

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: Will the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna be an Alternative Force?



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Summary

After 20 years, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has nominated a candidate under the National People's Power alliance. The JVP believes that it can be an alternative force to challenge the two main political parties. Despite its ambitious electoral promises, the JVP is unlikely to be a third contender during the upcoming presidential elections.

Introduction

The Sri Lankan electoral landscape has become complex with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)¹ fielding a candidate, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, for the first time in 20 years. The JVP was the second political party to unveil its candidate even before the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) announced theirs. Since its return to democratic politics in 1994 and contesting the 1999 presidential election, the JVP has not fielded a candidate and instead supported other mainstream political parties in the last 20 years. In 2005, it rallied behind Mahinda Rajapaksa who contested from the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Following a fall-out with the UPFA government in June 2005, the party supported Rajapaksa's rival, Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka, during the 2010 election. Five years later, it backed President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to form their *Yahapalana* (good governance) government that aimed to "re-establish the rule of law, end corruption and hold the accused accountable." However, the JVP now claims that the UNP is equally "corrupted" as the Rajapaksa government and that, "instead of old thieves, a new set of thieves has come to rule the country."²

The JVP has entered the presidential race under the National People's Power (NPP), a broad alliance of 28 organisations,³ comprising political parties, civil society organisations, intellectuals and other professionals.⁴ While there is little information on the different groups involved, one of them is the National Intellectual Organisation (NIO), a civil organisation formed in 2018 and led by a group of academics, professors and doctors which created a policy framework covering various areas, including health, education and

¹ The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is directly translated as the People's Liberation Front.

² 'Compass' – the symbol that guides country & people on the correct path', JVP Sri Lanka (12 October 2019), <http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/english/compass-the-symbol-that-guides-country-people-on-the-correct-path/>. Accessed on 19 October 2019.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Some of the partners include Revolutionary Socialist Party, The People's Pioneer Artists, Active Left Unity, Women for Rights, and National Intellectual Organisations.

employment.⁵ Some other organisations supporting the NPP, such as the People's Pioneer Artists, supported Sirisena during the 2015 presidential election. These groups may be rallying behind the JVP this time due to their disappointment that both the UNP and the SLFP have not adhered to good governance principles.

History and Ideological Narrative

The JVP has had a violent history. Formed in the 1960s as a small splinter group that defected from the Communist Party (Peking), it gradually hired and trained young militants to launch its first insurgency in the 1970s. However, it was quickly repressed by the state. In the 1980s, the group launched another insurrection, a much more virulent and protracted one, which invited a more aggressive response from the security forces and pro-state militia groups. For a brief period in the 1990s, the JVP had seemingly disappeared from the public eye when the surviving remnants went underground to prevent being captured and killed by the state. However, the group resurfaced within five years as a mainstream political party.⁶ Since then, the JVP has periodically gone through internal struggles. The most recent was in 2008 when a section of the JVP, led by Wimal Weerawansa, defected from the group to form the National Freedom Front.⁷

The JVP could arguably be the most dynamic and resilient political force in Sri Lanka, which has gradually mobilised public support from some sections of the society. The group has received some degree of success in various elections that placed it ahead of other smaller parties. During the 1999 presidential elections, the JVP fielded Nandana Gunathilake and won third place with six per cent of the votes. Its parliamentary representation has also gradually increased over the years. From winning one parliamentary seat in 1994, its representation increased to 10 in 2000, 16 in 2001 and 39 in 2004.⁸

The JVP was prudent in exploiting new opportunities for political mileage. The JVP's ideological orientation during the early years has oscillated from Sinhala nationalism to Marxist-Leninist and has now become an anti-globalisation and pro-worker force. There have been periods when the group entered into broad coalitions with leftist parties to denounce Sinhala nationalism, treatment of Tamils and the civil war. Paradoxically, it switched its ideological focus to Sinhala nationalism during the 2002 ceasefire agreement and the ensuing peace process between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It accused the government of dividing the country and allowing foreign powers to re-colonise the country through the peace process. Its Marxist ideology has complemented its

⁵ 'People should unite and help "re-brand" Sri Lanka's global identity : JVP leader', Times Online (19 February 2019), <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1071515/people-should-unite-and-help-re-brand-sri-lankas-global-identity-jvp-leader>. Accessed on 19 October 2019.

⁶ Rajesh Venugopal, 'Sectarian Socialism: The Politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (May 2010), p 567.

⁷ The Media reported that Weerawansa had an argument with the leadership based on the disarmament of Ramil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal, a political party formed by former LTTE members, and who decided to contest provincial council election with SLFP led United People's Freedom Alliance in May 2008. For more information see: 'Wimal: notable absentee', *BBC Sinhala* (5 April 2008), https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080405_april.shtml. Accessed on 29 October 2019; and 'JVP splits in two', *BBC Sinhala* (08 April 2008), https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080408_jvp_split.shtml. Accessed on 29 October 2019.

⁸ Venugopal 'Sectarian Socialism', p 568.

Sinhala nationalist project, reflecting key features of the materiality of nationalism within the framework of class and caste politics. It has always been critical of the government's economic agenda and market reform policies and has accused the government of colluding with foreign forces. The JVP orchestrated a series of protests in Colombo, bringing the capital to a standstill; it leveraged on the increasing resentment against the state's market reform policies and wielded its influence in the union movement to provoke a series of strikes during different periods. The JVP has earned a reputation for being a fact checker on the government, especially on foreign investments and agreements with other countries.

Campaign Trail

The JVP has now embarked on an aggressive campaign to compete with the other contesting parties. It held its first election rally at Beruwala on 6 October 2019 under the theme 'Let's build the shattered country' that saw the participation of Dissanayake, General Secretary Tilvin Silva and Kalutara district Parliamentarian Nalinda Jayatissa.⁹ The group formally started its election campaign at Thambuttegama, the birthplace of Dissanayake, on 8 October, 2019. Since then, it has conducted multiple rallies all over the country, including participating at the Maha Sanga (community of Buddhist Monks) rally held at Akurana on 11 October 2019.

The JVP has organised around 50 national rallies to cover the South, the North and the East, hosting over 250 meetings at the national level and 3,425 pocket meetings at the village level. Apart from that, house-calls to hand-deliver pamphlets and manifestos and Skype calls for home meetings are used as its campaign strategy.¹⁰ While the JVP's manifesto is yet to be published at the time of writing, it has unveiled parts of its policies on education, health, national unity, transportation, environment, arts and culture between 14 and 26 October 2019.

Electoral Promises

Interestingly, the JVP's electoral promises signifies both a continuation and deviation of its fundamental principles. On the one hand, it continues its long-term trajectory to end executive presidency and systemic corruption, build human resources and counter foreign intervention. On the other, it has taken a new stance on issues relating to national unity and post-war reconciliation.

The JVP believes that the executive presidency has been held by both 'despots' and 'jesters', and has proven to be 'destructive in nature', and that it is not needed anymore.¹¹ It accuses the other political parties of being 'a group of uncivilised politicians' whose politics breed bribery, corruption and fraud. It has reiterated the need for the end of systematic

⁹ 'Beruwala rallies to welcome NPP candidate', JVP Sri Lanka (7 October 2019), <http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/english/beruwala-rallies-to-welcome-npp-candidate/>. Accessed on 18 October 2019.

¹⁰ 'Compass' – the symbol that guides country & people on the correct path', JVP Sri Lanka (12 October 2019), <http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/english/compass-the-symbol-that-guides-country-people-on-the-correct-path/>. Accessed on 19 October 2019.

¹¹ 'What the country needs is a broad transformation of the socio-economic structure – AKD', JVP Sri Lanka (9 September 2019), <http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/english/what-the-country-needs-is-a-broad-transformation-of-the-socio-economic-structure-akd/>. Accessed on 18 October 2019.

corruption.¹² The JVP leadership also continues to stress the importance of developing human resources. Its campaign emphasises “a new economic policy which gives priority to domestic production and opens new avenues for the development of human resources while also uplifting the lives of those in the agriculture and fisheries industries”.¹³ The JVP is also continuing to push forward its deglobalisation agenda where it has criticised foreign investments approved by both the UNP and SLFP, including the Singapore-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement.

The JVP’s divergence on issues pertaining to ethnic polarisation is striking. The party accuses political leaders of creating insecurity and differences and proclaims that its goal is to promote ethnic harmony and national unity.¹⁴ This is a departure from its Sinhala nationalist rhetoric since 2002. Seemingly, it has taken a stance on assisting former war survivors to access justice, distributing land to the public and releasing those detained in remand prison.¹⁵ In 2010, it backed Fonseka who was also accused of alleged war crimes along with Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother, Gotabaya. It has expressed its interest in working with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in power devolution to the North and the East, and addressing the issues of reconciliation.¹⁶ The TNA is known to be promoting its Tamil nationalist agenda and encouraging foreign intervention in resolving post-war related issues.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, the JVP’s readiness to work with the TNA raises some doubts.

What would make JVP’s victory difficult?

Historical baggage

The JVP’s current central committee consists of members, including the leader, Dissanayake, who were a part of the revolts in 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸ The older generation, who suffered at

¹² ‘NPP Presidential candidate Dissanayake pledges to focus on uniting communities’, Times Online (18 August 2019), <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1099090/npp-presidential-candidate-dissanayake-pledges-to-focus-on-uniting-communities>. Accessed on 18 October 2019.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ‘What the country needs is a broad transformation of the socio-economic structure – AKD’, JVP Sri Lanka (9 September 2019), <http://www.jvpsrilanka.com/english/what-the-country-needs-is-a-broad-transformation-of-the-socio-economic-structure-akd/>. Accessed on 18 October 2019.

¹⁵ ‘Want to form a strong alternative force: Anura Kumara Dissanayake’, The Sunday Morning (20 October 2019), <http://www.themorning.lk/want-to-form-a-strong-alternative-force-anura-kumara-dissanayake/>. Accessed on 20 October 2019.

¹⁶ Meera Srinivasan, ‘We think what happened on October 26 is a conspiracy, says Anura Kumara Dissanayake’, The Hindu (21 November 2018), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/full-text-of-interview-with-jvp-leader-anura-kumara-dissanayake/article25560527.ece>. Accessed on 19 October 2019.

¹⁷ The TNA wants the International Criminal Court to carry out investigations on allegations of crimes during the civil war as one of its 13 demands. For more information see: C.A. Chandraprema, ‘New turn in northern Tamil politics’, The Island (19 October 2019), http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=212398. Accessed on 20 October 2019.

¹⁸ Dissanayake joined the JVP in 1987 during its insurgency days. In 1995 he was the National Organizer of the Socialist Students Association, appointed to the Central Working Committee of the JVP in the same year and eventually entered the politburo in 1998. He took over the group’s leadership in 2014 from Amarasinghe who passed away a few years ago. For more information see: ‘A look back into the life of the NPP Presidential candidate; Anura K.’, News First (18 August 2019), <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/08/18/a-look-back-into-the-life-of-the-npp-presidential-candidate-anura-k/>. Accessed on 21 October 2019.

the time, still associates the JVP with violence, making it difficult for the party to gain votes from those who had experienced the horrors. Despite claiming to have made a clean break for more than two decades, the JVP has had to continuously defend itself against allegations and rumours that the group was re-arming for another insurrection.

Inability to Build-up its Vote Base

It has been more than 20 years since the JVP came into mainstream democratic politics. Yet, it has failed to increase its vote base. Even though it managed to win close to 10 per cent of votes in 2001, the decision to contest in alliances and the splits within the group have resulted in the JVP's failure to build its vote base. The only time the JVP managed to gain more than 20 seats in the parliament was when it allied with the SLFP in 2004. Its fickle-mindedness at every election has resulted in voter stagnation. For instance, after the split of the party in 2008, the JVP only managed to garner 5.49 per cent and 3.68 per cent of votes in the 2010 and 2015 parliamentary elections respectively. Moreover, in general, Sri Lanka's presidential race has always been a bipolar contest and the alternative forces have only managed to gain less than two per cent of the votes.

Multiple Parties with Similar Ideologies

The JVP under the NPP coalition is not the only political contender that has made promises to end corruption, develop human resources, develop inter-religious harmony, and promote reconciliation efforts. The National Peoples Movement has put forth a similar ideological narrative, which could weaken the JVP's support base. However, the JVP could increase its vote base if it manages to convince the NPP or other like-minded groups to rally behind it.

Conclusion

The JVP's ideological reorientation in the 1990s and 2000s emerged from its ability to leverage on new spaces created in the political and economic system. Although the JVP has rebranded itself as a mainstream, non-violent, and non-insurgent force, many of its members of the central committee were actively involved during its violent days. Hence, some voters, especially the older generation who lived during the insurgencies, may have reservations about voting for the JVP.

From an ideological standpoint, the group has de-emphasised and re-emphasised Sinhala nationalism based on the country's political climate. Its complex political ideology could confuse voters on what exactly it stands for. Simultaneously, the JVP has supported a variety of other political actors and moved no-confidence motions in recent years. In 2018, it supported Wickremesinghe, along with the TNA, when he was unconstitutionally dismissed by Sirisena. The JVP was both strategic and empathic in its resistance by moving two non-confidence motions against Rajapaksa. In 2019, it moved a no-confidence motion against the incumbent government for failing to prevent the Easter Sunday attacks. While party defections and political restructuring is extremely common in Sri Lanka, the JVP has done it much more frequently than other political actors.

Although the JVP has been a powerful voice of dissent and has taken on the main political parties on issues involving nepotism and corruption in the parliament, it is unlikely that the group under the NPP banner would be an alternative force. At best, it could dilute the UNP's and the SLPP's vote share. While the JVP has entered a broad coalition under the NPP banner, little is known about the other parties in the group. Sri Lankan elections have historically been a two-party contest despite the presence of multiple parties, including the JVP, for decades. Moreover, the party has seen many defections in the last 20 years, undermining its internal unity. Its policies have also been fairly inconsistent, and it has switched alliances with groups of conflicting ideologies. Furthermore, there is barely any thematic difference between the JVP and other contesting groups which are trying to appeal to voters who are fed up with the two main parties, their governance, policies and styles of leadership. Although the JVP under the NPP alliance has drawn thousands of people during its initial election rallies, it is unlikely to be a game-changer at the forthcoming presidential elections.

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