

The Revival of the JVP after 1989

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What follows is a brief account of the history of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) from 1990 to the election victory of the JVP-led broader front, the National People's Power (NPP) in 2024.¹ Given the fact that several layers of the JVP leadership had been exterminated by the state machinery when the 1989 insurgency came to a tragic end in the early 1990s, this is not only a remarkable recovery, but also a story of some fundamental structural changes in the political domain of the country.

One of the basic facts that needs to be noted here is that the JVP is a 'Southern' political party, a qualification that needs little explanation. The North-South bifurcation is a fundamental fact that is pertinent to any discussion on the political domain of Sri Lanka. The 'South' is the area where Sinhala people predominantly live. The political behaviour of these areas has to be distinguished from the 'North' where Tamil people predominantly live. Political behaviours of the two entities are fundamentally different. It is in this context that the JVP is understood as a 'Southern' party.

The most pertinent question to be asked is how the JVP transformed itself from a political outfit that launched two armed insurgencies, into a mainstream political party which led a broader political alliance capable of winning a popular election and capturing state power.

During this period of recovery after 1990, the JVP benefited immensely from the steep decline in the popular attraction to conventional political parties. Although the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the two major parties, continued to play prime roles in electoral politics in the 1990s, the permanent allegiance of voters to these political parties was dwindling significantly. Forming alliances to contest elections, and the tendency to attract

non-party political actors to these alliances, were the best indicators of the decline of permanent and effective party allegiance among voters.

The decline of party allegiance was closely linked to several significant societal changes, including the massive increase of population around Colombo, which led to the formation of a new urban middle class. This resulted in shifting the centre of gravity of politics from rural areas to more urbanised areas. The party allegiance of voters significantly weakened with this shift. In other words, permanent affiliation to a political party was weaker among the voters of the new urban middle classes, than among the rural voters. The impact of this phenomenon on the UNP and the SLFP was immense. These parties lost most of their permanent party supporters of the 1960s and 1970s, i.e., the type of party supporters who were popularly known as '*kepuwath kola, kepuwath nil*'.² The post-1989 JVP could be placed within this largely new and fast changing political landscape in the Sinhala South.

The brutal suppression of the insurgency was a political defeat to the UNP. The counter-insurgency measures that were deployed to suppress the insurgency became quite unpopular and the UNP was heavily criticised for running a regime of terror. Much of the regime of terror continued even after the insurgency was effectively over. This situation gave birth to a new type of political activism, which brought various non-party political actors into the political mainstream. Major themes of this new political activism are linked to the broadening of democratic rights.

While this new domain of political activism paved the way to the significant electoral defeat of the UNP in 1994, bringing the People's Alliance (PA) led by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga into power, it also provided a safe and effective passage for the JVP to re-enter the political mainstream. Young political activists who were politicised largely during the insurgency became the backbone of the domain of this new political activism.

¹ Editors' note: This is an edited and expanded version of the author's 'Preface' to the second edition of Prins Gunasekera's *Sri Lanka in Crisis: A Lost Generation – The Untold Story* (2024, Colombo: Kavivara). We are grateful to Ms. Geshni Gunasekera for her permission to make it available to our readers.

² Editors' note: *Kola* meaning green and *nil* meaning blue in Sinhala, the party colours of the UNP and SLFP respectively, this expression, translated roughly, means they "bleed" green or blue in their deep attachment to their respective parties.

There was immensely effective intervention by a large contingent of JVP activists in the new political domain. These young activists, hitherto mainly active on the periphery of the armed insurgency, got the opportunity to be active in public political domains such as university student politics, and various public campaigns such as human rights lobby, journalism, and cultural activism. While this new activism helped the JVP to revive itself, these involvements also gave the JVP activists much needed protection as counter-insurgency activities were still in place.

A new wave of Sinhala-language tabloid newspapers, such as *Ravaya*, *Yukthiya*, *Lakmina*, and *Lakdiva*, as well as organisations such as the Free Media Movement and the Mothers' Front, in addition to a large spectrum of individual political actors, were important ingredients of this new domain of political activism. Interestingly, this new domain consisted of a large number of political actors who were vehemently opposed to the JVP-led insurgency. However, a new loose and informal alliance was formed between pro- and anti-JVP elements, particularly on the basis of 'democratic' slogans, on issues related to freedom of expression, and what we now call transitional justice.

The internal crisis of the UNP, which led to the desertion of a number of UNP heavyweights, including Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, the assassination of President Premadasa, and the subsequent election defeat of the UNP, served the JVP regroupment plan very well.

The election of one member from the JVP-supported electoral alliance, *Jathiya Galawaganime Peramuna* (Front to Save the Nation), to parliament from the Hambantota district at the 1994 parliamentary election was more than symbolic. The last-minute support of the JVP to the PA at the presidential election of 1994, ostensibly on the basis of the promise of the abolition of the so-called 'Executive Presidential System,' too helped the JVP well. Although the JVP had a negative public image due to its role in the era of terror (*Bheeshana Yugaya*), this image was overshadowed by the worst memories of state-sponsored terror and the popular perception of the JVP youth as a group of patriotic young people who loved the country. There was also a perception that the JVP was unjustly forced to take up arms as they were not allowed to participate freely in the political mainstream following the questionable proscription of the party in July 1983. Moreover, there was a perception that the JVP violence was in response to state-sponsored violence. Therefore, the JVP did not have much difficulty in re-entering the political mainstream in terms of winning public trust.

The end of the 17-year rule of the UNP in 1994 proved to be very favourable to the JVP. Although the PA emerged victorious, the SLFP, the main constituent party of the PA, did not have a strong political grip over the voters, including the rural middle classes, its traditional class base. Social and political relations in the rural areas of the Sinhala South had gone through massive changes. The traditional political leadership in this rural setting that formed the backbone of the SLFP, which was instrumental in its election victories of 1956 and 1970, was no longer active and effective. A new social layer had emerged, and it became the political backbone of the 17-year UNP rule in the rural areas. This new political class, while dominant in rural electoral politics, had become quite unpopular as the abuse of political power was the main character of their political conduct. The PA too was forced to rely on this political class.

The discontent of the rural masses towards the two main political parties was mainly due to the behaviour of this highly corrupt political class. The JVP had the opportunity to effectively address this discontent. *Dhūshanaya* and *Bheeshanaya* (corruption and terror) became the popular diagnosis of political decay. The JVP was working hard to project itself as an alternative political leadership. The slogan used at its election campaigns at the end of the 1990s, namely "*unuth ekayi, munuth ekayi, medā pāra api Javipeta*" (meaning "both parties are equally bad and this time, we are for the JVP"), seemed to have worked quite effectively. However, patron-client relationships were still effective, and the rural masses were in need of the service of the corrupt political class to liaise with the state, hence the two main parties still commanded sizable control over the rural masses.

Even in such a situation the JVP managed to carve out significant support for itself at the provincial council elections in the late 1990s and two parliamentary elections in 2000 and 2001. It performed particularly well in urban middle class areas where patron-client relationships are not quite effective in electoral politics.

As against one seat in the 225-member parliament at the 1994 election, the JVP won 10 and 16 seats at successive parliamentary elections in 2000 and 2001, in addition to winning a number of seats at local government and provincial council elections. At the 2004 parliamentary election, the JVP managed to win 39 district-based seats, in addition to the two national list seats it was entitled to when it formed a tactical electoral alliance with the SLFP. The JVP candidates in many districts surpassed SLFP candidates in preferential votes. As the JVP performance was quite embarrassing

to the SLFP leadership, the former gave up the two national list seats to which it was entitled to the SLFP. This voting pattern reflected the voter's paradox where they had a strong opposition to the corrupt political class, while they were compelled to support this class to access their political patronage.

Another factor that facilitated the rise of the JVP since the late 1990s was the revival of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. From its inception, the JVP had a moderate Sinhala nationalist orientation. This became explicit during the insurgency of 1987-89. Nevertheless, its nationalist orientation was somewhat sidelined in the early and mid-1990s, when non-nationalist orientations in the political domain were dominant. The situation changed again in the latter part of the 1990s. The intensification of the war, the waning popularity of the PA government, and most importantly, the revival of the political power of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology, particularly in the form of the *Jāthika Chintanaya* ('National Thinking') movement, created a fitting environment for the JVP to slip into its nationalist shoes again.³

The association with Sinhala nationalism became also a tactical necessity, owing to the emergence of yet another youth political movement led by Champika Ranawaka, an energetic political activist who was much more capable than the JVP of articulating Sinhala nationalist ideology. The JVP saw the danger of allowing the Ranawaka group to benefit from the growing popularity of the Sinhala nationalist political appeal. It is in this context that a strong connection between the JVP and Sinhala nationalism was established. In fact, the JVP was successful in checking the rise of the Ranawaka group as an alternative to them.

Irrespective of the loss of a large number of activists to the brutal counter-insurgency measures, a sizable number of activists were still dispersed all over the island. Moreover, the JVP had a strong presence in the state university system. It provided the JVP with a large contingent of energetic young activists. The ability to network, the high degree of commitment among the cadre, and the ability to mobilise its limited resources effectively, were notable features of the organisation of the JVP. It certainly inherited these features from its past as a clandestine revolutionary movement. These proved to be fruitful investments for the future.

The post-1990 continuous growth of the JVP was arrested by the unexpected rise of the Mahinda Rajapaksa project. The JVP's tactical alliance with the Rajapaksa project backfired somewhat, as the latter was able to capture the political imagination of the Sinhala South for a fairly long period after the military victory over the Tamil militants in 2009. To make the situation worse, a significant split occurred in the party, when the JVP tried to distance itself from the Rajapaksa administration. A group with a strong ideological orientation towards Sinhala nationalism, led by Wimal Weerawansa, the JVP's most influential public figure at that time, left the JVP in 2008 to join the Mahinda Rajapaksa government. Another split occurred in 2011 when a large contingent of its cadres, led by one of its powerful internal leaders, Kumar Gunaratnam, broke away from the JVP. Both these splits proved to be major blows. The two breakaway groups represented extreme political ideals: Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism by the Wimal Weerawansa group and ultra-left ideals by the Kumar Gunaratnam group. These two ideological orientations were indeed central to the ideological baggage of the JVP. When it lost support of both these ideologies, namely Sinhala nationalism and left radicalism, particularly at a time when the Rajapaksa project was dominant in the Sinhala South, the JVP seemed to be in the political wilderness.

The recovery of the JVP after the two internal splits has to be understood in terms of the shrinking of popular attraction to the Rajapaksa project. The Rajapaksa project rested on four major pillars, namely, Mahinda Rajapaksa's charisma; Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; patron-client networks led by highly corrupt local political leadership; and the social fantasy of the new middle class for speedy economic growth of a Singaporean type and an orderly society.

A few years after the war, particularly at the end phase of the second term of the Mahinda Rajapaksa presidency, there was a growing perception among the public that the Rajapaksas were running a highly corrupt regime, misusing the president's popularity. The conduct, or rather misconduct, of the rural political class was particularly damaging for the regime's popularity. People, while continuing to vote for the Rajapaksas, gazed at the misconduct of this local political class with hidden anger. We saw how this accumulated anger erupted violently when the properties of this local political class were severely attacked during the popular uprising in mid-2022.

The JVP was the main beneficiary of the decline of the popularity of the Rajapaksas. Although Gotabaya Rajapaksa, with a new image for himself as a clean and

³ I have analysed this movement elsewhere. See: Dewasiri, Nirmal Ranjith. (2018). "*Jāthika Chintanaya*: History and Political Significance". *ColomboArts Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* II (3): 41-55. <https://colomboarts.cmb.ac.lk/?p=360>

effective leader with a high level of integrity, managed to salvage the Rajapaksa project, it was only for a very short period. Now the JVP was well-placed to fill the political vacuum created by the political decline of the Rajapaksas.

However, even before the 2022 economic and political crisis, the JVP took two important steps that prepared it for the new role. One was the change of the leadership as early as 2014, when the 'Old Guard' Somawansa Amarasinghe was replaced by Anura Kumara Disanayake (AKD), a much younger personality with a remarkable ability to articulate ideas to the ordinary people. He also appeared as one with moderate views, which helped transform the negative perception of the JVP as an old type, ultra-left political entity.

The other step was the creation of a broader front, the National Peoples' Power (*Jathika Jana Balawegaya*) bringing together a large spectrum of non-party political actors. Although the NPP and the AKD leadership did not perform well in its first appearance in the 2019 and 2020 elections, particularly in the face of the brief popularity of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the fall of Gotabaya and the popular uprising in 2022 created a massive political vacuum in the Sinhala South, which could only be filled by the JVP-led NPP under the leadership of AKD.

There are however several unresolved issues with the political ascendancy of the NPP. The most important one is whether the NPP can sustain its unexpected popularity even in the short run. This is particularly an issue to be reckoned with in the context of the extremely weak voter allegiance to the NPP. Compared to the party-voter nexus in the 1960s and 1970s, the JVP as a political party has only a tiny fraction of the massive voter attraction that the NPP enjoyed in the two recent elections. The level of expectations of the NPP government among ordinary voters is extremely high. Given the complex and highly volatile economic

and political circumstances, it is not easy for the NPP government to fulfill these expectations, at least in the short run.

This is particularly significant as diverse oppositional forces, including the ultra-left, spearheaded by the Frontline Socialist Party, ultra-Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist groups, as well as groups on the political right, benefiting from some degree of discontent among certain sections in the political landscape which are mainly mobilised on highly influential social media platforms, compete with each other to form an oppositional political platform to counter the popularity of the NPP.

The JVP's answer to this volatile situation seems to be harnessing its grip on the government, probably at the expense of the NPP. This might seem to be a politically immature move in the context of voter behaviour that is not favourable to strong party affiliations. While the increasing involvement of JVP elements in government affairs will help replace the local level erstwhile corrupt political class with a new group of JVP cadres who are more politically literate and less corrupt, it will also significantly weaken the popular appeal of the NPP as a moderate social democratic political platform.

Whether this situation will have a negative impact on the NPP government will largely depend on the ability of the oppositional forces to emerge as a unified political entity that can challenge the NPP vote base, particularly in the upcoming local government election.

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