

# Mainstreaming Radical Politics in Sri Lanka: The case of JVP post-1977

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## **Abstract**

*This article provides a critical understanding of dynamics behind the roles of the People's Liberation Front (JVP) in post-1977 Sri Lankan politics. Having suffered a severe setback in the early 1970s, the JVP transformed itself into a significant force in electoral politics that eventually brought the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) to power. This article explains the transformation by examining the radical political setting and mapping out the actors and various movements which allowed the JVP to emerge as a dominant player within the hegemonic political mainstream in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it also highlights the structural changes in JVP politics and its challenges for future consolidation.*

## **Introduction**

The 1977 general election marked a major turning point in the history of post-colonial Sri Lanka. While the landslide victory of the United National Party (UNP) was the most important highlight of the election results, the shocking defeat for the old leftist parties was equally important. Both the victory of the UNP and the defeat of the left were symbolic. The left's electoral defeat was soon followed by the introduction of new macro-economic policy framework under the UNP's rule, which replaced protective economic policy framework that was endorsed by the Left.<sup>1</sup> Ironically enough, as if to dig its own grave, the same UNP government helped People's Liberation Front (JVP), which became a formidable threat to the smooth implementation of the new economic policies, to re-enter into the political mainstream by way of freeing its leadership from the prison. The JVP leadership had been put behind bars by the previous regime following the failed armed insurgency in 1971.

Recovered from the setback of 1971, the JVP became an important player in the political history of the post-1977 period, and organised a bloody armed insurgency that lasted from 1987-1989 and virtually brought the entire Sinhala-Buddhist south into a civil war. Although the insurgency was brutally suppressed and the entire JVP leadership – not to mention thousands of its activists – was eliminated, political stability of the UNP regime had been seriously damaged as a result of the confrontation. The JVP, however, again recovered, transforming itself under an entirely a new leadership to become a formidable force in electoral politics. Ultimately, it was decisive in bringing into power the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), led by Mahinda Rajapaksha, now the current president.

This essay attempts to explain the central and extremely dynamic role played by the JVP in post-1977 politics. It locates the JVP in the larger context of a radical political and ideological setting. It specifically aims to locate the state of the JVP following its transformation into a component of the hegemonic political mainstream in the early 2000s and consequent internal split of 2008. By doing so, the essay intends to shed light on post-2008 developments within the JVP.

The essay consists of three parts. Part I maps the radical post-1977 political setting. It not only describes the major players of radical politics such as the old left and the JVP, but also attempts to incorporate unconventional elements into the analysis, such as the *Jathika Chintanaya* movement and, what I call, the avant-garde left movement. Part II unravels the dynamics of a post-1977 JVP. It aims to explain how the JVP recovered from the major setback it faced following the failed insurgencies of 1971 and 1987-89, and how it emerged as a dominant player within the hegemonic political mainstream in the early 2000s. Part III attempts to analyse structural changes in JVP politics in the context of its mainstreaming. It also highlights the challenges it faces in the post-2008 recovery process being undertaken up to now.

### **Part I. Decline of the old left and the rise of JVP in the post-1977 Sinhala-Buddhist south**

Release of the JVP leadership from prison was a direct result of the general election victory of the UNP in 1977. In 1971, insurgents were charged at a special tribunal – the Criminal Justice Commission – set up by a special parliamentary act. With the repeal of the Criminal Justice Commission Act by the UNP government, the convicts were automatically freed (Alles, 2001: 253).

Although the old left lost all of the parliamentary seats, it remained on the political scene – although, its influence was fast diminishing. There were two main factors that helped it

remain on the scene. The first was its involvement in the trade union sector. Although trade union militancy had severely been debilitated following the 1980 general strike<sup>2</sup>, collective bargaining still had an important role to play in industrial relations. All leftist parties had a significant union base and this gave them a form of mobilisation capability among the labourers. At least some union members could be mobilised for the important political rituals of left parties, such as annual May Day celebrations and occasional street demonstrations.

Secondly, there remained some leading figures of the left who retained some – although waning – mass support within their constituencies. This support was the vestige of massive support which the old left had yielded in the early phase of its history. This limited mass support could be utilised in order to gain representation in parliament, provincial councils, and other local bodies. This was achieved through the elections that were held under the combined proportional representation and preferential voting systems, especially when these parties fought elections allied with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This was the case following the 1994 general election. In Colombo, Ratnapura, Kegalle, Galle, and Matara, left party members could win seats. Moreover, they also gained several slots in the National List in which 29 out of 225 were chosen. However, one of the problems that the left parties faced with these electoral gains in alliance with the SLFP was the absconding of their popular leaders to the SLFP.

### *Breakaway groups from the old left*

A number of breakaway groups from the old left tried to put into practice their revolutionary ideals. Splits occurred when dissenting elements inside these parties, favouring revolutionary ideals, challenged pragmatic steps being taken by the dominant party leadership in order to prevent the further decline of mass support.

Two important events in the early 1960s initiated a wave of internal splits in the old left parties. The first was the split in the Communist Party following the Soviet-China rivalry in the international communist movement. The other was the decision of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) to enter into a coalition with the SLFP in 1964. There were a large number of groups that emerged out of this *crisis* in the left. The most influential of this constellation of groups was, indeed, the JVP. Many others dwindled and vanished, while some managed to play a role in the post-1977 political scene. Some of these groups effectively functioned as the articulators of radical ideals of the left. These groups failed, however, to attract wider mass support and further divided into smaller groups through an amoebic process.

The history of these groups is yet to be written, especially in order to evaluate their place in the radical political space in post-colonial politics. Many groups disappeared and some reintegrated into the political mainstream in various ways. Several groups, however, stood out through the making of important ideological intervention. These exceptional groups were the Revolutionary Communist League (lately re-named the Socialist Equality Party), Marxist Workers' League led by prolific radical left writer T. Andrade, and the Wikalpa group which was led by fellow prolific writer Dayan Jayathilaka.

The major activity of these groups remained in the intellectual domain. They engaged in propaganda and educational work among radical political elements. These groups were always identified with their periodicals. The Revolutionary Communist League published the *Kamkaru Mawatha* (Worker's Path). The name of the Wikalpa group originated from the quarterly *Wikalpa* (Alternative) journal, which was published under the editorship of a group of left-wing activists, some of whom did not identify themselves with the *Wikalpa Kandayama*. Its 'official' name, *Wiplavakari Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (Revolutionary People's Liberation Front), was however virtually unknown to outsiders.

The place of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), another breakaway fraction from the LSSP, has to be explained somewhat separately. On one hand, it had quite a significant union base. Radical elements of the trade unions under the party's control were attracted to the party. On the other hand, it had some popular characters – Vasudeva Nanayakkara being one of them – who wielded certain charismatic authority over rural masses. These two factors helped it to mobilise mass support and remain in the electoral process, although at a dwindling pace

### *The rise of the JVP in the post-1977*

Although the JVP had its origin as an organisation in the old left (from the Chinese wing of the Sri Lanka Communist Party), it marked the beginning of a new trend in the left's radicalism. First and foremost, the JVP mobilised a different constituency from that of the old left – the rural and lower-to-middle-class youth. In this sense, Mick Moore's observation that the JVP at its initial stage established itself in the traditional 'red base' was not quite accurate (Moore, 1993: 629). In relation to the social base of the JVP, it is possible to suggest that the JVP originated out of the fundamental crisis of the peasant agriculture in the Sinhala-Buddhist south.<sup>3</sup> At the centre of this crisis was the issue of surplus labour that could not be absorbed into the existing peasant production. A significant proportion of the possessors of this surplus labour obtained education through an expanding free-education system. The urban

economy, too, however, was not expanding enough in order to absorb this surplus labour, especially among those educated rural youth.

This educated rural youth suffered heavily from this severe crisis because their high expectations to climb the economic and social ladder became restricted. Therefore, the JVP's political appeal was quite attractive to this group.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the quick mobilisation of a large number of activists within a short span of four to five years, one can appreciate the radical social character of this generation. The JVP mobilised these young people for an island-wide insurgency which was totally unprecedented, shocking the entire social fabric. This task was achieved with minimum resources and simple knowledge.

It is useful to recall how the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera came across this generation of rural youth in the mid 1960s when he was entrusted with the task of leading the youth (and Chinese) wing of the Communist Party, which was led by N. Shanmugadasan at the time. He later recalled that he travelled around the country in order to strengthen the organisations (Alles, 2001: 9). It is sufficient to bear in mind how quickly Wijeweera was able to build up a large group of activists. In talking to any member of the 1971 JVP, it became clear how easy it was for them to recruit new members. The famous method of recruitment was *koku gehilla* (hooking). Once an individual was persuaded to join the movement, he/she was given a series of lectures known as *panthi paha* (five classes) at a clandestine place. The content of these classes focused on simplified popular Marxist critique of the existing economic political and social setting, and a romantic version of the notion of socialist revolution.

It is now appropriate to ask how the JVP recovered from the 1971 crackdown soon after its leadership was released from jail in 1977. The answer may be quite simple. The mindset of the JVP constituency remained unchanged even after the suppression of 1971, and despite the attempts made by the regime to win over the support base of the JVP. In particular, measures taken to revitalise the rural economy had not been effective enough, at least at the short term. Even the economic liberalisation process of the post-1977 period, which mainly focused on addressing the issues of rural poverty and youth unemployment, did not produce effective results. This explains why the JVP was able to organise a more effective insurgency in the late 1980s, for which a great part of support was drawn from the rural youth in the Sinhala-Buddhist south<sup>5</sup>.

The situation became extremely worse because of the widening mismatch between expectations and opportunities. Severe resistance from university undergraduates for the marketisation of university education explains this mismatch. There was stiff

resistance against private sector involvement in tertiary institutes from those who threw their lot in with the state-sponsored higher education system. The radicalisation of medical students who agitated against a newly established private medical college in the late 1980s was a major rallying point for JVP-sponsored student activities. Given that medical undergraduates are usually a conservative section of the student population, their radicalization, therefore, can be used as a major index of the level of radicalisation among the educated sections of youth.

*Recruitment capability of the JVP in the post-1977 period*

The recruiting ability of new members is an important aspect of radical political movements. Unlike traditional left parties, the JVP had a remarkable ability to continuously attract new members. The ability of the old left in attracting new members came to an end in the mid 1960s.

The appropriate question that may be asked is: Why does an individual join a radical political group? This could also be discussed broadly under the theme of 'the problem of party allegiance'. I identify three structures of party allegiance in the Sinhala-Buddhist south: (1) traditional allegiance; (2) pragmatic allegiance; (3) anti-hegemonic allegiance. There can, at the same time, be movement from one structure of allegiance to another. I argue that these movements are relative to different political groupings. For this discussion, identifying the distinction between two modes of political groupings in the political system may be useful – the difference between hegemonising groups and anti-hegemonic groups. Hegemonising groups are those which perform the task of organising collective wills of the people into the existing hegemony. On the contrary, anti-hegemonic groups organise anti-hegemonic collective wills. I propose here a two-stage scheme to understand the transformation of the political allegiance.

**Stage one:** As mentioned above, hegemonising and anti-hegemonic groups, alike, perform the same task – that is, the organising of collective wills. This stage comes to an end when the consent of the masses is firmly established for the existing political system. In the case of anti-hegemonic groups, the end of this stage may be marked by the victory or defeat of their decisive battles against the existing regimes.

**Stage two:** In this stage, the party allegiance is mainly determined by the ability of party leaderships to provide access for party members to resource redistribution networks in the socio-economic setting. Compared to stage one, the second stage represents a normalisation of the behaviour of political groups in the hegemonic redistributive network.<sup>6</sup> Once the normalisation is accomplished in relation to a political grouping, either individual

interests of existing members towards the resource redistribution network may replace collective wills of the constituency as the *raison d'être* of the party allegiance, or new members with such interests may join the party. This situation is known as clientelism. At this stage, the recruitment ability of the political group is dependent on its ability to be a part of the resource redistribution network. In other words, the group has to enjoy some degree of state power as the state is a most capable agency for redistribution of resources. Anti-hegemonic groups are less capable of enjoying this ability because they remain outside state power – unless they capture state power at the first stage as in the case of the Bolsheviks in Russia and communists in China.

In the case of the old left, stage one ended in the mid 1950s when the political forces that were challenged by the anti-hegemonic left regained their lost ground in the late 1950s. I identify the 1953 popular uprising, known as 53 Hartal, as the event that marked the end of the anti-hegemonic phase. With election victory of 1956, the SLFP emerged as a hegemonic party which successfully attracted the rural masses for whom the left parties had become a formidable force. The re-organisation and transformation of UNP from an elite-centred party to a mass-based one reassured its appeal to both the rural lower classes, and urban working class. The coalition strategy that the left adopted in order to regain its loss of ground among the masses failed in the long run. Thus, at the end of 1970s it had virtually lost the ability to attract new members. Then, how did the JVP continue to attract new members? This was because, until the consolidation of the Mahinda Rajapaksha regime after 2005, the hegemonic forces had failed the rural educated youth – the main constituency of the JVP. Therefore, the JVP was easily able to recruit from this constituency. This ability was, however, severely reduced following the consolidation of the Mahinda Rajapaksha regime.

From 1994-2004, the JVP became a formidable electoral force among the new middle class in the semi-urban fringe of Colombo. This new middle class was created as a result of the expansion of the urban economy, especially after 1990. Members of this class were those who migrated to these areas from the rural sector. Besides the JVP, Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) emerged as a strong contender to win the support of this constituency. As far as the JVP is concerned, the recruitment ability of the members of this class for a radical cause was extremely low as this class was firmly integrated into the existing economic and social setting. The de-radicalisation of JVP politics from 1994-2005 was largely due to the growing influence of the political interests of this new middle class on the JVP political strategy.<sup>7</sup>



*Breakaway groups from the JVP*

The JVP has been likened to a large hall with two doors, in which new members continuously enter from one door and a constant flow occurs out of the other while, at the same time, the hall remains full (Chandraprema, C.A., *The Island*, February, 21, 1990). The JVP is generally viewed as a youth political movement dominated by a membership belonging to a particular age cohort. When a youthful member of the JVP passes this age of radical politics, the tendency is to leave radical political activity and settle down in the hegemonic setting. The timing may depend on many factors, especially the ways in which the member is integrated into the economic system and family life.

This outflow of JVP members from the party can be seen as a result of the de-radicalisation of political subjectivity. In addition to this main outflow of members, there is another outflow – although in lesser quantity – through radicalisation of the political subjectivity of the party member. This outflow takes place when tension occurs between the revolutionary ideals of the party's political ideology and the actual political behaviour of the party at a given moment. The general pattern is for the 'radical elements', who see the latter as a betrayal of the former, leave the party and form competing groups. There were several moments in the JVP's history when radical groups left the party and attempted to form new groups – for example in 1971-77, early 1980s, and early 1990s. These were moments in which the JVP was reconsidering its political strategy following decisive political events.

The history of these breakaway groups, however, shows that they have failed in the long run to retain those activists who left the JVP. Many members who leave the party in this manner also gradually leave radical political activism, although some may remain loyal to radical political ideas for a longer period. Some JVP spokesmen humorously use the term *wishramika kerelikaruwo* (retired rebels) to designate the members of these splinter groups. Therefore, it is ironic that this process of moving away of JVP members maintaining an ultra-leftist radical stance provided a safe passage for them to leave anti-hegemonic politics and integrate into the hegemonic socio-economic setting.

Apart from the JVP, the mid 1980s witnessed the emergence of two new radical discourses which had a decisive impact on the JVP in the following years. What follows is a discussion on these two important discourses.

*Two new discursive spaces in radical politics: Jathika Chintanaya and the avant-garde left*

These two radical discourses can be identified as responses to the political and ideological crisis of the dominant imagination



of the left. They evolved out of discursive elements that had longer histories. *Jathika Chintanaya* was ideologically linked to the Sinhala nationalist discourse that had its origin in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Dewasiri, 2000). The avant-garde left had its discursive roots in the new art movement which started in the early 1960s. These two movements became extremely influential in the late 1980s-1990s, and produced a fundamental challenge to the existing paradigm of radical left politics.

***Jathika Chintanaya.*** This movement emerged in the post-1977 period, owing fundamentally to the works of two intellectuals. It presented an alternative political imagination to that of the left against capitalism. Gunadasa Amarasekera was a famous writer and a cultural and political critic. For a long time, he had close links with the left. He had a critical attitude towards orthodox Marxism and less sympathy towards the nationalist sentiments of the Sinhala masses. Amarasekera repeated the allegation of Martin Wickramasinghe, another famous writer and a cultural critic, concerning the failure of the left to indigenise Marxism. He systematically presented his views in publishing the *Abuddassa Yugayak* in 1976 (Amarasekera, 1976). Nalin de Silva was an influential member of the left and was, indeed, at its far radical extreme. In the mid 1970s he was a leading intellectual figure of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) – a breakaway group from the LSSP.

I argue that these two intellectuals deviated from the left because of the traumatic impact of two important events. The breakup of the coalition between the SLFP and the LSSP in 1975, bringing the United Front government into crisis, was the event that had a decisive impact on Amarasekera. This impact can be understood from his novel *Gamanaka Meda* (Amarasekera, 2006). The ‘event’ for Nalin de Silva was the defeat of the 1980 general strike. NSSP had high expectations for the 1980 July general strike to be the catalyst for revolution. The defeat of the general strike was a heavy blow to the political strategy of the NSSP and, especially, to its optimism for an imminent revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after this, Nalin de Silva departed the NSSP and began to question the capability of Marxism to challenge capitalism, especially the limitation of the political vision based on the revolutionary agency of the working class. There was no nationalist orientation in Nalin de Silva at the beginning of his questioning of Marxism and the agency of the working class. In the mid 1980s, however, both he and Amarasekera had arrived at the conclusion that *jathiya* (nation) could be a better alternative to the (working) class, and ‘ethos of the nation’ would provide an alternative political consciousness and basis to build a political vision to challenge capitalist consumerism. The Sinhala nationalist turn in the political lines of these two was

largely determined by the rise of the Tamil militant nationalism in the 1980s. There was an upsurge of nationalist sentiment among Sinhala Buddhists in response to the rise of Sinhala nationalism.

Nalin de Silva not only challenged the political vision of the radical left by questioning the revolutionary agency of the working class upon which its political vision was built, but he also questioned the epistemological basis of Marxism. His epistemological critique was systematically presented in the work aptly titled *Mage Lokaya* (My World). In this work, he criticised the Cartesian approach to knowledge and questioned the possibility of objective truth, which, he argued, was the cornerstone of Marxist thinking, too.

It should be mentioned that most of the issues that Nalin de Silva raised had drawn the attention of the critical tradition of western Marxism. For example, there was great similarity between the questions that Nalin de Silva raised and the issues raised by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). I argue, however, that Nalin de Silva had not unraveled these issues with sufficient conceptual rigour as Laclau and Mouffe did.

This intervention was readily welcomed by a significant section of the radical youth, especially intelligent sections of university undergraduates. The University of Colombo and University of Moratuwa had sizable followings for Nalin de Silva. Many of these young student activists who were attracted to Nalin de Silva's intellectual interventions became central figures on the intellectual scene in the coming period. Two years later, Amarasekera also produced another influential piece of work, especially aimed at Sinhala rural educated youth. The work carried the evocative title *Ganaduru Mediyama Dakinemi Arunalu* (I see the rays of the dawn in the darkness of the midnight). This work urged JVP youth to combine Marxism with Sinhala nationalism. This was quite fitting with the political strategy of the JVP at this juncture. The JVP therefore tactically tolerated this intervention even though it was not in agreement with Amarasekera's work. This toleration, however, helped young radical elements, who were on the margins of the JVP's political activities, to orient toward the *Jathika Chintanaya*.

The anti-capitalist stance of *Jathika Chintanaya* gradually became less important as its exponents opted to become the most eloquent advocates of Sinhala nationalist interest vis-a-vis the growing political and ideological power of Tamil ethnonationalism. This Tamil nationalism emerged as the political and ideological 'other' of *Jathika Chintanaya*, in place of capitalist consumerism.

A close alliance was established in the early 2000s between the JVP and the *Jathika Chintanaya* movement, making this a highly influential political alliance. One of the important results of this alliance was the transformation of the political subjectivity of

the typical JVP member from a radical cosmopolitanist to a popular nationalist. This transformation became quite significant in the context of the internal split which occurred in 2008. In this split, Wimal Weerawansa, the powerful propaganda secretary and most popular public orator of the JVP, deserted the party with a large group to join the Rajapaksha regime.

**Avant-garde left.** Roots of this movement are found in the cultural scene of the beginning of 1960s, when a new group of Colombo-based artists and art critics were emerging under the heavy influence of the post-World War II avant-garde intellectual milieu of the west.

An early sign of this movement was seen in the following works: Siri Gunasinghe's novel *Hevenella* (Shadow) (1960); Amarasekera's novel *Yali Upannemi* (Born Again) (1962); Ajith Thilakasena's short stories; Sugathapala de Silva's dramas. The arts-drama field, in particular, created a vibrant intellectual space for young radical artists and critics. Drama production was, by nature, a collective endeavour. This field provided young artists and critics with an alternative space to engage in lively exchange of ideas.

This movement gained momentum in the 1970s, especially following the 1971 youth insurgency. Although this movement did not make any impact on the politics of radical youth in the late 1960s, the opposite was the case. Quite significantly, there was a conspicuous gap between the dominant political imagination of the left and that of these avant-garde artists, irrespective of the fact that almost all these intellectuals had close connections with the traditional left parties. The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), a radical Trotskyite group, identified the political potential of this avant-garde trend and, indeed, some of its numbers had become political supporters of the RCL in the 1970s and early 1980s. This group made a conscious attempt to win these artists and critics over to radical Marxist politics. Sucharitha Gamlath and Piyaseeli Wijegunasinghe, belonging to the RCL and also university academics, emerged in the early 1980s as two dominant literary critics who persistently engaged with these avant-garde artists.

The early 1980s witnessed the emergence of young radical groups that did not only include artists and critics, but also showed a high degree of radical political sensitivity. Members of these groups came from diverse sources. Some came from the JVP itself. The first such group, *Nirmanana Sanvada Kulakaya* (Circle for Debating Art Works), was pioneered by a group linked to the JVP. This was formed after the JVP was proscribed in 1983 as a cover-up for its underground political activities. However, the organisation soon broke up after disagreements emerged over its activities. These disagreements highlighted the inability of the established radical

politics to accommodate these avant-garde cultural activities. It is also notable that the main intellectual inspiration did not come from the JVP. Main resource persons, with Sucharitha Gamlath being one of them, were highly critical of the JVP in their discussion forums.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, with the backdrop of the JVP-led armed insurgency, the avant-garde tendency was also consolidating itself as a distinct cultural-political space. The intellectual milieu of the first half of the 1990s was very much conducive for the expansion of this space. A number of publications and cultural organisations were of use for the activities of these young intellectuals. Some of these important publications and organisations included *Ravaya*, *Yukthiya*, and *Hiru* tabloid newspapers, the *Pravada* journal published by the Social Scientists' Association, and the *Vibhavi* Cultural Centre. At this juncture, such discourse came under the heavy influence of new critical post-modernist intellectual trends in the west.

Arguably the culmination of the avant-garde movement occurred in the mid 1990s, with the creation of the radical political group which came to be known as X Group (*X Kandayama*). This was preceded by a number of small organisational experiments – the unknown and marginal history of which is yet to be written. The *X Kandayama* is, however, the most famous and influential organisational experiment to have influenced the new generation of radical youth. It developed an extremely effective and creative way of popularising its ideas, publishing several magazines and books, holding public meetings, and contributing to both print and electronic media.

In the 2000s, its impact could be clearly seen among radical youth and, most importantly, the JVP was also begun to respond to this new phenomenon. The former was seen as significantly modifying its cultural and intellectual activities, especially among the youth in Colombo's suburban areas, where the impact of the avant-garde left was strongly felt. In the mid 2000s, the JVP had seemingly decided to confront the intellectual challenge of this avant-garde left in a more proactive manner. In recent times, especially, after the decisive 2008 split of the JVP, it seemed to be seeking a close association with a certain section of the avant-garde left, probably as a part of its recovering process.

## **Part II. Dynamics of the post-1977 JVP**

One of the remarkable characteristics of the JVP's history is its continuous presence as an influential political entity with, of course, frequent ups and downs. This could be contrasted with the trajectory of the old left, which has become merely a bystander on the political scene since 1977. While the old left parties never

recovered from the setbacks following the re-establishment of the hegemonic and dominant political elite in the 1950s, the JVP has showed an immense ability to recover soon after such setbacks.

One important way to observe the evolution of the JVP is by looking at the trajectory of these setbacks and recovery over time. I divide the history of the JVP into four periods in terms of these recovery, growth, and setback cycles. For the convenience of this analysis, a full cycle is started from the point of recovery after a period of setback. The cycle completes the setback following a peak event which is marked either by state suppression or a major internal split. Cycles one and four are given as half cycles because, in the first cycle, there is no period of recovery and the fourth cycle remains at the recovery phase, and yet to experience the peak.

**Cycle I (half), 1965-1977.** The JVP as a separate political entity began around 1965 in an embryonic form and as a small clandestine group. After that, it experienced a tremendous growth until the 1971 armed insurgency, which was crushed by the state. This peak event was followed by the period of setbacks in which the entire leadership of the organisation was imprisoned. Internal disputes and desertions occurred in large scale in the period of the setback.

**Cycle II (complete), 1977-1994.** The JVP's recovery began after the newly elected UNP government released the convicted insurgents from prison in 1977. The initial recovery became relatively easier in the early years of the UNP regime as the latter used the JVP as a sort of cat's paw to weaken the opposition. This gave the JVP an ideal opportunity to revamp its country-wide organisation and emerge as the most active radical political movement, especially due to the dwindling of the old left parties. At the time of the 1982 presidential election, it had become a formidable political force by surpassing other leftist parties by a large margin. In the election, the JVP leader received 273,438 (4.19 per cent) of the total valid votes as opposed to 58,531 for Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP, and 17,005 for Vasudeva Nanayakkara of the NSSP. Although the further growth of the movement was temporarily hampered by the 1983 proscription of the party in the aftermath of the anti-Tamil pogrom, the ban facilitated its growth as a clandestine movement by making it more attractive to potential JVP recruits. The peak was in 1989 when the JVP was effectively running a parallel government with a military power and, to some extent, popular support.<sup>10</sup> The setback began when the insurgency was crushed in late 1989 and early 1990, with almost the entire leadership being executed.

**Cycle III (complete), 1994- 2008.** With the end of the 17-year UNP rule by 1994, the JVP again found itself in a favourable position to regroup under new leadership. Fading popularity of the Chandrika Kumaratunga regime in the late 1990s, the weakness

of the UNP to exploit it, and middle-class discontent towards the degenerated political elite of both parties, gave the JVP a favourable ground on which to establish itself in the electoral mainstream. The general election of 2000 clearly showed how well the JVP had recovered, when it won 10 seats in the parliament as opposed to the one seat it secured at the 1994 election<sup>11</sup>, and recorded 6 per cent out of the total valid votes. It further broadened its voter base at the following election in 2001, with 16 seats and 9.10 per cent of the vote. There was every sign at this juncture of JVP emerging as a serious threat to the existing hegemonic two-party system, especially with its growing ability to attract the support of the semi-urban middle classes. The popular slogan *unuth ekai munuth ekai*, used in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was quite attractive to this middle class. The literal meaning of this slogan is 'both parties are alike'. The slogan conveyed voter discontent concerning the degeneration of the dominant political elite.

The JVP was, at this time, evidently mulling over the possibility of capturing power within the existing electoral system. At the 2000 general election, it presented itself before the voting public with a manifesto carrying a rather expressive title, *Rata Hadana Pas Aurudu Selesma* (Five-year Plan to Build the Country). This manifesto certainly belonged to an era where having a planned economy was a popular policy alternative for third-world countries. This was definitely not very attractive to the middle classes who were quite firmly entrenched in the post-1977 consumerist society. Interestingly enough, after the 2000 election this document, which was issued in the ceremonious manner, had mysteriously disappeared from JVP propaganda. One reason for this could well be the self-realisation that this would create a bad reputation for the JVP among its middle-class voters.

This period clearly marked a shift in the JVP's political imagining of itself. The formation of the short-lived coalition government with the SLFP in 2001 was the highlight of this new political imagination. The coalition strategy was followed until the 2005 presidential election, which brought to power Mahinda Rajapaksha. For a short period, the JVP held three ministerial portfolios in the SLFP-led UPFA government of 2004.

The JVP reached the peak in this cycle when it won 39 seats, contesting the election under the banner of the UPFA. Unlike the peak it reached in 1971 and 1989, this time it was victorious – although it was not the final victory it wanted. The JVP, however, faced a major dilemma after the election concerning what its next step should be. Although it held three ministerial portfolios in the 2004 government formed by Chandrika Kumarathunga, it soon quit them ostensibly over the issue of a proposed post-tsunami interim arrangement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It



played a determining role in the victory of Mahinda Rajapaksha in the 2005 presidential election, and declined to join the government of the latter. This created an internal crisis that ended only with the defection of a powerful group led by Wimal Weerawansa in early 2008.

**Cycle IV (incomplete), post 2008.** The 2008 defection was probably the most serious setback faced by the JVP after the 1989 suppression. The extent of the setback was evident in the result of the provincial council and local government elections held after the 2008 crisis, in which the performance of the JVP was extremely poor. In the middle of this setback, however, the party managed to retain its hardcore membership. What was lost was mainly the voter base of the semi-urban middle classes.

The JVP's recovery effort following the setback seemingly focuses on several grounds, including followings: (1) joining forces with other opposition elements. An important breakthrough in this respect occurred when, in an unprecedented move in Sri Lanka's radical politics, the JVP joined with the UNP, which had been considered the last frontier of the 'regressive camp'; (2) strengthening its position in the trade union sector and among university students; (3) extending its activities to the Tamil north. This was also an important gesture because there had been a serious rupture between Tamil politics and the JVP owing to the latter's decisive role in the military crackdown on the LTTE.

As discussed above, each cycle consisted a period of growth which leads to a peak, and is followed by a period of setback and subsequent recovery. After the recovery, a growth occurs again which leads once again to a peak. There is, of course, significant variation in each cycle, determined by the historical contingencies.

### **Political vision and ideological orientations of the JVP**

The JVP always maintained that it was the only genuine Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movement in Sri Lanka. The JVP version of Marxist-Leninism indeed has very peculiar characteristics. Ever since Marxism was introduced to radical politics in Sri Lanka in the 1930s, it has occupied a decisive place in the ideological baggage of the left. As the intra-group rivalries grew in the left, the interpretation of Marxist theory became the focal point, with each and every group self-proclaiming itself as the true Marxist party. The version of Marxism that has been upheld on the Sri Lankan left is the Russian revolutionary Marxism. 'Marxist-Leninism' became the catch-phrase and the iconic figure of Lenin was treated as the one who transformed a doctrine into a set of guiding principles for the revolutionary movement. The iconic value of Lenin is an important aspect of JVP's ideological life, with the role of Rohana Wijeweera equated to that of Lenin. When Wijeweera was arrested in 1970, he



was depicted as the Sri Lankan Lenin in the propaganda campaign organised by the young organisation. This perception has remained until now, especially in the minds of JVP members (Dewasiri, 1991). Even when it was functioning within an ultra-nationalist politico-ideological context, in which the dominant articulators of the ultra-Sinhala nationalist ideology, such as *Jathika Chintanaya* and JHU, viewed Marxism as a threat to the national interests, the JVP attempted to interpret its political project in terms of the Leninist version of Marxism.

By early the 2000s, the JVP was fully integrated into the Sinhala nationalist political project. The most significant organisational manifestation of this nationalist orientation was the Patriotic National Movement, in which Amarasekera was the main ideologue. Wimal Weeravansa had become very close to Amarasekera at that time, both ideologically and personally. The latter viewed Marxism as a fundamental barrier to carry out true national liberation struggle and urged the JVP to abandon its Marxist inclination. It is interesting to note even in such a context that Wimal Weeravansa was extensively referring to Lenin in justifying his position in the intra-party struggle in the late 2000s (Weeravansa, 2008: 181-182, 186-188, 221, etc.).

One of the remarkable features of the political behaviour of the JVP was its ability to articulate two parallel political agendas at the same time – one for the wider masses and another for inside the party. It always maintained a safely-guarded political dialogue within the party and, also, trained party activists to carry out the public agenda to its mass audiences. The internal agenda was always quite consistent and the ultimate goal of the party was clearly laid out as the establishment of a socialist social order “though the dictatorship of proletariat”. Seizing state power was viewed as the precondition for achieving this goal. It was upon capturing state power that a secondary agenda for the masses was needed. This public agenda was devised in accordance with the party’s strategic aim of state power. In the strategic thinking of the post-1977 period, mass support was viewed as a key to the capturing of political power, either through armed struggle or popular elections. Therefore, a secondary agenda was always in place to win popular support in the Sinhala-Buddhist south.

The party leadership had a clear idea as to the ideological clash between the inner party agenda and the public agenda. For example, the party leadership was conscious that it could not integrate Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism into the official party ideology even though it used the former on tactical grounds. In executing this extremely subtle dual strategy, a sharp differentiation had to be maintained between the party activist and the masses. The notion *upakrama* (tactics) was crucial in the JVP political language in

explaining this dual strategy to party activists. Whenever a party cadre showed any uncertainty over the dual strategy, the well-known answer was “*eka upakramayak sahodaraya*” (comrade, it is only a tactic). Wimal Weeravansa eloquently articulated this dual strategy in his internal struggle to persuade the party to support the presidential candidacy of Mahinda Rajapaksha at the 2005 presidential election. He argued that the party had to show this support this time as a tactical move with the intention of contesting and winning the 2010 presidential election (Weeravansa, 2008: 111).

JVP’s ideological behaviour has acquired a unique character, owing mainly to this dual-strategy approach. This ideological behaviour is characterised by the articulation of elements of several ideological discourses within one political agenda. These ideological elements, forming the ideological baggage of the JVP, play their role in JVP’s ideological behaviour in different conjunctures depending on the tactic it has used to gain public support for its political agenda. There are certain moments of discontinuities in the JVP’s history in which different ideological components contribute to shaping its political agenda and internal splits occur as a result of tension between each ideological component.

Looking at the ideological baggage of the JVP, the following components can be identified as its major parts: left radicalism; soft Sinhala nationalism; rural-oriented radical populism. These ideological elements were effective in appealing to the JVP constituency, which was characterised by youth of rural origin who held urban-oriented social dreams. The outward projection of the JVP’s political programme was always formulated by way of articulating these ideological elements to suit the specific conjuncture.

The general pattern of the politico-ideological discontinuities of the JVP is that at a certain point of the progression of the politico-ideological project, the dominant ideological element is reached to such a conflicting point with the political goal of the core organisation. This conflict can be explained in terms of the dual-strategy approach, where two separate agendas are articulated subtly by the leadership in order to find a wider recognition and mass support for the inner agenda. Owing to the high level of ideological power of the outward agenda, the political subjectivity of the activist is transformed and restructured by the tactically employed ideological agenda. At a certain point, intra-party rivalries organise the outward agenda in opposition to the internal agenda. Members politicised through the political rituals of the outward agenda remain, at the same time, unquestionably loyal to the leadership and swinging between two agendas. At the time of the rupture, the membership is divided between two groups depending

on the power equilibrium of intra-party rival groups and the relative strength of the articulatory capability in regards to the outward ideological component.

This can best be illustrated by the trajectories of political life of two important figures who played decisive roles in the recovery period following the 1989 debacle, namely Rohitha Bhashana Abewardana and Wimal Weeravansa. These two young activists who survived the state repression of 1989 worked closely to re-organise the party. Abewardana's political subjectivity was transformed and restructured through his engagements with Tamil militant politics when there was a short-lived opening toward the Tamil militant movement after 1989. As Abewardana became a key figure in this engagement, he became a strong defender of the Tamils' right to self-determination. He soon left the JVP to form an alternative political group. Later, he became a passionate critic of the JVP's stance on the Tamil-nationalist political demands. Weeravansa's political subjectivity was transformed and structured in the opposite direction. When ultra-Sinhala nationalism became the key component of the outward agenda of the dual strategy in the late 1990s, at a time when Weeravansa became the principle spokesperson, his political subjectivity was transformed and structured through the engagement in the Sinhala ultra-nationalist political project. When he left the JVP in 2008, he had become the most popular exponent of the Sinhala ultra-nationalist discourse.

This dual-strategy approach where diverse politico-ideological elements, were articulated in order to achieve an internally defined political goal, made the JVP a unique and extremely vibrant political entity. This helped the JVP, at least partially, to recover from serious defeats and remain as a political player with significant mass support. However, at the same time, this unique characteristic of articulating diverse – and sometimes potentially conflicting – ideological components into one political agenda created frequent internal splits.

### **Part III. The dilemma of mainstreaming radical politics: By way of conclusion**

When the JVP achieved a high level of mass support and became firmly established as an integral part of the political mainstream of the Sinhala-Buddhist south during 2004-2005, its radical spirit had sharply declined. I propose the following three factors that caused this de-radicalisation and mainstreaming: (1) elitisation of the JVP leadership; (2) transformation of the political subjectivity of the rural youth; (3) broadening of the social base of the JVP.

***Elitisation of the JVP leadership.*** Unlike the leadership of the old left, the JVP leadership came from a non-elite background

– the leadership itself was very much part of the JVP constituency. Nevertheless, in the post-1989 re-organisation process, an important transformation took place in the leadership ranks. Having been in the political mainstream for a long time, the top leadership was transforming itself into elite status. I identify three factors of this elitisation.

The first is the election of a fairly large number of members into representative bodies. The electoral process in Sri Lanka in the past few decades has become a mechanism for upward social mobility. Those who are elected to representative bodies have attempted to make use of these elected offices to enhance their wealth, power, and social status. The experience of the JVP in the past 15 years has been, however, somewhat different. JVP-elected members for representative bodies have been closely supervised by the party mechanism. Nonetheless, it has been unavoidable that the social status of these elected members has enhanced once they have been elected and once engaged in their public work. Coming from lower strata of the status hierarchy of the social setting, they have been automatically promoted to higher stratum once elected, with the obtainment of elite status.

The second is the consolidation of the JVP trade union sector and emergence of a union bureaucracy in the JVP trade union leadership. The vibrant trade union sector in Sri Lanka has, for a long time, facilitated the establishment of a union bureaucracy which has functioned as an intermediary between unionised wage labourers, employers, and the state in collective bargaining processes. In the past 15 years, the JVP has firmly established itself in the trade union sector. One of the natural results of this development has been the elevation of the union leadership to the elite level. Attending international conferences and becoming important media figures have become significant features of this elite status.

The third is the growth of the party bureaucracy and full-timers. With the expansion of party activity, the party bureaucracy has grown, along with its full-timers. The financial strength of the party has vastly improved in the past two decades. Therefore, the lives of party officials and full-timers have certainly improved. This situation has certainly elevated them above the level of ordinary party members.

It should be mentioned that the JVP leadership has been quite aware of the possible aftermath of such an elitisation of the leadership. Equal status of party members is considered as a basic norm. Therefore, party members elected to representative bodies have been subjected to a strict code of conduct. The most important one of these codes is the policy of remunerating party members who are representatives of elected bodies. They are not allowed to use

the salaries attached to these position. These salaries are sent to a common fund which is used for social welfare projects. There are some restrictions over the use of vehicles, too. I argue, however, that these measures have not been entirely successful in order of obstructing the elitisation process, although they certainly have discouraged it.

Moreover, this elitisation was a logical outcome of integration of the JVP into the hegemonic political mainstream. In frequenting associations of hegemonic forces, such as the cooperated sector, state bureaucracy, and foreign diplomatic circles, the party leadership has been forced to maintain a certain level of high social status. While the status that the JVP leadership has maintained is significantly lower compared to the situation with the other main parties, there have been some extreme cases as well. The case of Wimal Weeravansa may be cited as one such extreme case. He has been targeted by the media for maintaining a lavish lifestyle. Also, he has frequently been caricatured by cartoonists with two mobile phones to signify this lavish lifestyle.

**Transformation of the political subjectivity of rural youth.** In the past two decades, the Sri Lankan economy has undergone fundamental change, with a significant drop in the unemployment rate being one important aspect. Various new outlets for rural surplus labour have opened up. The expansion of the rural and urban economic activities, along with new openings for the international labour market, has been one such important outlet. This situation has certainly widened the scope for rural youth to explore their expectations.

These changes have certainly transformed the political subjectivity of the rural youth. If the JVP's political appeal matched with the despairing mindset of the unemployed and underemployed rural youth in the 1960s and 1980s, the situation in the past decade or so has become quite different. New forms of hegemony are now in action in order to integrate the rural youth to the dominant social and cultural setting. Consumerisation of society has reached a point where the remotest areas of the country are not immune from the new consumer culture. This culture has captured the minds of the rural youth with immense power, and also caused major de-politicisation among them. The proliferation of electronic media (television and FM radio channels) and the availability of cheaper consumer goods have captured the minds of rural youth. The enormous attraction of a new 'reality TV' phenomenon among the rural youth has a clear manifestation in the hegemonic power of the new consumer culture.

**Broadening of the social base of the JVP.** As already indicated, the JVP has become a formidable electoral force among the semi-urban middle classes in the past 15 years. The political

subjectivity of this social class has fundamentally differed from that of the rural youth who the JVP has mobilised for two armed insurgencies. This new social base of the JVP, combined with the de-radicalisation of the rural youth, has facilitated the party's transformation from a radical anti-systemic political movement to a reformist political party. The de-radicalisation of the JVP social base becomes self-evident if one looks at the ease with which it has been able to move from the radical political path to a more conformist one. It is with remarkable ease that the JVP has opted to form a coalition with the SLFP – a strategy that the JVP vehemently opposed from its very beginning. One may recall here the stiff resistance that old left parties faced when they started on the same path. In the case of the JVP, however, the passage of crossing from revolutionary idealism to mainstream coalition politics has come much more easily.

### ***Prospects for the post-2008 JVP***

The split of the JVP in 2008 was certainly a turning point. The immediate aftermath of the split was self-evident from the result of the elections that followed. The JVP suffered heavy losses compared with the major electoral gains that it had achieved since the late 1994. What would be the implications of these losses in elections? Certain quarters seemed to think that the JVP would turn back to the arms struggle. The government's propaganda machine seemed to be thinking along similar lines, either genuinely or as a pretext for cracking down on JVP anti-government activities.

Whether or not the JVP is toying with the idea of shifting towards an arms struggle, there are definite structural impediments for following such an approach. The main factor is the transformation in the political subjectivity of the rural youth whose support is indispensable for an arms struggle. Anti-systemic political strategy now is certainly less attractive to the rural youth compared to the situation in the pre-1990 period. At any rate, it is evident that the JVP is facing a serious problem of *raison d'être*. The JVP is certainly well aware of this crisis. It seems that it is experimenting on two alternative political paths. One is to focus more on popular oppositional politics, with 'democracy' as the broader slogan and a focus on addressing issues that are of immediate interest to the general public. The mainstay of this line is to mobilise people around jailed former military chief Sarath Fonseka.

At the same time there is a growing emphasis on a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist political line. This political line is seemingly more popular among younger elements in the party. Recently, a younger group of the party started a periodical appropriately named *Aurora* (vol.1 no. 1, December 2010-January 2011). *Aurora* was the name of the legendary Russian Ship associated with the Bolshevik victory in the Russian revolution of 1917.

At first sight, however, these two lines may not seem as representing two different orientations but, instead, be seen as mutually complementary. It can be easily explained in terms of the dual-strategy approach that elaborated earlier. However, it is too early to judge whether these two lines are a manifestation of a strategically defined two-pronged political line, or a manifestation of desperate attempts to recover from the recent setbacks.

The absence of reliable internal information of discussions from the party precludes us from making strong conclusions about these two lines. However, critically evaluating publicly available material, I propose that these two political orientations represent a uniquely novel development in the JVP – namely, the emergence of a diversity of party political lines out of the distinct political subjectivity of two constituencies being catered to by the party. The ‘democracy’ line is catering to the semi-urban middle class which certainly is a very well-established social class in the existing hegemony of capitalist consumerism. The ‘socialist’ line is catering to radical youth who have not yet been fully hegemonised in the ‘system’. However, it is highly unlikely that this section of youth, which is certainly less despairing in comparison to the rebelliousness of earlier generations that took part in 1971 and 1987-89 insurgencies, will turn to armed struggle.



**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For the macro-economic changes in 1977, see Luxman (1997).

<sup>2</sup> For 1980 general strike see Fernando (1983).

<sup>3</sup> The political economy of the JVP constituency has been discussed sufficiently. Immediately after the 1971 insurgency, a number of scholars attempted to understand what had happened. This produced ample amount of literature on it in which significant attention had been given to the socio-economic roots of the insurgency. Halliday (1971), Keerawella (1980), and Obeyesekera (1974) provided useful information regarding the social base of the early phase of the JVP. Furthermore, the 'Circle of Pauperisation', proposed by Shanmugaratnam (1984: 26), lucidly illustrated the crisis of peasant production in the Sinhala-Buddhist south, leading to the radicalisation of the rural youth.

<sup>4</sup> For a useful account of the despair among the rural youth which generated radical anti-systemic anger, see Uyangoda (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For a useful explanation on the impact of post-1977 macro-economic policies on youth unrest, see Luxman (1996: 89-102).

<sup>6</sup> I use the term 'normalisation' following Thomas Kuhn's characterisation of 'normal science' which follows the 'paradigm shift' (Kuhn, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Shanthasiri (2004) has studied this diminishing radicalness by using Robert Tucker's thesis of 'deradicalisation of Marxist movements' (Tucker, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Prof. Sumanasiri Liyanage, polity-bureau member of the NSSP at that time, described to me the optimism of the NSSP leadership concerning the events of June-August 1980. He also told me that Nalin de Silva was so disillusioned by the defeat of the strike.

<sup>9</sup> I thank Nandana Weerathna, a founding member of this group, for providing me with this information.

<sup>10</sup> For this period of JVP activities, see Chandraprema (1991), Gunarathna (1990), Gunasekera (1998).

<sup>11</sup> At the 1994 election, it did not contest as the JVP, but under the banner of its proxy Sri Lanka Progressive Front.

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## Appendix

### Illustration I

