

# The Insurrectionary JVP and the Sri Lankan State

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**M**uch has been written about the insurrectionary Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—People’s Liberation Front). The main focus has been on the character of the organisation itself, why it emerged, and how it was defeated in 1971, and again in 1989. This paper deals with a different set of issues: the ways in which the Sri Lankan state and the insurrectionary JVP interacted and shaped one another. This reflects a broader interest in the question of why the quality of national governance in Sri Lanka has deteriorated so much in the 50 years since the first JVP insurrection of 1971. I suggest that JVP-state interactions can help explain that deterioration. But only so far. There is much more to that story – which is far too big and complex to explore further here.

## **Invented Insurrections**

My primary argument is that the two insurrectionary JVPs – that we can label JVP1 and JVP2 – were in large degree ‘invented’ by the state. The nature of the ‘invention’ however differs:

- In 1971, the state – and foreign ideological sympathisers<sup>1</sup> – accepted and replicated the JVP’s (aspirational-cum-delusional) self-definition as an organised, coherent, disciplined, and ideologically-motivated organisation that came close to toppling the government. In reality, JVP1 was a sprawling, loose-knit, undisciplined network that never stood a chance of success. Even before the April insurrection, the government was exaggerating the JVP threat to distract attention from its own considerable political and economic problems. Later, the government needed some

retrospective justification for the fact that the police and the armed forces had tortured and slaughtered thousands of young people in the process of restoring control of those rural areas from which the police had withdrawn. The narrative that the JVP had been a deadly torpedo aimed directly at the ship of state helped justify the carnage.

- Following the defeat in 1971 and the subsequent repression, banning, trials and imprisonment, and later release of some of the leaders, the JVP again became legal in 1977. By the early 1980s, the JVP had been reinvented as a movement that, while still talking of revolution, was in practice substantially committed to competing for votes in elections. It did that with some success. But that trajectory was abandoned when the government proscribed the JVP as part of a blatantly phoney attempt to blame left wing political organisations for the 1983 pogrom against the Tamil population; that in large part resulted from the acts of omission and commission of government itself and components of the ruling party. Further, the police had been continually harrying JVP members since the movement re-emerged, obliging them to pay a high price for adopting the electoral route. The facts of proscription and harassment, and the political weakness of the government, especially after Indian troops occupied part of the north in 1987 in connection with the escalating separatist conflict, provided the ever-imaginative and innovative JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera, with a new opportunity to take the path of armed insurrection. It is likely that, had it been allowed to do so, the JVP would have continued on the democratic path. It had commanded significant popular support and sympathy.

I conclude by sketching out how the need to combat the JVP contributed to the creation of a more militarised state apparatus, more capable of combatting terrorism, more adept at using terrorist-type methods against its opponents, and more closely aligned symbolically and culturally with the notion of Sri Lanka as a Sinhalese-Buddhist state.

### What do we agree on?

Some judgements about JVP1 and JVP2 seem almost beyond challenge:

- They were dominantly movements of young Sinhalese males, with a modal age of around 20 years.
- The personal connections made in Central Colleges (*Maha Vidyalayas*) and universities were central to recruitment and management.
- Participants were very largely from the poorer half of the population.
- An additional motivating force was the very limited employment prospects for young people who were sufficiently prosperous to graduate from high school and university, but insufficiently connected to centres of economic and social power to obtain secure jobs.
- Rohana Wijeweera, one of the most talented politicians that modern Sri Lanka has produced, played a dominant role in shaping and re-shaping the movement ideologically, politically, and organisationally.

Beyond that there are many differences of opinion. As one would expect of an avowedly Marxist enterprise competing violently with other Marxist parties and groups, much attention has been paid to the 'class base' of the JVP (Alexander 1981; Keerawella 1980). I don't think it is useful to investigate that question before tackling a prior issue: what kind of *movement* or *organisation* was the JVP? We almost automatically use those terms to describe it. But they may be misleading. *Organisation* in particular implies coherence, distinct lines of authority, and clear boundaries between who is in and who is out. That is how the JVP and other contemporary revolutionaries characterised themselves – and were understood by others. In Paul Alexander's words:

The Sri Lankan insurrection fits a familiar model. A tightly organised revolutionary party, with its origins in the Left politics of the urban intelligentsia, establishes cells throughout the rural population. A closely coordinated attack is launched against the State and within a short period the insurgents control much of the countryside and threaten the cities. Other nations respond to government requests for help, however, and the rebellion is crushed. Although the rebellion is grounded in deteriorating political and economic conditions the crucial factor is the leadership provided by the centrally controlled party organisation (Alexander 1981: 124-5).

In the case of the JVP, and especially JVP1, that image is actively misleading. It is better to think of JVP1 in particular as a series of loose, flexible, to some extent overlapping networks that were continuously changing, and were not always under central control. The network was certainly more centrally designed and controlled

in the 1980s by Rohana Wijeweera. When the 1971 insurrection was launched, he was in jail and unable to direct operations. Most people associated with JVP1 or JVP2 had a weak or tenuous connection with the movement. They played minor roles and often moved quickly into and out of its orbit.

## JVP1

The common understanding of the military dimension of the 1971 insurgency is that the core operation, according to a decision taken by the JVP leadership on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, was to be simultaneous assaults on police stations all over the island on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> April. However, for some reason that remains obscure, one group attacked the Wellawaya police station a day early, on 4<sup>th</sup> April. In consequence, all police stations were alerted. Those thought to be especially vulnerable were abandoned and their personnel shifted to more defensible stations. The police were ready for the attacks when they came on 5<sup>th</sup> April. Therefore, most attacks failed. The police maintained control of most rural areas. Had they not been forewarned, the initial strike might have been much more effective. The areas occupied by the JVP were then re-occupied over the next few weeks as the Army was deployed, partly because several overseas governments quickly flew ammunition and other military supplies into Colombo.

The most convincing critique of this account was written by Paul Alexander (1981), who was doing field research in the Southern Province at the time. Some of the main specific points from his analysis are:

- In the months before the April uprising, the Government of Sri Lanka, facing a host of economic and political problems, had been actively promoting the narrative that it was facing the prospect of armed insurgency by a tightly organised revolutionary group.<sup>2</sup>
- The great bulk of the formal leadership of the JVP, including those at various points listed as Politburo members, played no role at all in the attacks or the fighting.
- Related, there was no significant military action in or around Colombo or Kandy and there were very few university graduates among those later arrested as insurgents.
- We do not know how many police stations were actually attacked on 5<sup>th</sup>. The only detailed statistics we have are from a 1976 report by the Inspector General of Police that states "... 93 police stations were attacked by the insurgents between the

5<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> inclusive" (Alexander 1981: 126). The official news released on the radio in the first few days implied that the attacks were sporadic and staggered, rather than coordinated: 10 on 5<sup>th</sup> April, and a further 10 on the 6<sup>th</sup> (Alexander 1981: 127).

- "While the police were badly armed, with obsolete rifles and little ammunition, the insurgents were limited to handmade bombs and shot guns. In such circumstances, the capture of a few police stations does not presuppose substantial military skills or organisation" (Alexander 1981: 127). The description by Tassie Seneviratne, then of the Police Special Branch, of the panic that overtook the (relatively substantial) Matara police station on 8<sup>th</sup> April, illustrates that point clearly.<sup>3</sup>
- In the areas of the Southern Province occupied by the insurgents, there was little sign of a military plan, and no effort seems to have been made to take over government buildings or to move fighters into adjacent areas. The insurgents sat tight until the army and police mobilised and came for them.

Alexander's broader conclusions are that (a) the JVP insurrectionists were not centrally controlled and (b) the narrative of the tightly organised communist insurrectionary movement was propagated, for different reasons, by both the government and by the JVP itself. Most local groups likely had been in contact with the (somewhat amorphous) JVP leadership. Some local groups might even have been operating purely autonomously, once they heard the news on the government radio that police stations had been attacked and some had been over-run. Alexander notes that relationships between the police and many rural populations were tense and conflictual, and that "in normal times ambushes of police patrols and attacks on police posts by enraged citizens are not uncommon" (Alexander 1981: 129). It seems implausible that an alleged – and unverified – 'decision' taken by the JVP national leadership on 2<sup>nd</sup> April could have been communicated and acted upon to produce a nationwide series of attacks on 5<sup>th</sup> April or soon after.

There is a major question that Alexander underplays and other commentators have largely ignored. How did the JVP leadership and local groups communicate with one another? There was a national landline telephone service, but it was very thin outside Colombo. The police and armed forces had radios and could use the telegram service. But if the telegram service was available to the JVP before the attacks struck, they soon lost

access to it (Alles 1976: 154). It is hard to imagine how, in these circumstances, any JVP leadership could have coordinated armed operations in the rural areas. A high degree of localism in the functioning of the movement seems inevitable. This is what a former Senior Police Officer reports for a part of Galle district:

Kosgoda, situated between Bentota and Ambalangoda, and stretching interior towards Uragasmanhandiya, is predominantly of the Salagama caste, considered high caste, whereas Uragasmanhandiya is predominantly of 'low caste' (Vahumpura – MM). The Kosgoda people look down on the Uragasmanhandiya low caste people and don't tolerate them in their houses. Naturally, the Uragasmanhandiya people are embittered over this discrimination. Whenever there is an opportunity like the JVP insurrection . . . the Uragasmanhandiya people exploit the situation to settle scores with the Kosgoda people. In the 1971 JVP insurrection that is exactly what happened. The JVP mobilised Uragasmanhandiya cadres to attack the Kosgoda police station, and the Uragasmanhandiya cadres joined with the added agenda of attacking the rich Kosgoda people and looting. The Kosgoda JVP cadres joined to reinforce the police station and were issued shotguns by the police. Some of them brought their own shotguns. The attackers were easily repulsed. (Private communication, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2021)

### Caste

So where does caste enter into the story more generally? Again, it is hard to even address that question sensibly unless we appreciate the extent to which JVP1 in particular was a (decentralised, flexible, shifting) *network*, as opposed to a (centralised, coherent) *organisation*. And dealing with the caste question is impeded by both the widespread unwillingness of Sinhalese to discuss caste publicly and the more specific near-silence that surrounds the disadvantaged status of the 'minority castes', above all the relatively numerous Batgama and the Vahumpura.<sup>4</sup>

Three points seem firmly established:

- The formal leadership of the 1971 JVP was dominated by young men from Buddhist Karava families from the coastal strip stretching south from Colombo to Hambantota, and to some extent centred on Ambalangoda.<sup>5</sup> This was Rohana Wijeweera's background, and it is likely that the male Buddhist Karava bias in the leadership reflected his personal network. He did

not repeat the mistake – at least not to anything like the same extent (Chandraprema 1991: 127–9) – when reconstituting the JVP in the 1980s.

- There were caste dimensions to at least some disputes within the leadership (Alles 1976: 279).
- Members of the disadvantaged 'minority castes' – dominantly the more numerous Batgama and the Vahumpura – seem especially likely to have been on the receiving end of army and police violence, and probably played a disproportionately large role in the JVP network.

The most cited publication on the caste dimensions of JVP1 is the article by Professor Gananath Obeyesekere (1974). It is based on the analysis of an official dataset on all people detained in connection with the 1971 insurrection. More specifically, the data relate to 5,700 people who were categorised as having surrendered to the police and armed forces, and 4,492 who had been arrested – a total of 10,192. About 95% of detainees are categorised by caste. Some of the caste numbers accord with impressionistic judgements, including the over-representation of the Batgama and the Vahumpura. But the surprise for many people lay in the apparent evidence that (a) the Karava were not over-represented relative to population numbers, and, even more surprisingly, (b) the dominant Goigama caste were over-represented.

Obeyesekere uses these data to throw doubt on widespread views that the 1971 insurrection was to a significant degree motivated by caste rivalries or resentments. He rather argued that it was a broad-based uprising of the disadvantaged against increasingly visible class inequality and privilege at the national level. There is no hard evidence for or against his argument. I have much sympathy with it. Unfortunately, in the process of trying to give prominence to these broader societal drivers, he confuses our understanding of the role of caste. We need to look more closely at his interpretation of the figures on detainees to which he was given access. What underlying population are they supposed to represent? Until we resolve that, we cannot draw conclusions from them.

Let us temporarily accept Obeyesekere's implicit assumption that it is useful to think in terms of a relatively homogenous category of 'participants' in JVP activities (or 'members'), rather than see the network as comprising very different sub-categories of participants that should not be conflated with one another. We should however be sceptical that the 10,192 detainees on which he had data represented a reasonably good sample of JVP participants/members more generally. Some of the reasons for scepticism are given by Obeyesekere himself. The most important ones are:

- It is not clear that this group of 10,192 detainees represents all people detained (interned, arrested, etc.) in connection with JVP activities. Other sources give larger numbers.<sup>6</sup>
- It is possible that many of the people who surrendered had only been marginally involved in the JVP (for example, they might have attended one or more of the JVP's 'Five Classes' held in many locations in the country), and perceived that, outside the areas of actual conflict, the government offer of amnesty or compassionate treatment for people who voluntarily surrendered was too good to turn down.
- It is also possible that higher caste youth with family connections to politicians, public servants, the army, and the police would be more confident that they would find protection while in custody, and were more likely to surrender.<sup>7</sup>
- As most commentators suggest, both in 1971 and in the 1980s, some of the people denounced to the police and security forces were innocent victims of personal feuds.
- Above all, these 10,192 detainees were by definition survivors of the killings that took place earlier, as the police and army re-established control and wreaked revenge.<sup>8</sup> The caste composition of the dead is therefore central. We don't know it. Neither do we know the total number of the slain. The figure of 20,000 is widely repeated, although some estimates are higher. By contrast, the lower estimates are in the range of 4-5,000 people. Let us take 5,000 as a likely figure, both to be conservative and because there are some reasons to find it more credible.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the total figure, it seems certain that members of the Batgama and Vahumpura castes were disproportionately represented. Obeyesekere himself states that "... these castes suffered the greatest number of casualties since some of the fiercest and most prolonged fighting occurred where these castes were localised – in Elpitiya in the Southern Province (Vahumpura) and in the Kegalle District (Batgama). Moreover, the army commander in one district was a native high caste person of the area who conducted the campaign with complete ruthlessness against low caste persons. Goigama folk living in proximity to these low caste people used the post-insurgency period to inform against persons of this caste, so that in some Batgama villages in the Kegalle District the youth were practically decimated" (Obeyesekere 1974: 372).

The detainee figures give us the caste identity of 9668 Sinhalese. Of these, 2,610 (27%) were from minority castes (i.e. everyone except Goigama, Karava, Salagama, and Durava).<sup>10</sup> Suppose that half of the estimated 5,000 JVP-ers (or JVP suspects) killed were from minority castes. This would then almost double the estimated number of minority caste members punished either by death or detention, and considerably increase the minority caste proportion of those adversely affected.

We cannot have faith in Obeyesekere's interpretation of the numbers to which he had access, or his specific claim that the Goigama were over-represented among JVP-ers. But that does not mean that we can conclude that the 1971 JVP was in significant degree a 'low caste movement' or, more generally, motivated by caste rivalries. The issue here is not only about relative numbers of people from different castes, but what we mean when we use terms like 'JVPers', 'members of the JVP', or 'participants in the insurgency'. If we cling to the image of the JVP as a centralised, disciplined revolutionary *organisation*, then those terms all mean much the same thing. But the people who suffered death and internment, especially members of the minority castes, could have become victims through any combination of at least four channels:

- They might have been falsely denounced to the police or the armed forces as JVP-ers for many reasons, including local caste-based rivalries.
- They might have been targeted by the security forces because they were assumed to be actual or likely JVP-ers (because of caste identity).<sup>11</sup>
- They might have had no prior connection with the JVP, but seized the opportunity provided by the early news of JVP success to contribute to the overthrow of a repressive state and socio-economic hierarchy, and/or to loot their wealthier neighbours.
- They might have been activists directly connected in some way to the national JVP network.

It seems impossible to draw very firm conclusions about the caste dimensions of the 1971 Insurgency. But caste hierarchy and inequality clearly did play a role.<sup>12</sup> We can gain more insight by examining the role of the security forces, especially the police, in reproducing social order in Sri Lanka.

## Police

The police, more than the armed forces,<sup>13</sup> were on the front line of the 1971 insurgency. They were solely responsible for criminal and political intelligence, and had been investigating the JVP. Threats against the police featured prominently on JVP posters (Alles 1976: 52). Police stations, not army barracks, were the target of the April attacks.<sup>14</sup> Although it is impossible to verify, it is often claimed that the police were guilty of the worst maltreatment and torture of JVP suspects. That was probably what people would have expected at the time: the police – and not the army – were associated with routine brutality.

Around 1970, Sri Lanka still enjoyed a good reputation for democracy, constitutionality, and the rule of law. That reputation was broadly deserved. But external observers in particular tend to have been blind to one significant exception: the police, by long tradition, have been more attuned to imposing order and protecting property and the existing social hierarchy, through brute force, than enforcing the law or investigating crime.<sup>15</sup> Little thorough research has ever been done on the operations and role of the Sri Lanka police. However, we have enough material, including some detailed organisational histories, to sketch the broad picture (Dep 1969; Fernando and Puvimanasinghe 2005; Grewal and Munasinghe 2016; Munasinghe and Celermajer 2017; Nichols 2010; Verite Research 2020).

One of the organisational progenitors of the contemporary police was the force created by the British colonial administration in 1832 to police Colombo. Initially, a substantial proportion of recruits were Malays, who had originally migrated to Sri Lanka principally to work as mercenaries. Later, Burghers became more prominent. Senior ranks were dominated by Christians, and the Sinhalese officers were predominantly Goigama (Horowitz 1980: 57).

The other organisational progenitor was the rural police cadre employed by the British colonial authorities as part of the ‘headman’ system of rural local administration. A major criterion for all recruitment into the headman system was being of ‘good family’, i.e. having the local status and resources needed to exercise wide semi-formal authority. Members of the rural police, like headmen more generally, were dominantly Goigama. Caste hierarchy was baked into the policing system, as well as local rural administration more broadly.

In the past and to a large extent still today, Police personnel systems seemed almost designed to encourage the application of force rather than skill or intelligence

to the solution of policing challenges. The recruitment bar, in terms of educational qualifications and personal aptitudes and attitudes, was set low. Little training of any kind was provided. Promotion prospects for people recruited as constables were low; the force was run by people recruited into the management cadre. The quality of accommodation and other facilities provided in police stations and police quarters was extremely poor.<sup>16</sup>

The police seemed – and still seem – to relate to society simultaneously in two different ways that stand in tension with one another (Munasinghe and Celermajer 2017). On the one hand, they sometimes appear to stand outside society, and function as a repressive tool of state authorities. In this role, they often become involved in tense confrontations with local populations, trades unions, demonstrators etc.

On the other hand, in terms of recruitment and routine social interaction, police personnel tend to be deeply embedded in society, but especially with relatively more prosperous and higher caste populations. In this role, they may both act forcibly against ‘social undesirables’, like beggars or (transgender) sex workers, and respond positively to requests for help in dealing with individual problems (e.g. removing troublesome family members from circulation by using their extensive remand powers to keep them in custody).

This understanding of the functioning of the police provides a little more insight into the 1971 Insurrection. The JVP focused on attacking police stations for clear logistical reasons: especially outside Colombo, that is where the coercive forces of state authority were concentrated. But there was likely another dimension, especially in those rural areas with large proportions of minority caste populations: the police were viewed as repressive instruments for the maintenance of socio-economic and caste hierarchies. They were obvious targets for attacks once it seemed possible that radical political change might be underway. Caste was likely implicated in the 1971 JVP in part through historic relations of enmity between the police and the more ‘troublesome’ and disadvantaged social groups. That proposition gives us some useful insight into JVP2.

## Why JVP2?

A knowledge of Sri Lankan politics in the 1970s and 1980s seems to provide us with a simple and convincing answer to this question.

The UNP won a landslide victory in the 1977 general election. The new Prime Minister, J. R. Jayawardene, who dominated the party, began introducing

substantially more authoritarian and autocratic practices and institutions. These included the new 1978 Constitution, which elevated Jayawardene into a powerful Executive Presidency.

The expectation then was that general elections would be held before the six-year parliamentary term expired in July 1983, and presidential elections would be held before the six-year presidential term expired in February 1984. Instead, Jayawardene first called presidential elections in October 1982. Note that by this point all the people imprisoned in connection with the 1971 Insurrection had been released, including Rohana Wijeweera, and the proscription on the JVP had lapsed.

The JVP had declared adherence to democracy, and was generating quite a lot of enthusiastic popular support. It contested the elections for District Development Councils in June 1981 and received 10% or more of the total vote in several districts (Gunaratna 1990: 152-3). Wijeweera contested the 1983 presidential election on behalf of the JVP. While he received only 4% of the vote, he was third placed, and greatly out-pollled the candidate of the 'traditional' Marxist Left, Colvin R. de Silva.

Jayawardene won 53% of the vote. He then announced that he planned to extend the life of the existing Parliament, elected in July 1977, for a further six years, and organised a referendum in December 1982 to approve that decision. Among other things, that perpetuated Jayawardene's very large parliamentary majority, and thus his capacity to amend the Constitution at will – a facility that he was using liberally. State power was abused in many ways to ensure that the referendum was approved. The future of democracy in Sri Lanka was very much in question.

In the meantime, low level armed Tamil separatist violence was building. It was fed by Jayawardene's refusal to negotiate a sensible degree of devolution of power for Tamil-majority districts. That all exploded in July 1983. An ambush of an army patrol in Jaffna resulted in the deaths of 13 soldiers. The army ran riot in Jaffna. Worse, the coffins bearing the dead soldiers were taken to Colombo and the funerals were handled in the way that had been urged by senior people in government who seem to have been making advance arrangements for attacks on Tamil people and property, especially in Colombo. A pogrom took place.

Jayawardene did not instigate it. But he took a long time to stop it, and made a speech that implicitly cast the blame on the Tamil population. He had to some extent lost control of the situation, and was facing a severe risk to his reputation and authority. One of his

responses was to pin the blame for the pogrom on an assortment of political leftists, including the JVP. The party was immediately proscribed, in July 1983.

So we seem to have here a complete and convincing explanation for the JVP's decision to reverse track, go underground, and begin again to organise to overthrow the state by force. They had tried the democratic path and, along with all other political parties except the governing UNP and its close allies, had been punished. It was far from certain that free elections would happen again.

The fact that the JVP was better placed than the other opposition parties to work underground likely also influenced the decision, and perhaps too the fact that they had sympathisers and supporters within the fast expanding armed forces. The first big expansion came right after the 1971 Insurgency, when the armed forces were trebled in numbers and the police numbers doubled (Jupp 1978: 19-20). Then, as the Tamil separatists began to develop significant military capacities from the early 1980s, the armed forces were expanded again. Finding good quality recruits was difficult. Many unsuitable people were accepted. Desertion was common. While the JVP probably never created their own distinct cells within the armed forces, there were supporters, sympathisers, and contacts useful for a range of purposes, including procuring weapons.

This is broadly the conventional understanding. It almost certainly provides us much of the explanation of why, despite a promising start in contesting elections, JVP2 again took the revolutionary path. But there is one additional factor worth a mention. The more detailed accounts of this period frequently mention that, even when the JVP was legitimate and democratic, its supporters and sympathisers were being continually harassed in various ways by the police and, to a lesser extent, by supporters of the ruling UNP (Gunaratna 1990: 145-60).

The time line is telling. The JVP was proscribed in July 1983. The decision to revert to armed struggle seems to have been taken a few months later, in early 1984. A separate military wing was created in 1986. The leadership exploited the reality of police repression to persuade sympathisers and supporters that they were unsafe: the state was out to get them (Chandraprema 1991: 64-5). If the police had not harassed the movement, the JVP leadership likely would have found it more difficult to mobilise the energy and enthusiasm needed to launch another insurrection.<sup>17</sup> After the proscription, people harassed and assaulted by the police for (suspected) JVP activities sometimes became very committed JVP cadres (Gunaratna 1990: 200-205).

In sum, it was the state that turned the JVP into an insurrectionary force in the 1980s. President Jayawardena made the JVP into one of the main scapegoats for the 1983 pogrom. The police and members of the ruling UNP never ceased to use violence against the movement even when it was behaving at least as democratically as the other political parties standing in elections.

### Growth of the Coercive State

The most striking single change in both the structure and the functioning of the Sri Lankan state in the past half-century lies in the growth, and active deployment, of an extensive apparatus of coercion. This is the near-inevitable result of the prevalence of armed internal conflict in the three decades from around 1980.

Before that, internal conflict was limited to the 1971 Insurgency and the spread of low level Tamil separatist violence in the Jaffna area in the late 1970s. Between 1983 and 2009, the separatist conflict was near-continuous, broken only by a few uneasy and short-lived truces, while the second JVP Insurrection of 1987-9 likely resulted in about 40,000 deaths.

The armed forces have grown much more than the police in terms of numbers, budgets, and capacities. In addition, the armed forces have largely replaced the police in the functions of collecting political intelligence and repressing political or other organisations deemed to represent threats to the state or the government. In more detail:

- The armed forces and the police have become much more numerous, absolutely and in relation to population numbers. This is especially true of the armed forces, whose current numbers are around 35 times the 1970 figure, while the total population has less than doubled.<sup>18</sup> They are better paid and equipped, and obviously consume a much larger proportion of GDP – although precise, reliable figures are not available.<sup>19</sup>
- The military capacity of the armed forces has grown enormously. In 1971 they were small, lightly armed, and devoid of combat experience. During the long separatist conflict from the early 1980s until 2009, they developed a wide range of different types of capacity to ultimately defeat one of the most competent and multi-skilled non-state military-cum-political movements known in the contemporary world.
- In the later stages of the conflict with the Tamil Tigers, and after their defeat, the armed forces have been accorded the status of national heroes,

widely memorialised and honoured, and inscribed into a deeply rooted historical narrative around the defence of a uniquely Sinhalese-Buddhist civilisation and state against external enemies.<sup>20</sup>

- Before 1971, the police and the armed forces employed significant fractions of staff who were not Sinhalese-Buddhists (Dep 1969; Horowitz 1980). Following big expansions in numbers and unwillingness to employ non-Sinhalese, they are now almost entirely Sinhalese, and very largely Buddhist.<sup>21</sup>
- During the later stages of Mahinda Rajapakse's presidency, after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the armed forces began to play a role in the general administration of the country. This trend was exacerbated when Gotabaya Rajapakse was elected President in 2019, and a much larger number of former senior officers from the armed services – currently estimated at more than 20 – were appointed to senior roles in public administration.
- The police force has become increasingly politicised: links to individual politicians or political parties shape recruitment, promotion, and deployment; and politicians in office can play a major role in the deployment of police resources. While this serves the immediate and specific needs of powerful politicians, it tends to undermine the capacity of the police to serve collective or national needs.
- In 1971, internal criminal and political intelligence was the responsibility of the police Special Branch (later the Intelligence Services Division). The armed forces had almost no capacity in these areas. Trust in the ability of the police to perform these roles competently diminished after the 1971 Insurrection and the increasing activities of the various armed Tamil separatist movements in the later 1970s. The first major step in the transfer of internal intelligence functions to the armed forces was the creation of the National Intelligence Bureau (now the State Intelligence Bureau) in 1984. This drew staff from both the police and the armed forces, but was headed by someone from the police service until 2019. At the beginning of JVP2, the police still bore the major responsibility for domestic intelligence, but proved vulnerable to targeted assassinations, and were not up to the job. The armed forces quickly developed their own intelligence and counter-terrorism capacities, and came to dominate, as they do today (Gunaratna 1990: 326).



- Beginning with the defeat of JVP2 in 1989, the state has developed a significant, permanent illicit and unacknowledged capacity to assassinate both military and political opponents.

Politically and militarily, JVP2 posed much more of a threat to the Sri Lankan state than JVP1, and was associated with much more bloodshed. Again, the figures are much in dispute, but let us accept the conventional estimate of 40,000 deaths in total. It is very likely that more than half of those killed were actual/suspected/alleged JVP-ers, but this time the JVP itself murdered on a large scale. We know much more about JVP2 than JVP1.<sup>22</sup> There is no space here to even summarise the trajectory of JVP2. I will focus on how that trajectory contributed to the militarisation processes outlined above.

First, JVP2 had a broader popular base than JVP1, especially in urban areas. It was obvious to almost everyone that its proscription for its alleged role in the 1983 pogrom was groundless. It was the victim of a repressive government, and able to fight back more effectively than the other Sinhalese-based political parties who were the also the victims of repression – the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the various Marxist parties, at that point mainly corralled into the United Socialist Alliance. After the Indian armed forces (IPKF – Indian Peace Keeping Force) intervened in the separatist conflict and occupied the Northern part of the island in 1986, with the formal but very reluctant blessing of the Sri Lankan government, the JVP quickly – but only rhetorically – took up the mantle as defenders of the nation against Indian invasion.

Second, JVP2 was much better organised than JVP1. It was directed by Rohana Wijeweera, who remained out of gaol and underground. He appears to have learned a great deal about political and military organisation since 1971. JVP2 again had many of the characteristics of a network, but these were more intentional and organised. Many of the military operations and assassinations were sub-contracted to the quasi-distinct military wing, the DJV, and sometimes to contract killers from the criminal underworld. Large numbers of young people were recruited to perform routine low level tasks for limited periods of time, and then allowed to move out before they could be identified by the security forces.

Again, the main sources are not very explicit about internal communications methods. But by the 1980s, the telecoms scene had changed dramatically. Cell phones only made an appearance in 1989, as JVP2 was being eliminated. But by the early 1980s commercial telephone booths were widespread, the number of

road vehicles and private commercial bus services had increased greatly. The material constraints that made it almost impossible to coordinate the JVP from the centre in 1971 had largely disappeared.

Third, the relationship of the JVP to the armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force) changed between 1987, when the second insurrection began, and 1989, when it was defeated (and Rohana Wijeweera captured and killed). As mentioned above, in the beginning the JVP had some support and information from inside the armed forces. There was a symbiosis between (a) high levels of new recruitment into the armed forces; (b) the limited capacity of the armed forces to combat the various Tamil separatist groups; and (c) the high rate of desertion. Deserters could look to the JVP for protection and sometimes for employment. Along with some men still in service, deserters seem to have constituted the core of the JVP's military wing (Gunaratna 1990: 328).

Further, the JVP's militant and patriotic (rhetorical) condemnation of the 'invasion' of the north by the 'Indian Peace Keeping Force' gelled with the widespread belief within the armed forces that their own government had betrayed them by allowing the IPKF to take over the north just as they, the armed forces, were getting the upper hand over the Tamil separatists. In the early stages of the second insurrection, the JVP largely abstained from direct attacks on the armed forces (Gunaratna 1990: 325-6).

However, that (limited) degree of empathy and cooperation between the JVP and elements in the armed forces evaporated in 1989. The context was that, by mid-1989, the insurrection had achieved considerable success, but seem to have plateaued. The JVP exercised a great deal of control over parts of the population. Able to enforce strikes and their own curfews, they were often popularly referred to in Sinhala as the 'small' or 'junior' government.

But the counter-JVP forces – a range of different organisations manned by mixtures of police and armed forces personnel and nominees from the governing UNP and a few smaller political parties – were increasingly successful in capturing, interrogating, and killing suspected JVP-ers. At the same time, there were signs that, following almost two years of major economic disruption, popular sympathy for the JVP was beginning to wane.

Ever audacious and imaginative in tactics and strategy, Wijeweera pushed for a resolution by ordering a July poster campaign that warned the personnel of the armed forces and the police that they and their families would be killed if they did not desert. There had already

been a few such killings. It is not clear that the JVP ever intended to carry out their threat. The threat worked, but not as intended. The armed forces were energised against it. Within a few weeks, Wijeweera was captured, persuaded to make a video recording calling on the movement to demobilise, and then shot. The rest was mopping up.

My final point follows.

The war against the JVP was an unconventional one ... It was a hit-job war. It was not superior weaponry, training or numerical strength that won the day. It was accurate information and the element of surprise. The JVP rose when they had an edge on these matters over their opponents. And they fell when their enemies began to outstrip them. ... The handgun and the van were the chief implements of war against the JVP (Chandraprema 1991: 287).

General Cecil Waidyaratne, who headed Operation Combine, the anti-JVP campaign, said that it was mainly a:

platoon commander's and corporal's battle ... All the operational work was done by young lieutenants and corporals. The small team with a vehicle and communications equipment was the norm ... The importance of being a lieutenant was that he was junior enough to take part in the operations and senior enough to conduct the interrogation and follow up ... One of the biggest problems was to guard against JVP infiltration. Thus, the operational teams isolated themselves from the rest and kept mum about their work (Chandraprema 1991: 291-2).

These small teams – mainly comprising members of the armed forces and the police, with some involvement of members of the ruling UNP – were deployed in the villages. They learned to remain mobile, to operate at night, to develop surveillance skills, and to keep the initiative to unsettle their opponents (Gunaratna 1990: 330-4). These ways of fighting were totally new to the armed forces and the police.

The competence that they acquired was then applied – and further developed – in other domains. The defeat of JVP2 was part of the birthing process for: the successful use of hit-job tactics against the LTTE over the next two decades; the acquisition of effective political intelligence capacities on the part of the armed forces (rather than the police); and the routine use of the 'white van' process for eliminating political opponents.

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## Notes

1 See especially Halliday (1971).

2 Note also that the broadly socialist policies of the government meant that it did not enjoy good relations with the main Western powers, who at that point exercised more influence in the region than they do today. The Vietnam War was going badly for the Americans and their allies. A narrative about a communist revolutionary movement in rural Sri Lanka would have been helpful in gaining sympathy and support from the West and from other Asian governments.

3 "On 8th April 1971, Superintendent Egodapitiya was ordered to proceed on special duty to Matara and I with Inspectors D.N.S. Perera and Selwyn de Silva, volunteered to join him.

When we reached Matara Police, we found all outstations withdrawn to Matara HQ Police Station and the policemen were chock-a-block in the building as well as the compound. No specific assignments had been given to them. The Superintendent of Matara Division, S.D. Chandrasinghe and the Assistant Superintendent Matara, B. Karavita were closeted inside the office of the HQI. The only police officer 'on his feet' was HQI D.S. Sumanaweera. A short while after our arrival, an alarm was given from a high rise building in front of the police station (Dr. Mohotti's) that a CTB bus was moving at high speed along Hakmana Road in the direction of the police station. It was curfew time. HQI Sumanaweera took position near the parapet wall in front of the police station. The bus turned around at several junctions bordering the Matara Esplanade and started to head in the direction of the police station. When the bus was close enough for the driver to observe the police, it was signalled to stop, but the bus kept moving. HQI Sumanaweera fired two shots with a .303 rifle and the bus jerked to a halt. The driver died of gunshot injury to his head. It was later revealed that the driver had been required to report elsewhere for an official purpose and he had driven in that manner because he had been drunk. While the HQI went forward to confront the bus and then opened fire, the rest of the policemen in all nooks and corners started to fire their rifles indiscriminately in the air, and those inside the police station fired through the roof. I was watching the proceedings from behind cover of the parapet wall when I saw the Senior Superintendent of Police Matara also behind the parapet wall in his birthday suit, and asking HQI Sumanaweera to come inside. The HQI assured him that the situation was under control and requested him to go in and wear something. That was the panic-stricken situation that prevailed at the Matara Police when we arrived there. False alarms of large groups of insurgents marching towards the Matara Police and of flotilla of boats approaching from the sea, were galore. The radio operator, Police Constable Yasapala came wailing away several times claiming to have intercepted all kinds of ominous messages. One such message was that Kosgoda Police had been overrun and all policemen killed, and its Officer in Charge Inspector Mahath was hung on a temple flower tree in front of the police station. The fact as it turned out was that Kosgoda Police was the only outstation that did not withdraw but was successfully defended by its OIC Inspector Tony Mahath and his men" (Seneviratne 2021).

4 The phrase 'minority castes' refers to all Sinhalese with a caste identity that is not Goigama, Karava, Salagama or Durava. Such statistics as we have indicate a high degree of exclusion of the minority castes from all positions of political and economic power. See for example Coomaraswamy (1988: 239, 344, 336), Horowitz (1980: 70), and Jiggins (1979: 87).

5 See the information on the individuals alleged to have comprised the Politburo of the JVP on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1971 (Keerawella 1980: Appendix 5A and 5B). There is however considerable doubt about whether the Politburo existed in any substantial sense. Referring to the evidence given to the Criminal Justice Commissions that later enquired into the JVP, Alexander states: "An examination of the few specific activities described in detailed evidence before the commissions indicates that each task was accomplished by recourse to informal kinship and friendship ties and not by utilising links in a formal structure" (Alexander 1981: 115).

6 Kearney and Jiggins claim 14,000 people in custody by July (1975: 42). Alexander talks of 16,000 detainees (1981: 130), and Gunaratne of 16,500 (1990).

7 There was a very wide diversity of treatment of JVP suspects/ participants/ detainees, ranging from appalling torture and brutality to a period of relatively mild internment.

8 Note that few people were killed by the JVP in 1971. The official record was 41 civilians, 37 police, and 26 military personnel (Alles 1976: Appendix 1).

9 At the time of the uprising, the police and the army each had a strength of about 10,000 men (Kearney and Jiggins 1975: 41). Had 20,000 JVP-ers been slaughtered, then each policeman and soldier would on average have killed one person – and in practice some individuals would each have slaughtered much larger numbers. Living in Sri Lanka in the mid-1970s, the army and police just did not seem to me to have such a blood-soaked recent history.

10 Of those 2,610, 1982 (76%) were Batgama or Vahumpura.

11 There are scraps of evidence to suggest that this occurred to some extent during the repression of JVP2.

12 For a more detailed discussion of the role of caste in JVP1 and 2, see Chandraprema (1991: 129-31, 193, 198-201, 232).

13 In 1971 the armed forces were small, lightly armed, and had very limited operational experience, in combating smuggling between Sri Lanka and India. They had no combat experience (Horowitz 1980).

14 There were plans to attack the Panagoda military base, but they did not materialise.

15 It is likely that foreign observers were especially likely to misunderstand the police, because they, along with higher status Sri Lankans, would not be directly confronted with reality. For example, James Jupp, in a rather impressive and well-informed book on Sri Lankan democracy published in 1978, states that “The Ceylon state, through its police, security forces and courts, normally behaved in a liberal manner” (1978: 247).

16 This basic critique of police organisation and management seems to have been repeated with few changes over many decades. The fact that successive governments have done little to address it suggests that they find advantages in it.

17 It is true that, before the 1983 proscription, some members of the JVP were arming themselves, partly at least for self-protection, and also engaging in crime. But that was not consistent policy (Gunaratna 1990: 159-60).

18 In 1970, the armed forces appear to have employed about 11,000 people, and the police about 10,000 (Kearney and Jiggins 1975: 41). Currently, the armed forces report about 400,000 active personnel, and the Sri Lanka Police Service reports 60,000+ employees. Other estimates from international organisations suggest higher numbers. Broadly, the ratio of police personnel to population has almost tripled since 1971.

19 Other dimensions of this expansion include the growth of medical and educational facilities to serve the armed forces, including the Kotelawala National Defence University.

20 Understandably, the police are not honoured to the same degree. However, the elite para-military Special Task Force, originally recruited from within the police in 1983 to combat separatism in the Eastern Province, shares in the honours but is still formally part of the police service.

21 No figures are available on the ethnic or religious composition of the police or the armed forces.

22 For JVP2, I rely in large part on my own article (Moore 1993) and on two substantial books, both produced in large part through access to state intelligence sources: Chandraprema (1991) and Gunaratne (1990). Although both books are apparently based substantially on state intelligence sources, their authors reveal a degree of understanding or even empathy with the JVP that gives us some confidence in their judgements. But we do not know their

specific sources, how far they were able to use material provided by captured JVP operatives, whether that material was reliable, and how far it has been tainted by efforts to shift blame. We actually have little verifiable information from JVP sources, either from people close to the leadership or from the grassroots. Most died. Those who survived have not talked publicly, for understandable reasons

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