, the "peace process" and the Sri Lankan elections'.

labour law reform<sup>33</sup> on virtually the same day that the critical fourth round of negotiations with the LTTE were initiated in Thailand. Both of these issues aroused considerable anxiety in themselves and were occasion for widespread anti-government demonstrations by a variety of different organizations. But over the course of the following week, the JVP adroitly exploited these distinct sources of tension and fused them together by bringing 25,000 people onto the streets of the capital Colombo in the biggest opposition rally against the government to date.<sup>34</sup>

TABLE 2: MAIN JVP PROTESTS AND UNION ACTIONS JAN 2003 – FEB 2004

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Cause</u>	<u>Organisers</u>
8 Jan 03	Colombo	25,000	Peace/Labour	JVP
20 Feb 03	March to Colombo	50,000	CFA anniversary	JVP
10 Mar 03	Colombo	100,000	Peace process	JVP plus allies
25 Apr 03	Colombo	'thousands'	Peace process.	JVP
6 Jun 03	Colombo	10,000	Peace process	JVP
25 Jun 03	Colombo	5,000	Peace process	JVP
12 Aug 03	Colombo	thousands	Peace process	JVP
28 Aug 03	Galle-Colombo march	100,000	Peace process	JVP
16-29 Sep 03	Strike action	80,000	various	Hospital unions
22 Sep 03	Colombo	30,000	various	Hospital unions
1-3 Oct 03	Strike action	20,000	Privatization	Railway unions
1 Oct 03	Kandy-Colombo march	100,000+	Peace process	PNM
21 Oct 03	Strike Action		Public Sector	JVP
24 Oct 03	Colombo	100,000+	Anti-govt	SLFP
7 Nov 03	Colombo	'thousands'	Peace process	PNM
19 Jan 04	Hunger Strike	10	Labour legislation	ICEU (JVP union)
25 Jan 04	Hunger Strike	12	Salary package	Hospital unions
Jan-Feb 04	Strike Action	10,000	Privatization	Railway unions
6-9 Feb 04	Hunger Strike	13 farmers	Fertilizer subsidy	JVP farmers union

Source: Compiled from the Daily Mirror, Sunday Times, Daily News, Tamilnet, The Island.

Following this, the JVP launched a series of increasingly powerful demonstrations on an almost monthly basis that paralysed Colombo through the end of the year. These were also accompanied and interspersed by a wave of industrial action in critical public services. Between August-November 2003, the JVP brought anti-government tensions to fever pitch by instigating an almost continuous sequence of high profile strikes, marches through the country, and massive demonstrations against the peace process and a variety of other political actions in centre of Colombo.

<sup>33</sup> Respectively, the Termination of Employment of Workmen (Special Provisions Amendment) Bill, the Industrial Disputes (Hearing and Determination of Proceedings (Special Provisions) Bill, the Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Bill and the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children (Amendment) Bill.

<sup>34</sup> *Tamilnet*, 8 January 2003: 'Massive JVP Rally Condemns Peace Talks', *Daily Mirror*, 9 January 2003, 'JVP Vows to Topple Government this Year', *Island*, 9 January 2003, 'Norwegian-led Peace Will Lead the Country to Ruins – JVP'.

In late-September, 80,000 hospital workers went on strike for 13 days, paralysing health services. As soon as they returned to work, 10,000 railway employees went on strike, causing chaos in the public transport system. Meanwhile, the JVP affiliated Joint Union of Unemployed Graduates (JUUG) held a continuous protest outside Fort railway station for two months protesting lack of public sector jobs. Numerous other government departments and public sector companies also threatened strike action, as did farmers unions.

Many of these strikes were directly instigated by the JVP through their new-found influence in the unions, with the explicit intention of destabilising the government. But there was also a considerable independent and spontaneous element, fuelled by the growing economic anxieties over the reform agenda. In addition, the IMF-inspired fiscal austerity measures implemented in 2002, including a fertilizer subsidy cut and public sector hiring freeze, had predisposed a variety of different socio-economic constituencies against the government. As one independent trade union leader described: 'The entire work-force in the country was opposed to Ranil'.<sup>35</sup>

The growing scale of the JVP's anti-government juggernaut in late-2003 was directed on the one hand at the government itself – but was also tactically directed to pressure President Chandrika Kumaratunga to use her constitutional prerogatives to dismiss the UNF government, dissolve parliament, and trigger fresh parliamentary elections. A new wave of strikes erupted in January 2004, just as the final negotiations were underway between the JVP and the president. There was a sudden outbreak of hunger strikes by the JVP unions protesting labour legislation outside the labour ministry and by hospital workers outside the health ministry. The JVP farmers union started a hunger strike against the fertilizer subsidy withdrawal that converged on Colombo. Finally, there was another mammoth railway strike that shut down the railways from 27 January – 9 February 2004. All these strikes converged on Colombo and were brought to a climax in the first week of February 2004, applying concentrated pressure on the government, and on President Kumaratunga to dismiss the government. The highly instrumental and political nature of the strike wave, and the extent to which it was under the direct control of the JVP became very evident when the strikes suddenly ended on 9 February, as soon President Kumaratunga agreed to dissolve parliament and call elections on 2 April.

## **5. Marxism and the National Question**

Between 2001-2004, the JVP became the leading Sinhala nationalist political organisation in Sri Lanka, and the leading political force opposing the peace process. Incredibly, it achieved this position without being an explicit advocate of Sinhala nationalism, (and indeed frequently denouncing it). Moreover, it did so in direct competition with other political forces which were far more explicit,

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<sup>35</sup> Interview, M.R. Shah, Colombo, 28 September 2006.

outspoken, and authentic advocates of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. Indeed, the JVP's Marxist origins have been an asset in their successful mobilisation of Sinhala nationalism, in the sense that it has provided them with the ideological sensibility, political tools and organisational skills to outplay their competitors.

A flexible allegiance to two different ideologies has allowed the JVP the lee-way to tactically bend from one to the other as the political circumstances demand, and to recruit and mobilise as an authentic representative of both trends. It provides the JVP with command not only over their natural social base among educated rural Sinhala-Buddhist youth, but also allows them access to mobilise and draw in supporters from the trade union movement, and from those who are agitated on the national question. The JVP's Leninist party structure and their strict norms of discipline and collective decision-making have provided them with unparalleled organisational strength. The JVP has a dedicated cadre base who remain active and who perform constant house-to-house visits and acts of public service such as tsunami relief even when there are no elections looming. The JVP remains one of the few parties that has a constant supply of idealistic young 'full-timers' willing to sacrifice their careers for a life as a party organiser. In these respects, the JVP ranks very favourably against the corruption, indiscipline, clientelism, petty rivalries and factionalism in the other parties.

The most critical of these assets that Marxism has provided the JVP is the ability to convincingly present their opposition to the peace process as inspired by ideals of justice, liberation and equality, rather than by ethnic exclusivism, militarist revanchism or religious zealotry. The JVP angrily and vociferously denies the charge that it is chauvinist,<sup>36</sup> and there is very little in the official literature or statements of the JVP that can be described as arousing overt anti-Tamil sentiment. The JVP advocates equal rights for all communities in Sri Lanka and recognises that Tamils have historically suffered discrimination and even violence.

Their 2001 election manifesto, which otherwise bristles with hostility to the upcoming peace process, nevertheless promises to 'ensure equality and democracy to all nationalities, ethnicities and people of different religious faiths, rejecting all forms of chauvinism and tribalism'.<sup>37</sup> The manifesto also pledges to rehabilitate Tamils who were displaced by the 1983 riots. As such, although the JVP is indeed a Sinhala nationalist party, such a characterisation is not self-evident and needs to be carefully articulated and qualified. The JVP is certainly not a Sinhala supremacist party, has not advocated or participated in organised violence or provocations against Tamil civilians, and does not espouse an explicitly Sinhala exclusivist position. This distinguishes them for example from the more brash Sinhala nationalism of the Sinhala Urumaya (SU), or their successor, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) – who are openly sectarian advocates for the Sinhala-Buddhists, and have been associated with provocative and inflammatory attacks on virtually all the other religious and ethnic minorities.

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<sup>36</sup> For example, see the following interview with Tilvin Silva: *Hindu*, 4 May 1999, 'We Are No Chauvinists'.

<sup>37</sup> JVP 2001 Parliamentary Elections Manifesto.

But as a result of the JVP's ideological *weltanschauung*, and the socialisation of their leading cadres in a 'Sinhala only' environment, their leaders have displayed an almost epistemological blind-spot for Tamil nationalism, and it remains a topic that party leaders often find bewilderingly difficult to emote with or engage with at any level. Take for example, the following exchange between an audience member and the officiating JVP cadre at a seminar sponsored by the party on the national question in 1997:

*[question by audience member]: 'Can you succinctly describe your solution to the ethnic conflict in this country?'*

*'Socialism', answered one of the JVP leaders unequivocally and crisply.*

*'What should the Tamil people do until socialist rule is established in the country?'* asked another person in the seminar crowd.

*'The Tamils also have to struggle for socialism until then'* replied the JVP.<sup>38</sup>

In reality, the direct target of the JVP's hostility is not the Tamil population at large, but Tamil nationalism as an ideo-political project, which calls for a substantial measure of regional self-government, if not independent statehood, for the island's north and east. In their campaign against the peace process, the JVP characterised Tamil nationalism by and large to be an undemocratic, chauvinistic movement of ethnic exclusivism, led by a terrorist organisation, and that is furthermore deeply implicated in a neo-colonialist enterprise by foreign powers to divide and re-conquer the island. The JVP's outlook on Tamil nationalism in the 2001-2004 peace process remained heavily influenced by a thesis developed in the mid-1980s by the party's founder-leader Rohana Wijeweera.<sup>39</sup> In an extended polemical engagement within the Marxist debate on the national question, Wijeweera argued that the right to self-determination was not absolute in Lenin. Support for a given nationalist movement was, he argued, conditional on its juxtaposition to world imperialism and to its strategic value to the communist movement.

At certain historical moments, nationalist movements can be progressive, democratic and liberatory. But at other times, they can be distinctly dangerous, whether as the refuge of reactionary parochial elites, or as the handmaiden of predatory imperialist forces seeking to divide and re-colonise the third world. Tamil nationalism, he argued, (conflating Tamil Nadu's Dravida movement with Sri Lanka's Tamil Eelam movement), was in the latter category, and deserved to be opposed on grounds of principle.

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<sup>38</sup> *Midweek Mirror*, 16 April 1997, 'JVP Fails to Convince'.

<sup>39</sup> Wijeweera (1986).

*Actually the aim of the DMK movement is completely in line with the aim of US imperialism and their plan of action. It is very clear that US imperialism gives importance for the active expression of the agitation and struggle of the DMK movement for an independent Dravidian land again, after the partial success it has had in generating separatist movements in the north-eastern, eastern, north-western and western, northern India, and the support and aid, it has been able to mobilise from countries outside the borders like Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. Should Sri Lanka be partitioned on the boundaries of nationality, should an independent Tamil Eelam state be established it would provide a catalyst for this aim. Therefore it can be a secret to nobody why US imperialism and everybody who wants to break up India have such an interest in the Tamil Eelam movement.* <sup>40</sup>

But even beyond the casual and misleading conflation between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil nationalisms, Wijeweera's is arguably an opportunistic mis-reading of the Leninist tradition, which distinguishes between the oppressive and undemocratic nationalism of imperialist and larger nations, and the more democratic character of the nationalism of smaller, colonised nations. In Sri Lankan conditions, it is this legacy of Lenin that has brought the mainstream Marxist left into a position of broad sympathy with Tamil nationalism as the democratic expression of a historically discriminated minority. Wijeweera instead argued that Tamil nationalism, through its alleged complicity with imperialism, was a dangerous and reactionary threat.

In operational terms, this effectively translated into an agenda and tactical programme that was little different from that which successive generations of Sinhala chauvinists have deployed since the mid-1950s: the fetishization of the unitary nature of Sri Lanka's state, a conflation of the national interests with the (imputed) sectional interests of its largest community, a stubborn refusal to tolerate any form of regional power devolution to the Tamils, and the hysterical vilification of all those, especially Sinhalese, that would advocate or tolerate such a compromise.

This abiding characterisation of Tamil nationalism as imperialist proxy continued to inform the JVP through the 1990s and formed the substantive framework around which their opposition to the foreign-mediated peace process was constructed in 2001-2004. In effect, the JVP is not itself an open advocate for the exclusive rights of the Sinhala majority, and even maintains a rhetorical denunciation of Sinhala chauvinism. However, through their tireless opposition to even the most moderate versions of the Tamil nationalist agenda, the JVP has consciously pandered to, cultivated, and benefited from Sinhala chauvinism, has arrived at alliances with outspoken extremists, and has become the leading advocate for the issues most central to Sinhala nationalism. On the basis of their actions, the JVP is viewed by large sections of Sri Lankan society, and particularly by the Tamil community, as a Sinhala chauvinist organization. But internally, the

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<sup>40</sup> Wijeweera (1986).

self-legitimation of the JVP draws upon Wijeweera's formulation that their opposition to Tamil nationalism arises not from an oppressive majoritarian impulse to dominate a vulnerable minority, but from their underlying commitment to social liberation, ethnic harmony and anti-colonialism.

## **6. Marxism with an Indubitably Sinhalese Character**

Having briefly explored the way in which the JVP's Marxist identity places it in distinction to Sinhala nationalism, this section turns now to the converse relationship: how does the JVP's Sinhala nationalism relate to the rest of the Sri Lankan Marxist tradition? In practical terms, the JVP's relationship to the Marxist left has been largely derivative of their stance towards the ethnic conflict. Despite having frequently compromised with Sinhala chauvinist forces for electoral expediency, the Marxist parties are traditionally the most minority friendly entities in the Sri Lankan political spectrum. The JVP, on the other hand, has frequently adopted a position on the ethnic conflict that is little different in practical terms from that of the Sinhala chauvinist far right. What explains this unusual deviation?

Sri Lanka's 'old left', comprising the Communist Party (CP) and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and even the JVP's contemporaries in the 'new left' such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) have historically drawn their support base from the trade union movement.<sup>41</sup> In most cases, and going back to their founding in the mid-1930s, their leadership have consisted mostly of radicalised urban middle class intellectuals. In their prime during the 1950s-1970s, the old left parties contained a sizeable contingent of Tamils among their leadership, cadre, fellow-travellers, and mass fronts.<sup>42</sup> Since the 1980s, the CP and LSSP have been enthusiastic supporters of a devolved power-sharing mechanism to address the aspirations of the Tamils, while the more radical NSSP has been willing to accept even the Tamils' right to self-determination.

In complete contrast, the JVP has historically been composed overwhelmingly of Sinhala-Buddhists, both at the rank and file and leadership level – and are utterly opposed to any measures to decentralise powers to the Tamil north-east. Until the late-1990s, the JVP had virtually no base in the trade union movement, and relied largely on their domination of the university student unions. Indeed, most of the traditional left parties question the JVP's ideological credentials and accuse them of being closet communalists in Marxist clothing. The JVP was held to lack the ideological authenticity and theoretical schooling that distinguished the respected ideologues of the old left. The party was accused of having no base (and indeed, no faith) in the working class; were ridiculed for their shallow and weak grasp of Marxist theory; and had at various times, flirted eclectically and erratically with Maoism, Che Guevarism, and Trotskyism. One of the JVP's oldest critics, Dayan Jayatileka speaks for many on the 'old left' in his bitter

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<sup>41</sup> Kearney (1971).

<sup>42</sup> Although the Tamil north-east only once elected a left party MP in 1956.

diatribe against them as a Pol-Potist force espousing a ‘malignant, midget Marxism – a dwarfed, distorted, debased, caricatured Marxism’.<sup>43</sup>

Such criticism of the JVP is to be found not only among the Marxist left, but also among Sinhala nationalists of the *Jathika Chinthanaya* school such as Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera, or Professor Nalin De Silva, who are sympathetic to the JVP, but nevertheless find their continuing allegiance to Marxism as unnecessary baggage. As Amarasekera explained very frankly:

*Within the JVP there is a deep feeling for nationalism. I think their understanding of Marxism is not very deep. Marxism is a mask to make it look respectable: Lenin, Mao and so on. Don't misunderstand, they are fine fellows who love this country and come from the grass-roots. At some stage in the past they had to have this mask. This is when it was very fashionable, sophisticated, etc. Now it is very discredited. I tell them, throw this bloody mask away. But a volte face is not possible. They [would have to] must openly say that they are not Marxist. They would have to disown their [dead] leader Rohana Wijeweera, a bloody fool of a Marxist.*<sup>44</sup>

But the JVP's adherence to Marxism is not merely an ideological sleight of hand to mask their inner chauvinist core. Neither is it the case that the mixture of these two tendencies represents an uneasy marriage or macro-level coalition arrived at between two distinct factions, for the mixture occurs at a far more molecular level, and is as such impossible to disentangle. Furthermore, the JVP's Sinhala nationalism is by no means unusual or exceptional within the tradition of Sri Lanka's Marxist left, for it has been one of the central internal tensions within the movement since the mid-1950s, more than a decade before the JVP was founded. Indeed, one can argue that the JVP is the legitimate heir to the tradition of Sri Lankan Marxism initiated by the CP and LSSP.

The traditional left parties are strident opponents of the JVP on a variety of grounds going back to the late-1960s. But it is their divergence on the ‘national question’ that is the most vexatious, and that has led them into bitter rivalry since the mid-1980s. Batty Weerakoon, who was General Secretary of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) during the 1990s, described the JVP as ‘a petty bourgeois party with Marxist slogans. They have communal politics only.’<sup>45</sup> Bala Tampoe of the Ceylon Mercantile Union – an old left-oriented trade union that has lost ground to the JVP's ICEU was characteristically blunt and scathing in his assessment: ‘The JVP are completely degenerated Marxists. In fact they know nothing about Marxism, and are straight forward Sinhala chauvinists.’<sup>46</sup> D.W. Subasinghe, who heads the trade union wing of the Communist Party remarked

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<sup>43</sup> Jayatileka (1995).

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Gunadasa Amarasekera, Colombo, 8 April 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, Batty Weerakoon, Colombo, 9 April 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, Bala Tampoe, Colombo, 27 July 2006 and 6 September 2006.

similarly 'JVP is petty bourgeois, and semi-peasant, not working class. Their growth is on the national question, not on working class issues.'<sup>47</sup>

James Jupp's description of the JVP is in many ways typical of those within or sympathetic to the left tradition, who wish to establish how the JVP represents a fundamental disjuncture with the rest of the Marxist left: 'the JVP was virtually uninfluenced by the sophisticated and cosmopolitan approach of the LSSP',<sup>48</sup> he describes. Later, he explains 'to the established left the most obnoxious feature of the JVP was its eclectic and nationalist ideology'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, unlike the LSSP or CP, the JVP leaders were not members of the westernised middle class, were far less articulate in English and were mostly of very humble, rural origins. Their schooling in Marxist theory was weak, and they had no international connections to speak of. But all this does not amount to conclusive evidence that the JVP is some mutant anomaly that emerged from beyond the pale, for the mainstream Sri Lankan Marxist tradition had by the 1960s itself become increasingly tainted by association with Sinhala nationalism.

Indeed the problem is not even limited to Sri Lanka as such, for nationalism has remained one of the abiding intellectual and political challenges confronting the Marxist left internationally since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Tom Nairn writes, 'The theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure'.<sup>50</sup> There are some very obvious parallels to be drawn between the experience of the Sri Lankan communist movement in the 1930s-70s, and that of India in the same period, or even as far back as the European parties of the second international (1889-1916). In the context of their increasing parliamentary representation and steady de-radicalisation, the relationship of European social democracy to nationalism took a path that began with resistance, but then moved on rapidly towards accommodation, compromise, and capitulation. During World War One, most parties found it impossible to resist the nationalist wave sweeping across their supporters and most parties ultimately came to adopt a stance of 'social patriotism', lining up to support their respective governments in favour of the war they had previously condemned.

Likewise, it is in the course of their steady march towards de-radicalisation and parliamentary gentrification during the 1950s-1970s, that the CP and LSSP became closely associated with Sinhala nationalism in the form of the SLFP governments of S.W.R.D. and Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The SLFP's landmark election victory in 1956 on a wave of Sinhala nationalist sentiment was in reality accomplished with the assistance of an electoral alliance with the CP and LSSP. In the interests of maintaining and leveraging their electoral relevance, both parties drifted into coalitions within openly Sinhala nationalist governments, hoping to use their cabinet positions as a vehicle to bring a left-wing agenda to bear in government policy, and also to introduce a voice of moderation to

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, D.W.Subasinghe, Colombo, 8 August 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Jupp (1978), p.307.

<sup>49</sup> Jupp (1978), p.314.

<sup>50</sup> Nairn, T. (1977). See also Munck (1986) and Debray (1977).

counteract the Sinhala nationalism of their allies. But what happened more often is that the CP and LSSP were forced into defending policies that they had earlier stood against, and found that Sinhala nationalism was creeping into their own organisations.

When Robert Kearney interviewed LSSP leaders in the 1960s and 1970s to understand their increasing collaboration with the Sinhala nationalism that they had earlier fought against, the answers he received were essentially the very same factors that the JVP would pick up on a generation later: (i) that there was a progressive element to Sinhala nationalism; (ii) the fact that it was electorally unbeatable:

*the Sinhalese resurgence had galvanised the masses and created the genuine mass movement of the contemporary period. The movement expressed deeply felt popular aspirations and contained 'progressive' features, particularly as it represented the class revolt of the Sinhalese-educated rural masses against the English-educated classes, as well as containing 'reactionary' divisive and obscurantist features. In the existing circumstances, the Samasamajists claimed, the strength of the movement was so great that opposition to it was futile and progress was possible only by associating with it and guiding it into progressive channels* <sup>51</sup>

The LSSP's respected leader Dr. Colvin De Silva, for example, had in 1956 led his party in vigorous opposition to the Sinhala-only language policy of the SLFP. In a passionate speech to parliament during the language bill debate, he made the remarkably prophetic warning that forcing Sinhala on the Tamil population would pave the way for separatism and violence:

*Do you want two languages and one nation or one language two nations? Parity, Mr. Speaker, we believe is the road to the freedom of our nation and the unity of its components. Otherwise two torn little bleeding states may arise of one little state, which has compelled a large section of itself to treason, ready for the imperialists to mop up that which imperialism only recently disgorged.*<sup>52</sup>

But in 1972, the very same Dr Colvin De Silva was the cabinet minister for constitutional affairs in charge of drafting what is now an infamous constitution that set the stage for Tamil separatism. The new constitution re-imposed a unitary state that made no concessions to regional devolution, enshrining Sinhala as the sole official language, and according the 'foremost position' to the Buddhist religion. This is not to suggest that Colvin De Silva or the LSSP had turned communal. But the logic of retaining electoral relevance and parliamentary clout led to their complete de-radicalisation and compelled them towards an ever closer

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<sup>51</sup> Kearney (1973), p.432.

<sup>52</sup> Hansard, Vol 24, Col 1917, 1956.

association with Sinhala nationalism, which had suffused the very idiom of the populist political realm that they inhabited. As Kumari Jayawardena describes:

*in terms of parliamentary politics this often meant the adoption of policies and strategies that would evoke a positive response from the general mass of the people; in effect, of the Sinhala majority.* <sup>53</sup>

James Jupp describes this process within the LSSP in the early 1960s:

*For nearly six years the LSSP leaders resisted the Sinhala Only tide, facing abuse, violence and defection in the process. ... Within the largest of the Marxist parties there was a constant disciplinary problem created by the tension between adhering to a demanding ideological position and functioning within a society which was making that position electorally untenable.* <sup>54</sup>

Consequently, the Marxist left was shoe-horned into increasingly unpleasant compromises that triggered bitter and self-destructive factional disputes within their own parties. They earned the parliamentary left a reputation for opportunism, expediency and a willingness to sacrifice militancy, ideology and principle for power, eventually costing them the support of a new generation of radical minded youth in the 1970s and 1980s, both Sinhala and Tamil.

While these angry young Tamils were mobilised within radical Tamil nationalism and separatism, it is the JVP that came to represent the voice of the angry under-privileged Sinhalese youth.<sup>55</sup> And it is in supplanting the 'old left' parties from the 1970s onwards that the JVP became heir to an established tradition of grass-roots collaboration and cross-pollination between the popular radical idiom of Marxism and Sinhala nationalism. It is for this reason that the JVP represents what is referred to as the 'children of 1956': the populist upsurge in 1956 represented the first coming together of an electoral alliance of Sinhala nationalists and Marxists. The JVP represents the child of that union: a corporeal fusion of Marxism and Sinhala nationalism that exhibits both characteristics in seamless combination. As JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe himself described upon returning to Sri Lanka in early 2004, 'We love this country. Before we became Marxists, we were patriots'.<sup>56</sup> The JVP, he held, 'did not import Marxism in its outdated raw form but infused certain Marxist elements with the indigenous Sinhala Buddhist culture, the result of more than 2000 years of an unbroken civilization that existed'.<sup>57</sup>

## **7. Electoral Expendiency and Institutionalisation**

Although the JVP's social origins and unique ideological history has always contained within it the latent potential for a Sinhala nationalist deviation, the

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<sup>53</sup> Jayawardena (1987).

<sup>54</sup> Jupp (1978), p.103.

<sup>55</sup> Samaraweera (1980).

<sup>56</sup> *Business Today*, 27 February 2004.

<sup>57</sup> *Asian Tribune*, 20 January 2004, Interview of Somawansa Amarasinghe by Walter Jayawardhana.

actual genesis of their extremist stance on the national question was triggered only in the very specific circumstances of 1983, in the wake of a humiliating result in the November 1982 presidential elections, and following the sharp escalation of ethnic tensions and violence after the July 1983 riots. Under their previous general secretary, Lionel Bopage, the JVP had between 1975-83, adopted a tolerant, if not entirely sympathetic attitude to the growing Tamil nationalist movement. They adopted what was in essence, a modified reiteration under Sri Lankan conditions of the well established Leninist-Stalinist position on the right of nations to self-determination.<sup>58</sup> But following the JVP's highly disappointing performance in the presidential elections of September 1982,<sup>59</sup> and the growing Sinhala communal hysteria<sup>60</sup> aroused by the Tamil separatist insurgency in the north, the party was forced to re-evaluate their position in order to retain and expand their popularity in the new polarised circumstances. As Jagath Senaratne describes:

*with the ascendancy of ethnic political mobilisation as the chief motor of political mobilisation by the early 1980s, the JVP was compelled to make a reassessment. It has to make clear to the Sinhala masses where it stood on the ethnic conflict and the secessionist insurgency. It came out in strong opposition to the demand for a separate state, strenuously opposed the interventions from India, and conveniently blamed the UNP government for the entire crisis.*<sup>61</sup>

Following a sharp disagreement within the politbureau in mid-1983, which ultimately led to the resignation and departure of Bopage, the JVP comprehensively revised its entire position on the national question. Whereas the JVP under Bopage had in 1977 accepted 'the right of the Tamil speaking people to self determination', they had, after the onset of civil war in 1983, become 'the most anti-Eelamist group in the country'.<sup>62</sup> Importantly for the ideological evolution of the party a decade later, Chandraprema holds that it was Somawansa Amarasinghe who led the opposition to Bopage within the central committee in 1983, and who successfully argued for the anti-Eelamist line.

*Amarasinghe was also one of the key figures in an intra-party debate on the ethnic issue which took place in mid-1983 before the proscription and went on for some months afterwards. Amarasinghe et al were of the view that the JVP should totally reject its earlier stand on the ethnic issue which held that regional autonomy should be granted to the Tamil people by way of solution. Lionel Bopage and a considerable cross section of the party disagreed and left. Hence Amarasinghe can be identified as one of the main figures behind the JVP's rigid stance against any form of Tamil regional autonomy in the North and East.*<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Stalin (1945).

<sup>59</sup> See accounts of the serious internal repercussions of this election in accounts of the JVP by Gunesekera (1998), and of the Lionel Bopage departure in Chandraprema (1991).

<sup>60</sup> Matthews (1988).

<sup>61</sup> Senaratne (1997), p.118.

<sup>62</sup> Chandraprema (1991), pp 101-102.

<sup>63</sup> Chandraprema (1990), pp.8-9. This suggests in effect that it was Somawansa's miraculous escape in 1990, and the subsequent success of his faction in laying claim to the party in the 1993-95 period that was

In an atmosphere of increasing violence and widespread polarisation, the JVP, which had by then been proscribed, became the party that sought to outbid the government at every turn in its nationalist rhetoric, and that bitterly attacked any hint of peace talks or a compromise solution as a betrayal that would lead to the division of the country.

The JVP's volte face to a radical Sinhala nationalist *deshapremi* (patriotic) organisation in the mid-1980s led them into a suicidal confrontation with the then UNP government over the first such meaningful attempt at a peace process in the form of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord. By their own (belated) admission, the JVP was responsible for killing some 6,000 people between 1987-89 in what was in effect a vast campaign of assassination, strikes and public intimidation. But despite the fact that the JVP was itself ultimately annihilated, their actions had effectively served to wreck the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord.

More than a decade later, the JVP engineered another such shift from Marxism to Sinhala nationalism in the context of another such period of electoral experimentation and in the prelude to another such peace process by a UNP-led government. In 1994-95, and more substantially in 1998-1999, the JVP was in alliance with the NSSP, United Socialist Party and Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) under the platform of a 'New Left Front' to present a JVP member as joint candidate. At the time, despite the fact that the JVP opposed the devolution proposals that the rest of the left accepted, it still consciously projected itself as a socialist party: 'the JVP is fully committed to socialism and those two parties are capitalist', declared their fiery new media secretary Wimal Weerawansa.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout this period, party publications condemned the war, opposed the military, denounced Sinhala nationalism, and campaigned against the imposition of emergency war-time legislation. Weerawansa and Tilvin Silva, who became the two most high profile leaders of the JVP during Somawansa's exile between 1990-2004, frequently made pointed attacks against Sinhala extremist organisations such as the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) and even accused them in their official organ of organising a military coup d'etat.<sup>65</sup>

During this period, the JVP considerably softened or de-emphasised their position towards the 'national question' in the interests of left unity. The New Left Front put forward a joint candidate of the JVP for the December 1999 elections, and their joint manifesto pledged to end the war by 'granting the minorities the right

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ultimately responsible for re-injecting Sinhala nationalism into the JVP in the late-1990s. Subsequent communication from Lionel Bopage suggests that this factor is exaggerated, and that the real proponent of anti-Eelamism in the politbureau was Wijeweera himself. (Thanks to Lionel Bopage and Michael Roberts).

<sup>64</sup> *Sunday Times*, 12 July 1998, 'JVP Plans the Third Come Back'.

<sup>65</sup> *Red Power*, November 1998, 'Military Coup in Procession', *Tamilnet*, 22 October 1998, 'JVP warns of anti-Tamil violence'.

of self-determination in a socialist rule based on democracy<sup>66</sup> – a position completely at odds with what the JVP had advocated before or afterwards. But in the months following the disappointing performance of the JVP candidate in the presidential elections of December 1999, the JVP switched back into Sinhala nationalist mode. By August 2000, the JVP had completely parted company with the New Left Front. Together with a new set of allies in the Sinhala nationalist camp, the JVP placed itself at the forefront of massive street demonstrations against the Kumaratunga government's devolution proposals. They contested the October 2000 and December 2001 elections on an increasingly strident campaign against the looming peace process, and benefited with a surge of electoral support.

TABLE 3: JVP ELECTION VOTE SHARE, 1982-2006 BY DISTRICT

ELECTION TYPE	<u>1982</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2006</u>
	Pr	L	L	Pr	Pl	Pl	L	L
Colombo	3.8%	4.7%	6.9%	4.6%	7.7%	11.1%	7.3%	19.6%
Gampaha	3.4%	3.5%	7.5%	4.3%	7.6%	11.5%	7.5%	12.9%
Kalutara	3.4%	2.1%	6.3%	4.5%	7.0%	10.9%	5.8%	13.4%
Kandy	2.6%	1.8%	3.1%	2.5%	3.6%	6.2%	4.1%	8.2%
Matale	4.4%	2.9%	4.3%	3.7%	4.9%	7.4%	5.7%	8.8%
Nuwara Eliya	2.6%	2.2%	1.8%	1.9%	2.1%	3.5%	3.0%	6.8%
Galle	5.0%	4.3%	8.4%	5.3%	7.9%	11.4%	7.2%	11.1%
Matara	6.6%	5.6%	11.8%	6.9%	9.8%	13.5%	8.3%	13.8%
Hambantota	14.6%	12.0%	20.7%	13.3%	15.2%	21.2%	20.5%	23.4%
Jaffna	1.4%			0.4%	0.1%	0.1%		
Vanni	3.2%			0.8%	0.5%	0.7%		
Batticaloa	1.1%			0.2%	0.2%	0.1%		
Digamadulla (Amparai)	4.8%			1.5%	2.1%	3.4%	7.5%	7.5%
Trincomalee	5.8%			1.8%	2.5%	3.8%		5.1%
Kurunegala	3.5%	3.2%	4.3%	3.7%	5.4%	8.1%	5.2%	10.3%
Puttalam	3.2%	1.2%	3.8%	2.9%	3.9%	6.2%	3.1%	7.8%
Anuradhapura	5.9%	3.6%	4.9%	4.1%	6.1%	11.1%	6.5%	14.5%
Polonnaruwa	7.7%	4.8%	5.9%	4.7%	6.3%	10.4%	7.8%	11.7%
Badulla	3.2%	3.7%	3.9%	3.3%	4.5%	7.2%	6.0%	8.6%
Monaragala	6.9%	5.7%	7.0%	5.8%	7.1%	11.7%	8.4%	13.4%
Ratnapura	3.3%	2.6%	4.3%	3.4%	4.6%	8.2%	5.7%	9.0%
<u>Kegalle</u>	<u>4.0%</u>	<u>2.7%</u>	<u>4.5%</u>	<u>3.7%</u>	<u>5.4%</u>	<u>8.7%</u>	<u>6.0%</u>	<u>9.9%</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4.2%</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>6.0%</b>	<b>9.1%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>11.9%</b>

Source: Sri Lanka Dept. of Elections. Pr=Presidential L=local government; Pl=Parliamentary.

Thus by looking at the actual circumstances of the JVP's programmatic switch from class to nation on two occasions, there are plausible grounds to argue that these have in reality occurred in the context of electoral consolidation, and

<sup>66</sup> Leaflet issued by the JVP, NSSP, MULF, NLA, 11 November 1999, reprinted in Law and Society Trust (2000), *Presidential Election 1999. People's Choice? A Report of the Presidential Election of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Law and Society Trust., Appendix 9.

perhaps (to a smaller extent), even due to tactical considerations of electoral strategy. Within six months of two separate disappointing elections, first in October 1982, and later in December 1999, the JVP had swung towards a far more vigorous and aggressive Sinhala nationalist posture. The history of their subsequent election performance after 2000 shows that this was actually a successful strategy that increased their vote share to a new level.

Table 3 shows that the JVP had, by 1999, only succeeded in restoring their vote share of 1982, such that the real (measurable) expansion in their growth beyond this level (from 4.1% to 9.1%) occurred in the period between December 1999 – December 2001, when they reoriented themselves towards a far more strident anti-devolution, anti-peace process, Sinhala nationalist platform.

But beyond the relatively short time horizon involved in planning electoral strategy and tactics, the JVP's fluid manipulation of their dual identities also represents a longer term internal transformation. Effectively, the JVP has since its inception, undergone a slow, uneven, and non-linear transformation from an insurrectionary communist party to a parliamentary Sinhala nationalist party.<sup>67</sup> This is not to say that the shift is absolute or complete: for elements of Sinhala nationalism have been present in the JVP since its founding, just as its Marxism has not and will likely not completely disappear. The lurch to Sinhala nationalism during the 1983-85 period, and again during the 2000-2001 period did indeed have short-term significance, but must be understood as an episode in their long-term reformulation as a non-insurrectionary parliamentary force, and as an element of their quest for a stable social base upon which to base their parliamentary ambitions. This process is broadly cognate (but under different circumstances) with a similar process that the 'old left' underwent in the years after 1956 when they were accused of compromising with communalism for electoral reasons. The JVP spent much of the 1977-83, and 1994-2000 period experimenting with a fairly neutral line on the national question, just as the old left did in the 1956-64 period. Over 1998-1999, they had allied with leftist groups such as the NSSP and modified their position on self-determination - but this appeared to have hurt them electorally in the 2000 presidential elections, where they scored marginally lower than in their standalone performance in the local elections between 1997-99.

As with the CP and LSSP between the 1940s-60s, the JVP has gone from being a proponent of armed struggle and of the revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois democracy to being a fierce critic of those (such as the LTTE) engaged in armed struggle, and a party of exemplary and conscientious parliamentarians. They have in short, transformed themselves from those devoted to overthrowing the system from the outside, to those devoted to cleansing and preserving it from the inside.

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<sup>67</sup> I am grateful to Dr. A.P. Shantasiri of Ruhuna University for his insights on this issue.

## 8. Class and Nation

The gradual tendency of Sri Lanka's Marxist parties to swing from class to nationalism in the course of their de-radicalisation and electoral habilitation does not imply that class is irrelevant, either as a category for political mobilisation or ideo-political analysis. Indeed, I would contend that the mass appeal of Sinhala nationalism lies in the fact that it is fundamentally rooted in the dynamics of class. This is not to say that the JVP can be easily understood as a simple class phenomenon, and neither is it the case that the JVP can be reduced to any one class, for the steady increase in their electoral support during 1994-2004 clearly signifies their expanding appeal among different social groups.

This is also not to equate the popularity of the JVP with the prevalence of poverty in the abstract sense, for the majority of those officially classified as 'the poor' have not voted for the JVP. In other words, I suggest that both in terms of class and poverty, it is necessary to situate the JVP not by studying class in itself, or the extent of the deprivation of their supporters per se – but of how the JVP's support bases are located and have evolved with respect to the class structure as a whole. As a sociological phenomenon, the JVP's support base are frequently described as the 'children of 1956': that is, they comprise the educated rural Sinhala Buddhist population of poorer backgrounds who are the social products of the expansion of free Sinhala medium secondary and university education. They came of age in the aftermath of the Sinhala nationalist upsurge in 1956, were nurtured in the vernacular cultural renaissance of the time and absorbed the powerful Marxist and Sinhala nationalist anti-systemic ideo-political currents that it unleashed.

At the time of the JVP's 1971 uprising, the social background of the 10,192 surrendered and captured insurgents were recorded in considerable detail by the authorities, and were later published in a paper by Gananath Obeyesekere.<sup>68</sup> The figures revealed by Obeyesekere are remarkable not only for the extent to which they provide a unique set of data on a large number of participants in a revolutionary movement, but for the degree of homogeneity of this group. Of those in custody, 98% were Sinhalese, 95% Sinhala-Buddhist, 89% were aged under 30, and 92% were the children of farmers, labourers, plantation workers or the low grades of government service, and 86% had attended rural secondary schools.<sup>69</sup> The JVP's first insurgency can as such, be quite accurately summarised

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<sup>68</sup> Obeyesekere (1974). I have modified the descriptive statistics presented here so that it varies slightly from those computed by Obeyesekere. The major difference is that I exclude the category of 'unspecified' from calculation of percentages whereas Obeyesekere does not. For example, when I report that 95% of those in custody were Sinhala-Buddhist, I mean in reality that 95% of those that reported their ethnicity were Sinhala Buddhist.

<sup>69</sup> There are of course evident risks in using such data, the most serious of which is the possibility that it might over-represent the social categories presumed to be guilty by the police, and who were hence more actively sought out by them for capture and arrest. If the police searched out young, educated, unemployed Sinhala Buddhists for arrest, then they would clearly be over-represented in the sample. This concern is partly mitigated by the fact that only 44% of the total 10,192 were actually arrested while 56% had surrendered themselves.

as a movement of secondary school educated, Sinhala-Buddhist youth of under-privileged rural backgrounds. In a very large number of cases, they were the children of small or middle level farmers from areas that were geographically, economically and psychologically very peripheral to the capital Colombo. As David Rampton describes, the JVP operates within a context characterised by a 'vast disparity perceived between elites and masses, the capital and the provinces, the urban and the rural, centre and periphery.'<sup>70</sup>

It is within these circumstances of enduring economic, social, political and regional exclusion, reproduced through different generations of development policies, that Sinhala nationalism finds expression as a positional stance of anti-elite protest. In post-colonial Sri Lanka, where the ruling economic and political elite has been characterised by conspicuous cultural westernisation, the articulation of class consciousness and hostility by the lower elements of this order seeking upward mobility has constantly reverted to an assertion of nativist authenticity and Sinhala nationalism. This is not to say that the dividing lines between the elite and mass are static, stable, or homogenous, for the internal differentiation of the 'mass' is a critical factor in the enduring appeal of Sinhala nationalism, and its continuous re-emergence in the political sphere. Neither are these divisions based on insurmountable ascriptive categories, for it occurs in a context of perceived expectation of social mobility, and particularly, upward inter-generational mobility.

The critical link between class and nationalism is provided by the social democratic state, and to the enduring and critical relevance of the state from late-colonial times in promoting the class transition of upwardly mobile rural communities. The materiality of nationalism is thus intimately connected to the fact that the state is the largest material benefactor in society; and that Sinhala nationalism is an ideology that connects the people to the state. By providing education and welfare, protecting and promoting domestic entrepreneurs, and generating direct employment opportunities, the social democratic state became the vehicle by which the lives of the rural poor could be completely and permanently transformed.

Sri Lanka's social democratic state, which went through a long phase of expansion from the 1940s-70s, has since the 1980s experienced atrophy and compression. Since the early 1990s, the only part of the state that has consistently grown has been the military. The war has in effect, preserved the social democratic state and many of the functions of poverty reduction and social mobility that it earlier performed. Considering that many aspects of social policy have been encroached upon by NGOs and aid donors during this period, there has been an erosion of the public service component of the state and a proportional increase in the military role of the state. In rural (Sinhalese) Sri Lanka, the military performs an important function in employment provision to the collapsing small-holder rural economy. In related research, I argue that the military has become the single largest employer of rural youth, accounting for as many as half of all cash-paying

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<sup>70</sup> Rampton (2003).

jobs in some areas. The preservation of the militarised social democratic state is thus one of the central impulses that continues to provoke Sinhala nationalism during the 1990s, and provides the ideological and social context within which the JVP has re-emerged into electoral relevance.

That is to say, Sinhala nationalism forms part of the socio-political assertion of a certain segment of the 'mass' for whom nationalism is effectively an ideological expression of their material claims upon the social democratic state. Amidst the neo-liberal juggernaut of market de-regulation, privatization and the systematic neglect and under-funding of the state sector for over two decades, the re-assertion of Sinhala nationalism by a party of populist Marxism, the dogged opposition to the devolution of the state's powers, and the widespread appeal of an anti-globalisation ideology all points in the same direction. They characterise the desperate strategies of those close to the bottom of the ladder to preserve and protect the social democratic state, in which lies their only realistic chance of emerging from a life of poverty and of improving their life chances for themselves and their next generation.

The JVP's Sinhala nationalism is thus not necessarily a deviation from mobilisation on a class basis – but is in many ways a reversion to class mobilisation through more successful means. They continued to mobilise class-based grievances, but did so not by appealing systematically to class at all, or by appealing to the working class as such, or even to the most depressed or disadvantaged groups. Instead they successfully tapped into the tremendous vats of discontent from a variety of under-privileged groups in Sinhalese society for whom the preservation of the shrinking social democratic state is a matter of desperate urgency. Lacking independent wealth, they continue to depend on state provision of education, health and employment to sustain themselves and to maintain their standard of living. And it is through the ideological apparatus of Sinhala nationalism that opposition to the diminution of the state – whether through market reform or devolution – emerges conflated into the political realm. In other words, the JVP has succeeded where other Marxists have failed, by mobilising class through the language of the nation. Similarly, they have successfully projected themselves as the defenders of the nation by presenting themselves in the garb of anti-systemic radicals authentically rooted in class politics.

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