

# **Sri Lanka. November Heroes – What about accountability?**

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**As the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) commemorates its 35<sup>th</sup> “November Heroes” day this year, it finds itself having ascended to the highest political office in the land after its candidate won the recent Presidential election. The commemoration is held to remember those who died in the 1987-89 southern insurrection including the JVP’s founder Rohana Wijeweera, who was captured by the military in November 1989, tortured and executed. He joined tens of thousands of individuals who were extrajudicially executed by the State. Those whose whereabouts were not established remain as victims of enforced disappearance.**

The JVP-led National People’s Power (NPP) alliance is expected to win the general election next week. To borrow a cliché from Hollywood, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ and when it comes to the search for justice for the tens of thousands of victims of atrocity crimes committed by the Sri Lankan State, the NPP most definitely has a great responsibility to deliver now that they hold executive office.

The 1971 JVP insurrection which lasted a mere five weeks resulted in over 12,000 enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by the then SLFP Government. That number is in the range of 60,000-100,000 for the period 1987-89 during the second JVP insurrection during the UNP administration. The Government’s own commissions of inquiry looking into this period have recorded over 46,000 disappearances. The number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in the northern theatre of violence between 1983 and 2009 also ranges in the tens of thousands.

The new administration of President Dissanayake last month informed the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), that it rejects international efforts to deliver justice for the victims of State atrocities. After years of failure to deliver a credible internal mechanism for accountability, in 2021, the HRC established a mechanism within the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights “to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka”.

This mechanism has a mandate to preserve evidence of atrocity crimes which can include the JVP insurrections. It has been operational for the last four years and according to a report presented to the HRC in September this repository “comprises 96,215 items and contains over 470 different sources, including information provided by more than 220 witnesses and 250 organisations, including international and multilateral organisations.” Whether the Sri Lankan Government likes it or not or whether it accepts or rejects this mechanism, international efforts towards accountability are moving ahead.

The question now would be whether the current administration led by the JVP would be part of these

efforts to find justice and accountability for the crimes. As a party that had suffered some of the worst political violence in recent history, one would generally expect the JVP and the NPP to be on the right side of this debate. However, if its recent policies, especially the Statements made in Geneva are anything to go by, this does not seem to be the case. The 'November Heroes' commemoration will be nothing short of a hypocritical lie if the current administration doesn't change course and get on a path that would hold the State responsible for the crimes committed against its citizens.

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