

The JVP: Nazi-communist terrorism in Sri Lanka

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

A ray of hope of settling the complex Tamil issue in Sri Lanka has emerged with the installation of a Tamil-dominated coalition government in the newly formed North-Eastern Province. But the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) has unleashed a reign of terror which has seriously undermined the prospects for a political resolution of the conflict that has engulfed Sri Lanka over the past six years. The rise of the classic communist-fascist JVP, an ethnic terrorist Sinhalese organization, from virtually nothing in 1980, to a controlling factor in Sri Lanka's political arena is perhaps the most dramatic testimony to the toll the strife has taken on the social and political fabric of this island nation.

On Nov. 13, the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* published a written interview with JVP leader Rohan Wijeweera, who has remained underground since the 1983 Colombo riots in which the JVP's role was mentioned by then President and head of the ruling United National Party (UNP), Junius Jayewardene. In the interview, Wijeweera said that the JVP's foremost task is to "chase out the Indian troops," a reference to the Indian Peace Keeping Force battling remnants of the belligerent Tamil militants under provisions of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord; "repeal the pact of betrayal," the Accord; "dissolve provincial councils," set up to give some degree of autonomy to the Tamil majority in the North-Eastern Province; "and chase out the Jayewardene-Thondaman government." Thondaman is a Tamil leader who heads the Ceylon Workers' Congress and was a minister in the Jayewardene government.

Though they have the ring of the empty boasts of a "revolutionary," Wijeweera's words sent a chill down the spine of Sri Lanka's politicians. Aided by assassins and an indifferent law-and-order machinery, the JVP has established a strong foothold as the group which can terrorize the public to get what it wants. JVP terrorism, which means walking into public meetings with guns ablaze and burning down homes and railway stations, has gripped the entire south and most of the central, western, and northwestern provinces in paralyzing fear. Public figures with political affiliations and political workers are gunned down at their homes as they step out the door in the morning. Anyone supporting the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord is particularly targeted.

The JVP membership is estimated at 10,000, with 2,000 full-time workers.

The impact of terrorism

The JVP-inflicted terror has virtually frozen the entire political leadership. In spite of former President Jayewardene's February statement that he would "crush the JVP," the same President agreed on Nov. 10 to the JVP demand that he dissolve the parliament and install a caretaker cabinet to oversee the presidential and general elections. Jayewardene did set terms for the JVP—that they would have to join the democratic process—but it was clear who had the upper hand. Since the JVP later raised the stakes, demanding a "total change," President Jayewardene had to back out. Meanwhile, the terror continued.

On the other side, the main opposition group, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has used the JVP to its own advantage. In 1971, soon after SLFP leader Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike assumed office, the JVP led a lightning attack across the island on police stations and army barracks in an attempt to grab power.

Although the "instant revolution" was brought under control, the JVP went underground. Officially, 1,000 insurgents were killed by the armed forces, but most independent estimates put the figure at over 10,000. At Mrs. Bandaranaike's request, the Indian government had flown in 5,000 Indian troops, and ordered the Indian Navy to seal off Sri Lanka to prevent any external support for the insurgents.

Following the large-scale outbreak of violence in 1983 in Colombo, targeting the Tamils, then-President Jayewardene, who had lifted the ban on the JVP in 1977, accused the JVP and two other leftist groups of inciting the violence. From then on, the Tamil issue pushed Jayewardene into a corner. On the one hand, he realized that the discrimination against the Tamils had to be ended. On the other hand, he was aware of the capability of the chauvinist Sinhalese, the majority community, to make gains politically and chaos socially. Moreover, after the ban on the JVP was lifted, some UNP ministers with close caste affiliations to the JVP, men such as Cyril Mathew, had recruited JVP cadre into the UNP. It is these "ex-JVP" men within the UNP who are believed to

have been responsible for the pogroms against Tamils in 1983.

Mrs. Bandaranaike did not miss the chance to make political gains, and began to court the JVP while spewing Sinhala chauvinist rhetoric. She attacked President Jayewardene for succumbing to Indian pressure to give the Tamils what they want. Added comfort to her at that point was the JVP tactic of selectively killing ruling United National Party members only. Even when the JVP turned its guns toward other groups like the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP), a leftist breakaway from the SLFP, Mrs. Bandaranaike did not give up hope that an arrangement with the JVP would be possible. Last February, JVP gunmen killed SLMP leader Vijaya Kumaramatunga, Mrs. Bandaranaike's son-in-law.

The JVP proved no more responsive to Mrs. Bandaranaike's opportunism than to Mr. Jayewardene's sticks-and-carrots. Following Jayewardene's JVP demands, Mrs. Bandaranaike made a desperate attempt to get JVP support for her presidential candidacy, but to no avail. Rohan Wijeweera made it clear that he considered any election held by the Jayewardene government to be fraudulent. As for Mrs. Bandaranaike, on Nov. 12, the JVP put up posters in the southern provinces, its stronghold, telling SLFP members to quit the party or "face execution."

A political cancer

Although the JVP broke into the international media in 1971 following its abortive coup attempt, the organization was formed in 1964 and had been involved in sporadic violence since 1965. Led by Wijeweera, son of a petty businessman of Kotteguda village on the outskirts of the southern town of Matera, the party had its initial base in southern Sri Lanka. Wijeweera's early dabbling in Marxism was solidified during a stint at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow. He soon gave up his medical studies and embraced radical Marxism.

Under the impress of the Sino-Soviet "split," Wijeweera became disillusioned with Soviet "revisionism" and, tracked on to North Korea and China, styling himself a "Maoist." At the time of the 1971 coup attempt, Sri Lanka severed diplomatic links with North Korea on the grounds of its alleged involvement in the JVP-led insurgency. Wijeweera was also widely understood to have undergone guerrilla training in the Middle East under a left-wing faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

From the outset, however, Wijeweera was a confirmed Sinhala chauvinist, and his Marxist-Maoist litany was draped over a core of Nazi-like racism. He explained his distaste for President Jayewardene, for instance, by citing documents that the former president's ancestry was Tamil, and that he had simply adopted a Sinhala name to cover it up.

It is the Nazi-like racism that accounts for the JVP's virtually symbiotic relationship with the most rabid and degraded elements of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) in the Tamil movement.

To raise funds, Wijeweera adopted fascist methods, authorizing armed robberies of banks and homes on the plea that the "capitalist class" wanted to destroy his "patriotic struggle." No mere babe in the woods, Wijeweera also established a beachhead among Sinhala chauvinists employed in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Wijeweera retains a number of friends and fellow-travelers within the military to this day.

Though JVP's activities were confined to southern Sri Lanka in the early days, in such towns as Hambantota, Matara, Tangalle, and Galle, they began to spread northward in the post-1983 period. Briefly, following Wijeweera's release from prison and the lifting of the ban on the party in 1977, the JVP surfaced and began working with the Tamils in the North and Eastern provinces. But the group's anti-Tamil bigotry was not forgotten. In the 1982 presidential election, the only one in which it ever contested, the JVP came in third in the predominantly Sinhala areas and fifth out of six in the Tamil-dominated North and East.

The 1983 anti-Tamil riots forced Wijeweera and the rest of the JVP leadership to go underground once again. From underground, JVP denied any link with the Tamil extremists and denounced the Tamils as "imperialist stooges" trying to divide up Sri Lanka. Reverting back to its pre-1971 organizing tactic, JVP accused the Jayewardene government of "selling out to the Tamils." JVP activity since 1983, recruitment from the Sinhala population in particular, has been boosted by LTTE militancy in the north.

Since 1983, the JVP's targets for recruitment have been students, both at the college and school levels, and Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists represented by such vicious anti-Tamil figures as Palipane Chandana Thero, chief of the Asgiriya Temple in Kandy, and Rev. Maduluwawe Sobitha, who leads the Khomeini-style *Maubima Surakima Vyaparaya* (Protectors of the Motherland). Although the Buddhist monks appear to have very little sympathy for Wijeweera's "proletariat," his anti-Tamil and anti-India vitriolics have touched their hearts. Other high priests, such as Mahanayake Thero of Malwatte, Venerable Maruttuwewe Ananda Theri of Janata Satan Peramuna, and others, have identified themselves as antagonists of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and boosted the JVP by preaching Sinhala chauvinism.

Having succeeded in generating support from a significant section of the Buddhist *Sangha* (Organization), Wijeweera set about to do what he knows best: He unleashed his young activists to terrorize, burn, and kill. As the UNP leaders and workers were being killed in their homes, the opposition SLFP began to realize that JVP might be useful in unseating the ruling party. Mrs. Bandaranaike, 11 years out of power and victimized by President Jayewardene herself, began attending the chauvinists' meetings along with the JVP and hawkish Buddhist monks.

Mrs. Bandaranaike may have failed to realize that the JVP does not believe in any political process, and that when

the time comes, she would also be discarded like the UNP and SLMP. The Buddhist monks, on the other hand, do not believe in any political process either, and will be perfectly content as long as rabid Sinhala chauvinists assume power in Colombo, to break the Accord and reject all Tamil demands.

The terror campaign

After the signing of the Accord by Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on July 29, 1987, JVP raised the politics of violence to a higher plane. Wijeweera circulated recorded tapes in which he, like the Communist Party of China following the Sino-Indian war of 1962, expounded on "Indian expansionism" motivated by the economic needs of Indian capitalists. The five-tape lecture not only denounced India, but also spread venom against the tea plantation workers, Tamils of Indian origin, and Tamils in the North.

Over the past year, JVP violence has been reported as far north as Kalpitiya—more than 100 km north of Colombo. In the center province, in the hills, the JVP's violence has been increasingly reported, and virtually the entire south is fully terrorized by Wijeweera's people. By November of 1988, Sri Lanka was forced to admit the country was not safe for tourists in full diplomatic complements.

The campaign of terror, centered on annihilation of top

political leaders, began with the throwing of a hand grenade into the parliament building on Aug. 16, 1987, when parliament was in session. A week earlier, JVP had killed Jinadasa Wedasighe, a member of parliament, in Ratnapura, about 60 km southeast of Colombo. The campaign escalated:

- On Nov. 10, 1987, at least 50 people were killed when a powerful time-bomb exploded inside a transport van in the densely populated section of Colombo.

- On Dec. 23, JVP gunmen shot down UNP chairman Harsh Abeywardene and three of his staff in Colombo. On the same day, a trade unionist and active member of the UNP was stabbed to death in the southern district of Galle.

- On Feb. 16, 1988, two JVP gunmen shot dead Vijaya Kumaramatunga, the son-in-law of Mrs. Bandaranaike and a strong backer of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. The JVP front, Deshapremi Janata Vijaparaya (DJV), claimed responsibility. It has since been established that the DJV functions as the "brown shirts" of the JVP.

- On May 20, 1988, UNP General Secretary Nandalal Fernando was shot dead in south Colombo.

- On Oct. 14, 1988, two provincial council members belonging to the UNP were killed, along with eight others.

- On Oct. 24, 1988, several members of the JVP carrying submachine guns, entered the UNP office in Colombo and mowed down four UNP members. Twenty others were injured in the firing.

- On Dec. 1, gunmen opened fire and exploded bombs at a leftist presidential candidate's campaign rally, killing four and wounding about 100. The candidate, Ossie Abeygoonasekara of the SLMP, was unhurt, and later reported that the army and police had remained inactive while the JVP gunmen were shooting people down. It was the second attempt on Abeygoonasekara's life in two weeks.

This is but a sampling of JVP terrorism over the past year. Nearly once a week reports come of bombing of railway stations and attacks on police stations and army depots by the JVP. While the bombing of bus and railway stations is aimed at terrorizing the population, the attacks on police and military targets are to collect weapons, and are done in concert with JVP sympathizers within the law enforcement agencies. In addition to Abeygoonasekara's report, JVP infiltration of the police and military was confirmed when JVP attacked a military detention camp in Pelawatta, 70 km southeast of Colombo, on Nov. 6 and released 153 prisoners, all of them JVP activists.

That JVP terror had become perhaps the most potent force in central and southern Sri Lanka became evident in early November, when JVP called for an indefinite strike throughout the country. On Nov. 10, when candidates for the presidential election went to submit their nomination papers, the capital city of Colombo was shut down. In the interior, food shortages were reported as the transport workers, many of whom are with or at least feared to cross the JVP, refused to work.

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