JVP SPLITS

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Among the significant political developments in Sri Lanka in recent weeks is the surprising split of the radical-Sinhalese nationalist JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, People's Liberation Front). The media had earlier speculated about a possible rift within the JVP. But the story of an actual break up of the party became public on the day, on April 05, 2008 when the JVP was commemorating the 27th anniversary of the 1971 insurgency which the JVP led. In his Hero's Day address, the JVP leader, Sumawansa Amerasinghe, announced that Wimal Weerawansa, the party's Propaganda Secretary, was suspended from all the positions in the party on disciplinary grounds. The next day, Weerawansa made an emotional speech in Parliament – Weerawansa was also the JVP's parliamentary group leader -- accusing the party leadership of shooting him from within. He walked away with ten out of 39 JVP MPs, indicating that he was ready to launch a new party. In subsequent charges and counter charges that the two factions have been exchanging, there are numerous conspiracy theories, attributed to some foreign and reactionary forces, to explain away each faction's behaviour.

In Sri Lanka, giant monoliths have shown that they are also quite vulnerable, to internal fissures, with tendencies to crack under pressure. The LTTE split in early 2004. The JVP splits in early 2008. The 2004 split cost the LTTE its military command in the Eastern province and eventually the control of the entire province. The leader of the LTTE's break away faction was Kuruna Amman, LTTE's military commander in the Eastern province and one of the most ruthless and skillful military commanders the LTTE had produced. The JVP's break away faction is led by the party's propaganda secretary, a brilliant public speaker and the charismatic young leader of the Sinhalese nationalists. While being a leading office holder of a party which still calls itself Leftist – the English media in Colombo continue to call the JVP 'reds' and 'Marxists' though these labels are quite dubious – Weerawansa in fact founded and led a Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist movement called the Patriotic National Movement (PNM). Thus this split seems to reflect the mainstream JVP's unease with Weerawansa's Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist project.

Although the two factions have openly traded many accusations and counter-accusations during the past two-to-three weeks, the real reasons for the split are not yet clear. It seems that there is a deep sense of bitterness built up over the years between the two groups, and reconciliation between them appears unlikely. The dissidents are even subjected to physical violence. The basic dispute that has generated so much inter-personal bitterness appears to be about the policy towards the present administration of President Mahinda Rajapakse. While the mainstream JVP tried to maintain a critical distance from the Rajapakse regime, Weerawansa and some of his parliamentary colleagues had argued for working closely with the regime. In that sense, it is a dispute about coalition strategies that has spilled to the domain of personal relations.

The JVP is one of the most remarkable political entities to have emerged in Sri Lanka. It has a history of nearly forty years. An off-shoot of the Maoist Communist Party of Ceylon, led by N. Shanmugathasan, the JVP first emerged as an underground radical movement. That was in 1967-68. Its founder leader, Rohana Wijeweera, began his political career as a youth activist in the Maoist CP in 1965. A dropout medical student from the Patrice Lumumba University of Moscow, Wijeweera was among the many young Leftists in Asia, Africa and Latin America at the time to take the revolution seriously as well as a serious political practice. Disillusioned with what was called at the time the 'reformist,' 'revisionist' and 'class collaborationist' politics of the 'old' Left – today these terms sound quite strange and archaic –, Wijeweera launched his own revolutionary project. Calling his effort 'a creative application of the universal truths of Marxism-Leninism to the specific conditions of the semi-colonial, semi-capitalist Ceylon,' Wijeweera worked among the youth and the rural peasants in Sri Lanka's Sinhalese society. The radicalized and educated youth were attracted to this underground movement. That was the time when the romance of armed struggle and revolution, from Algeria to Zanzibar, Bolivia and Cuba, North Korea and to Vietnam, had swept South Asia as well. During this time, the Naxalite movement was also beginning to take shape in the Eastern India.

The defining feature of the JVP as a radical movement has been its serious and uncompromising commitment to

capturing state power. The JVP made two attempts to fulfill that objective, first in April 1971 and then in 1987-1989. Both ended not just in failure, but in the annihilation of large numbers of its leaders, members, sympathizers and even their family members. The 1971 attempt was a brief affair, spread over a few weeks. Many of the movement's leaders, including Wijeweera, survived death and prison sentences to re-launch the movement in the early 1980s.

The second JVP 'insurgency' of 1987-89 developed in a new political context. The civil war between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil secessionist groups had erupted after the anti-Tamil riots of 1983. The Jayewardene regime proscribed the JVP in July 1983, alleging falsely though that the 'Left' parties were behind the anti-Tamil riots. The JVP, which had been engaged in parliamentary and electoral politics for a few years, went underground again. The Indian involvement in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, particularly through the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987, gave a new opportunity for the JVP to re-emerge. And re-emerge the JVP did with a bang. The day Rajiv Gandhi and Junius Jayewardene signed the Accord, on July 27, 1987, there were organized riots in Colombo. Gandhi himself escaped possible death at the ceremonial guard of honour when a naval rating attempted to hit Gandhi's head with the butt of his rifle. Those were the unmistakable signs of the second coming of the JVP's 'revolution.'

India's political and military intervention in Sri Lanka in the mid-eighties seems to have re-defined the JVP's political agenda. To capitalize the public anger generated by what many Sri Lanka's thought at the time as the high-handed behaviour of the Indian government as well as the fears generated by the huge Indian military presence in the North-East of the Island, the JVP launched a 'patriotic war' against the 'Indian imperialist state' and its 'local agents,' the Jayewardene regime. That turned out to be a bloody campaign of violence, directed against the UNP regime, the armed forces and the police and even the Left parties who supported the Indo-Lanka Accord and the devolution of power to the Tamils. Nearly three years of intense violence forced the Sri Lankan government to send the IPKF back home, forge a new alliance with the LTTE and then launch in early March-April 1989 the bloodiest counter-insurgency war Sri Lanka has experienced in such short time span. It may have killed nearly 30, 000 JVPers just in a period of six months. It also resulted in rounding up and cold-blooded killing of the entire top JVP leadership, including Wijeweera, but except one Polit Bureau member. The man who was lucky to escape Sri Lanka and save his life is Somawansa Amerasinghe, the JVP's present leader. The legend has it that he hired a fishing boat off the coast of Negombo and escaped to the Kerala coast to later proceed to Italy. Eventually, he led a life of a political exile in England, until returning to Sri Lanka in 2001 to take up the new and powerful JVP's leadership.

The remarkable thing about the JVP is that even after the annihilation it suffered at the hand of the state in 1988-89, the movement re-emerged in the early 1990s as a parliamentary party. Amerasinghe and his colleagues, who were exiled in Europe and Japan, kept the red flag flying till a new generation of leaders emerged from among the survivors of the terror of 1988-89. Wimal Weerawansa, the leader of the new dissident group, is one among them. Most of the JVP's present top leaders are survivors of 1988-89. They also successfully steered the JVP away from the armed struggle and towards parliamentary and electoral politics.

The golden moment of the new JVP began in 2000 when President Chandrika Kumaratunga sought its support to form a parliamentary majority. Interestingly, the JVP did not accept cabinet positions, but supported the Kumaratunga regime from outside, calling the regime a 'probationary government.' Then the JVP entered a formal coalition with Kumaratunga's People's Alliance in 2004 to win 39 parliamentary seats and be in a position to dictate terms on the government. Amerasinghe, the exiled leader, had returned in 2000. Quite interestingly, it was the PA-JVP coalition, with its powerful appeal to the Sinhalese nationalist fears and anxieties that largely succeeded in politically undermining the UNP-LTTE peace attempt of 2002-2003. Out of power, and therefore in a self-critical mode, ex-President Kumaratunga now admits that she made two fatal mistakes by aligning with the JVP and then pushing out of power the Ranil Wickramasinghe administration, on the JVP's behest. That was in October-December, 2003.

The JVP's break up is probably the manifestation of a general crisis among political parties and movements in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, the JVP has remained for quite some time the only entity that did not suffer a major internal crisis in recent years. All the others – Sri Lanka Freedom Party, United National Party, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Ceylon Workers' Congress, LTTE, PLOTE, and EPRLF – have suffered splits, leading to declining of party fortunes, re-alignment of party loyalties, shifts in the party leadership and even re-configuration of politico-military balance in the country. The JVP's split seems to be of considerable political consequences too.

The split also indicates the crisis which the JVP encountered by trying to maintain two faces – Sinhalese nationalism and class politics. The JVP always had these two faces, but it was its radicalism and the politics of class struggle that gave it a niche in the political process. The JVP's shift to nationalism as a means to state power occurred in the 1980s in the context of the Tamil secessionist insurgency and the Indian intervention in the ethnic conflict. In its post-1989 regeneration, the new leadership has given the nationalist agenda greater emphasis. This mixture of Sinhalese nationalism and radicalism paid the JVP dividends for some time, enabling it to emerge as the third largest party in Sri Lanka's parliament in 2004. In the 1994 parliament, the JVP had only one MP who used to wear a red shirt over his white trousers. Subsequently, all the JVP MPs began to wear the politician's uniform in Sri Lanka, white or black trousers and white, long-sleeved shirts. That is how the parliament had domesticated the yesterday's rebels as respectable, 'national' and professional politicians.

It appears that the present split is an outcome of the collision of Sinhalese nationalist and class struggle lines within the JVP. The nationalists wanted the party to extend uncritical support to President Mahinda Rajapakse's war against the LTTE and be silent on economic and other issues. But the class politics line, based on trade union constituencies, had a different agenda, to confront the regime on economic and social issues. In the short-run the Rajapakse administration is the immediate beneficiary of the JVP's split. The JVP cannot now mobilize trade unions on the street to protest against the spiraling inflation, rising cost of living, impending food crisis and the transfer of the economic burden of the war on to the poor and the middle classes. ■

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