

Sri Lanka: Can the Frontline Socialist Party Revive the Left?

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More than 5,000 people packed Colombo's Sugathadasa stadium for the inaugural conference of the Peratugami Samajawadi Pakshaya (Frontline Socialist Party - FSP) on 9 April 2012. Most were members and sympathisers of this new Left party - a breakaway from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples' Liberation Front - JVP); but many representatives of other radical Left parties, Left intellectuals, and progressive social activists were also in attendance. The emergence and consolidation of the FSP is an important and hopeful development for the revival of peoples' movements in Sri Lanka in the post-war era, following decades of retreat of the labour and left movements.

Underlining the internationalism of the new party, and its understanding of the relationship between national and global struggles against capitalism, the Convention was dominated by speeches and messages from international guests [\[1\]](#) and representatives of FSP branches in England, France and Italy. Greetings were also delivered by Left groups within Sri Lanka, mainly of Trotskyist and Maoist lineage, including Vickramabahu Karunarathne on behalf of the Nava Sama Samaja Party.

A 'Party for Us' announced the new party in a poster and social media campaign in the weeks leading up to the Convention, showcasing images of the poor and exploited - of different classes, occupations and ethnicities, who are unrepresented in the present political system.

Currently, the working class movement is passive and its traditional leadership are unwilling to challenge the government on the unbearable cost of living and the pillaging of workers savings to service government debt and stimulate the stock market. The number of strikes and workers on strike has sharply declined to only 8 recorded strikes in 2009, with only 5,320 workers involved in contrast to 52 strikes of over 200,000 workers in 2006.

The governmental Left is palpably weaker in policy influence than in previous coalitions and unable to even moderate the authoritarian capitalism of the Rajapakse government. The organised Left outside the government has declined numerically and in social weight and is struggling to regenerate itself. While there have been some significant social struggles of free trade zone workers, university teachers, and fisher-folk in the past year, these have been short-lived episodes with only partial defensive gains at best.

Abductions overshadow Convention

The excitement of an impressively organised and staged launch was overshadowed by the abduction of two leading members of the new party on the eve of its Convention; in a transparent attempt to sabotage the event and to sow disarray and confusion in its ranks.

Premakumar Gunarathnam and Dimuthu Attygala were abducted in two separate incidents within hours of each other, following a pre-Convention meeting of the leadership on 7 April. Their party was unequivocal in holding the state responsible for the abductions and in expressing the widespread sentiment that it was a prelude to their extra-judicial killing, as has been the despicable trend in Sri Lanka.

Even the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) - which unsurprisingly has had a hostile relationship with its former comrades - was forthright in blaming the Rajapakse regime for the 'disappearance' of Gunarathnam and Attygala and in expressing the widespread lack of confidence in the investigative process. "Since the government was involved in murders, abductions, disappearances and suppressions of opposition political activists", said JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Dissanayake, "the [law enforcement agencies] were helpless." [2]

In fact, since October 2011 alone, around 60 individuals have been abducted or 'disappeared' [3], in so-called 'white van' incidents (after the colour and favoured vehicle of the perpetrators). Most of them are not of Tamil origin, unlike during the war, but rather from the Sinhala, Muslim and the indigenous peoples (Wanniyaletto) communities.

However, among them are two supporters of the new party of Tamil origin, Lalith Weeraraj and Kugan Murugandan. Both activists were abducted on 9 December 2011 in Jaffna where they were campaigning for justice with family members of Tamils who have been 'disappeared' or reported missing during the last stages of the war. [4] Weeraraj and Murugandan's whereabouts and physical safety remain uncertain; and international solidarity for their release must be redoubled.

It is widely believed that most of these abductions are organised by military/paramilitary/ex-military units under the direction of the all-powerful Defence Secretary and brother to the President, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, to dispose of those believed to be of threat or inconvenience to the regime, or whom they are unable to detain through judicial process for lack of evidence.

Enforced Disappearances

The practice of 'enforced disappearances' has been prevalent in all political regimes and have targeted both Sinhala and Tamils: the former mainly during the JVP insurrection between 1987 and 1990 and the latter mainly during the 26 year civil war that ended in May 2009.

Covert 'counter-terrorist' operations of this nature were revived following the 2005 election to the presidency of Mahinda Rajapakse; and the reorganisation of the state security apparatus by Gotabhaya Rajapakse - a former officer in the Sri Lanka Army who saw active duty in the brutal suppression of the Sinhala youth rebellion in the late 1980s.

In an unprecedented development, Gunarathnam and Attygala were both released from captivity on 10 April. Their safe release is only due to the broad and diverse political coalition that protested against their abduction within Sri Lanka, the diplomatic pressure of the Australian government, and an international solidarity campaign that was swiftly organised including through the Fourth International.

The government denied responsibility for their abduction and has bizarrely sought to link Gunarathnam – who is of Tamil ethnicity – to the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and to highlight his Australian nationality and use of an alias to enter Sri Lanka.

This is really ludicrous because the JVP, of which Gunarathnam (nom de guerre ‘Kumara Mahattaya’) was an activist during its second insurrection and later leading member until last year’s split, has historically been implacably opposed to the Tamil armed struggle and indeed vocally supported the military campaign of the present and past governments.

Further, as an underground leader of the post-second insurrection JVP, and considering that his elder brother Ranjitham (the only Tamil-origin central committee member of the JVP during the late 1980s) was killed by state security forces, it is unsurprising that he would secure residence abroad for himself, and travel under an adopted name for his own protection.

Gunarathnam was promptly deported to Sydney where his wife and children live. Soon after his arrival he addressed a media conference organised by his party in Sri Lanka via the internet; and described how he had been tortured and sexually assaulted during his captivity. [5] He reaffirmed his political commitment to the struggle for socialism and to the new party.

Dimuthu Attygala (alias ‘Krishanthi’) is the best known woman leader of the FSP, and was formerly a member of the politburo of the JVP. Her area of responsibility was the women’s wing of the JVP (Socialist Women’s Union); and in the new party she has been assigned coordination of its international relations in addition to its women’s front organisation (‘Women’s Movement for Freedom’).

Recounting her ordeal in a media conference organised by the FSP following her release on 10 April, Attygala believes she was abducted to extract information on the new party’s international connections and particularly to discover its political and financial network. [6]

Her captors persistently questioned her as to whether the FSP had links with pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora organisations. She has no doubt that she was abducted by state security personnel and detained at a military camp during her interrogation.

Splits within JVP

Late last year the media began carrying reports of a major split within the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has been Sri Lanka’s largest Left party (although many Sri Lankan leftists object to characterising it as socialist because of its Sinhala nationalist stance on the Tamil national question).

The JVP’s roots are in the Maoist Ceylon Communist Party in the late 1960s and its membership and supporters are drawn from the Sinhala rural and semi-urban petty-bourgeoisie. Its central leader, Rohana Wijeweera, was expelled from the CCP-Peking and formed his own secretive organisation which led two armed insurrections against the Sri Lankan state in 1971 and later in 1987, which were brutally crushed with the loss of tens of thousands of young lives. In the second insurrection, all but one member of its leadership was physically eliminated.

In the early 1990s, the JVP revived its organisation and entered electoral politics. As the bourgeois populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party adopted the neoliberal policies of the right-wing United National Party after forming a new government in 1994, the JVP became the beneficiary of social and political discontent and a pole of attraction to radical students and young workers. Its parliamentary caucus

grew from 1 member in 1994, to 10 in 2000 and 16 in 2001, and peaked at 39 (in the 225 seat legislature) in 2004. It also made significant gains among organised workers especially in the state and private sector, often through poaching members from rival unions; while also dominating politics in universities through its militant student unions which were not averse to using violence and ragging to exert its authority over the administration and students alike.

However, the JVP faced two ways: it presented itself as an anti-imperialist and an anti-capitalist force struggling for socialist revolution in Sri Lanka, while simultaneously projecting itself as a patriotic nationalist organisation rooted in Sinhala Buddhist culture and committed to the preservation of the unity and territorial integrity of the country.

As former general-secretary of the JVP, Lionel Bopage – who also pushed in the late 70s and early 80s for his party to recognise the existence of Tamil national oppression and to support the Tamil struggle for equality and justice – commented: “Since the late 1990s the JVP not only supported the chauvinist verbal onslaught against the Tamil people but also became an active collaborator in the brutal repression carried out by the state against the Tamil people. Thus, it has to bear some responsibility for the socio-cultural and economic outcomes that the working people of the island are experiencing today. For dividing the people by clouding its consciousness, the JVP, in particular its nationalist bloc used chauvinist and fundamentalist slogans to the maximum effect. The JVP camouflaged its ultra nationalist stance with socialist phraseology”. [7]

The JVP have been virulently opposed to any proposals for power-sharing with the Tamil nation. It was a bitter critic of the draft 2000 Constitution, the political proposals debated during the Cease-Fire Agreement (between 2002 and 2005), and withdrew from the All-Party Representative Committee process on constitutional reforms. It even continues to oppose the 13th Amendment to the Constitution that introduced limited devolution of powers to the regions, despite contesting elections for and being represented in those provincial councils.

The JVP were vocal supporters of the war and of the use of military force to suppress the LTTE. In their view, the division of the island through creation of an independent Tamil homeland (‘Tamil Eelam’) would benefit US imperialism and Indian ‘expansionism’ in the region. The logical political conclusion of this perspective was to form alliances with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government that was prosecuting the war.

Thus, the JVP – like the ‘Old Left’ Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Communist Party of Sri Lanka decades before it – succumbed to the pressure of ‘coalition politics’ (popular frontism) by aligning itself with the SLFP, first by joining the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga government in 2004, and later by vigorously supporting the election of her successor Mahinda Rajapakse in 2005.

As the flawed ‘peace process’ and full-blown war broke out after August 2006, the JVP mobilised Sinhala society in warmongering. The government even arranged for the JVP parliamentarian Wimal Weerawansa to regularly address soldiers at the battle-front, in a morale-boosting exercise.

This twin policy of collaborating with the neoliberal governments of Kumaratunga and Rajapakse as well as its non-differentiation from the Sinhala chauvinist campaign against Tamil rights sparked an internal debate within the JVP on its revolutionary socialist identity.

Chauvinist split in 2008

Hidden from public view, the different viewpoints were partially revealed when the camp around the Sinhala chauvinist Weerawansa broke with the party and joined the Rajapakse coalition in April

2008, along with 10 other JVP parliamentarians. The JVP lost its most charismatic public speaker along with a front organisation of Buddhist monks and laity that was in the vanguard of agitation against political resolution of the national question.

At the time, Weerawansa revealed that there was a group within the party that wanted it to rethink its political positions, including on the Tamil question, and warned darkly of 'Trotskyist' deviations.

This was clearly an exodus of the Sinhala nationalist bloc within the JVP. It allowed the JVP to reassert its political independence from the Rajapakse regime. In fact, soon after the end of the war in mid-2009, the JVP in an about-turn began demanding the end of emergency rule, the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, speedy rehabilitation and release of LTTE combatants and Tamil political prisoners, and for respect for democratic and human rights. It also repositioned itself as a bitter critic of the Rajapakse regime but without any self-criticism of its own past political record of support.

The debate continued within the JVP as a group of dissidents attempted to win the traditional leadership of the party over. It was only in August 2011, when it became clear to the dissidents that there was no democratic space for them within the JVP that they took the decisive step of forming a public faction known as the Jana Aragala Vyaparaya (Movement for Peoples Struggle - MPS).

The dissidents began at a disadvantage. They were mainly second generation leaders recruited in the student movement in the course of the 1990s for e.g. Pubudu Jagoda ('Lasith'), Chameera Koswatta, Waruna Deepthi Rajapaksa, Duminda Nagamuwa and others. The older members such as Senadheera Gunatilleke ('Opatha') were only known within the party and unknown to the general public as the JVP has generally projected its parliamentarians as its public spokespersons complemented by its paramount leader Somawansa Amarasinghe and its General Secretary Tilvin Silva as its ideologues. One of the MPS' criticisms of the JVP is that its leaders were created through their entry into elected bodies such as parliament, and not through struggles.

The mainstream media was swift to describe the dissidents as 'extremists' and hint that they represented a throwback to the JVP's armed adventurism. The identity of one of their key leaders, Premakumar Gunarathnam, was leaked to the media; and his Tamil ethnicity was used to throw mud at the new formation, manifesting Sri Lanka's racist political culture.

However, the MPS was able to win the loyalty of most of the bureaus of the JVP (for e.g. student, education, publications etc.), as well as the majority of its district structures aside from Anuradhapura, Hambantota and Kurunegala. Also, many of the JVP's overseas members, excepting perhaps in Japan, have also joined the new formation.

The new party is evidently well-funded in comparison to other Left parties. It has several full-timers and an efficient and disciplined organisational structure. It is supporting the Janarala newspaper (edited by the team that previously published the pro-JVP Irida Lanka weekly). It has organised several public events in the last few months to consolidate its membership and explain its differences with the JVP. It is able to mount posters island-wide and within the space of a few hours, such as immediately following the recent abduction of its leaders. Like the JVP it is able to count on the selflessness and self-sacrifice of its cadres and sympathisers. Its overseas committees are also critical to its income and in developing relations with fraternal organisations abroad.

The JVP has the support of 3 of the 4 parliamentarians returned in 2010; only Ajith Kumara representing Galle district has joined the FSP. It also has retained the support of its trade unions and their membership. However, its peasant front leader (and former member of parliament) S. K. Subasinghe has joined with the dissidents. The JVP has also secured most of its assets including

headquarters and many district offices.

Partial Break with JVP

Initially, the MPS aimed to gain leadership of the JVP and therefore it has presented itself as the authentic or genuine inheritors of the legacy of Rohana Wijeweera. So, last November on Wijeweera's death anniversary that is marked as 'Heroes Day', there were two commemorations of JVP martyrs (Il Maha Viru Samaruwa) by the different factions.

Although it has engaged in self-criticism of its past (that was distributed in book form at the inaugural convention), the new party has focused its critique on the post-2004 record of the JVP, particularly its support for the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Therefore, it is still unable to confront the adventurism of the JVP's two abortive 'revolutions', as well as the break from Marxism represented by Wijeweera's position that the Tamil plantation proletariat (of recent Indian origin) constituted a fifth column of Indian expansionism; and his opposition to the Tamil liberation struggle.

The split has already had a salutary effect on the JVP. In January 2010, it supported the presidential campaign of former army commander Sarath Fonseka, also backed by the United National Party and the Tamil National Alliance, and formed a motley electoral front with him and his supporters (ranging from disgruntled UNPers and SLFPers to military personnel) called the Democratic National Alliance (DNA). This alliance is now dead as the JVP has accepted that it was a mistake to ally itself with Fonseka and claims that it will not enter into coalition agreements with pro-capitalist parties in future. Also, the JVP has become more strident in its criticism of the militarisation of the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces of the island and in highlighting abuses of democratic and human rights in those regions.

While the FSP is critical of the JVP's position on the Tamil national question, its own perspective is still vague and ambiguous. It recognises the existence of multiple nationalities in Sri Lanka, but does not advocate the right to self-determination for oppressed nationalities. In fact its leaders have said that they oppose "separatism and federalism" and will seek to convince Tamils to "accept a solution which ensures equality and democracy to them". [8]

We can agree that the existing 13th Amendment is not a solution to the national question and that we need to transcend capitalism to attack the roots of national oppression. However, as a beginning, does the FSP accept the need for its full implementation including the controversial exercise of powers over land allocation and police powers by provincial governments? And, will it join the campaign for "13+", that is, for power-sharing with Tamils and other minorities and self-government in the North and East? This is a thorny issue for the FSP partly because the JVP opposed the 13th Amendment and killed leftists who (critically) supported the Indo-Lanka Accord that introduced the constitutional reform during its second insurrection.

It is commendable that the MPS/FSP has not yielded to the prevailing Sinhala nationalist ethos and has publicly declared that it is engaged in dialogue with ex-LTTE combatants and willing to accept them into its ranks. The government has unleashed a ferocious propaganda campaign against it for daring to forge unity between the Sinhala and Tamil oppressed and to overcome the mutual distrust and suspicion that has polarised the exploited and marginalised of both peoples. However, the new party cannot take cover under the threadbare position of the JVP that Tamils and other minorities must await 'socialism' for the satisfaction of their democratic demands.

There also needs to be clarity on whether we mean the same thing by 'socialism' and the road to

socialism. What is the relationship between democracy and socialism? How do we entrench and assimilate democratic practices within our own organisations and mass organisations? How should socialists work within the workers movement when it is divided on party political lines? What is the relationship between struggles against national oppression and struggles for socialism?

For instance, the FSP's inaugural convention appears to be modelled on those of the JVP which are rallies of the faithful and not delegate-based conferences where open debate takes place and the leadership is transparently elected. Instead, the new leadership (an 18 member central committee) of the FSP was announced at the Convention, having apparently been pre-selected by an inner core membership. Subsequently, the central committee has elected Senadheera Gunatilleke as its general secretary and G. Kularatne as its organising secretary among its 9 member political council that also includes Premakumar Gunarathnam and Dimuthu Attygala.

It is to the credit of the Frontline Socialist Party that since its inception, it has been open to collaborate and dialogue with other political traditions. This sharp break from the political practice of the JVP cannot be over-stated. The JVP has always been a sectarian party that placed its self-interest over those of the broader movement. It avoids engagement with the radical Left and is unable to collaborate on joint campaigns even in the trade union and social movement. The JVP only considers itself to be the genuine party of the Left. This has isolated it and contributed to its political stagnation.

In contrast, the comrades of the FSP understand that the working class is not homogeneous and that it will have diverse political tendencies. Therefore the FSP recognises that there has to be a plurality of the Left in the revolutionary movement and that the movement as a whole can only advance through grasping and channelling the various experiences of its constituents.

The FSP has adopted the perspective that it does not claim to have all the answers and neither does it claim to have had a spotless past. In that spirit it has welcomed the participation of other groups in its Movement for Peoples Struggle which it intends to continue as a broad front while building its own party. This enlightened approach of the comrades of the FSP and the respectful manner in which it has been in dialogue with the radical Left including Trotskyist groups such as the NSSP, despite the hostility of the JVP towards this political tradition, is what is most encouraging in what are bleak and unfavourable times.

In addition to common campaigns such as around disappearances and abductions, the current political dialogue should also take place at the base of the radical Left and not be confined to its leadership in Colombo. The FSP could open the pages of its newspaper, not only to promote greater understanding within the Left, but also to overcome the crisis of credibility of socialist ideas and politics. The NSSP has proposed to the FSP that it should jointly organise its May Day celebration this year with other Left parties and trade unions. Unitary initiatives such as these can be decisive steps towards greater convergence on the Left and inspire hope among those in struggle today and tomorrow.

P.S.

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Footnotes

- [1] The international guests included Clare Doyle of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI); Khalid Mehmood of the CWI-affiliated Socialist Movement Pakistan; a leader of Rifondazione Comunista (Party of Communist Re-foundation) in Italy; a representative of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL); and a leftist from Belarus.
- [2] "Gunaratnam affair: JVP too points finger at govt.", The Island, 9 April 2011,
http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=49329
- [3] "Horrible rise of disappearances in post-war Sri Lanka continues unabated", 5 April 2012, groundviews.org,
<http://groundviews.org/2012/04/05/horrible-rise-of-disappearances-in-post-war-sri-lanka-continues-unabated/>
- [4] "Two activists missing in Jaffna", BBC Sinhala.Com, 10 December 2011,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2011/12/111210_jvprotest.shtml
- [5] "Man returns after Sri Lanka Ordeal", News on ABC, 11 April 2012,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PjOKZizfkW&feature=plcp&context=C453aa8eVDvjVQa1PpcFNYngEH-BOKtxl6RH6gTmeNHiXvNR3EiZA=>
- [6] 'We were White Vanned', Daily Mirror, 11 April 2012,
<http://www.srilankabrief.org/2012/04/we-were-white-vanned-dimuthu-Attygala.html#more>
- [7] Lionel Bopage, "Sinusoidal nature of the JVP Policy on the National Question", groundviews.org, 26 July 2009,
<http://groundviews.org/2009/07/26/sinusoidal-nature-of-the-jvp-policy-on-the-national-question/>
- [8] "There is a grave need for a leftist movement", Daily Mirror, 6 October 2011,
<http://print.dailymirror.lk/images/WEFG.jpg>