

Epistolary Interview

**Insurrection Amidst Constitutional
Revolution:
The *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*
(JVP) and the 1970-72 Constitution-
Making Process**



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¹ Lionel Bopage was the General Secretary of the JVP during the 1980s. Asanga Welikala conducted this interview via email in June-July 2012. In some instances, Bopage has preferred to answer several questions in a cluster.

1. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) came into being in the late 1960s just as the political dynamics that led to the eventual establishment of the first Sri Lankan republic were crystallising. How would you locate the JVP, its ideology and programme in relation to this constitutional reform debate, which was at the time conducted primarily between the United Left Front and the UNP-led government?

In order to clarify the JVP's position, we need to understand the political and economic transition of Lanka from the colonial to the neo-colonial stage of capitalist development that occurred particularly during the 1940s. Neo-colonialism was much more sophisticated than colonialism, because neo-colonialism generated not only economic dependence, but also political, religious, ideological and cultural dependence. Responding to the growing anti-colonial militant struggles in the colonies, colonialists trained pro-colonial elements that followed the colonial image itself in everything they did. The 'independence' illusions created with the help of the pro-colonial elite were used to hoodwink people in the colonies. This political and economic strategy of the colonialists became known as neo-colonialism. This was not an exclusive view of the JVP, but the view of all progressive people at the time including the Third International, Fourth International and the traditional Left parties of Sri Lanka, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP).

The *Policy Declaration of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, drafted in the early 1970s while being behind bars, clarifies this position as follows:

“After independence in 1948, the bourgeois governments, which have succeeded each other,

have consistently trod the same bankrupt path of capitalist development under the guise of 'Democratic Socialism' or 'Socialist Democracy'. The result of this policy is to be seen today in the intensification of oppression of the working masses, mass unemployment, suppression of the rights of the minorities and the deprived status of women.

Whilst the working class and the oppressed mass of the people have been further weakened and reduced economically, politically and socially during the last three decades, foreign imperialist monopolies and their collaborators, the dependent national bourgeoisie, have enriched and expanded themselves in privilege."

Despite the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Lion flag in 1948, the island and its people did not have political or economic independence. The British responded to the changing international balance of forces against colonialism and the wave of anti-imperialist struggles taking place in the colonies by implementing a strategy for protecting their colonial investments, interests and privileges. New American imperial power took over from Britain and destabilised the governments through persuasion or by overt or covert military force. During the 1950s and 1960s it helped to destabilise Guatemala, Iraq, Iran, Egypt (Suez Canal), the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Korea, Burma, Taiwan, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Congo, Gabon, Cuba, Turkey, Cyprus, Greece and Indonesia.

The emerging capitalist classes in the colonies were mostly pro-colonial in their world outlook, lifestyle and cultural mores. In a way, the JVP's ideological position took a twist towards appreciating the pre-colonial infrastructure the island had in maintaining its self-sustaining economy, before it fell into the hands of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British colonialists. These colonial powers destroyed this economically self-

sustainable infrastructure to convert the economy into a trade-oriented, capitalist plantation economy.

- 2. Of the Five Classes that were conducted for cadres at that time, (which could also be regarded as a broad articulation of the JVP's main ideological and policy perspectives), the second class, entitled 'Independence – A Neo-colonial Strategy,' concerned neo-colonialism and the central argument that independence was not really achieved in 1948. Can you elaborate on this?**
- 3. When the JVP broadly endorsed the United Front (UF) in the general election campaign of 1970, did it fully subscribe to the UF's manifesto commitment with regard to constitutional change? Or did the JVP have a more radical preference with regard to constitutional change? If so, what?**
- 4. Did the JVP engage with the Constituent Assembly and its deliberations in any way? Did the JVP see the Constituent Assembly as a legitimate and effective constitution-making body that could establish a socialist republic?**
- 5. In his chapter for this volume, Dr Nihal Jayawickrama states that the situation that arose in the aftermath of the JVP's rebellion in April 1971 was serious enough for him, as the then Secretary to the Ministry of Justice, to write to the Prime Minister in the following terms:**

“Indeed, it would be most interesting to consider what the situation would be if the insurgents were to set up their own Constituent Assembly in Mawanella or Anuradhapura. Both Constituent Assemblies would then be outside the pale of the law, competing with each other, and each depending for its efficacy on the number of people who would ultimately accept its jurisdiction. Consider, for example, how chaotic the situation in the country would be if on the day on which the Constituent Assembly proclaims the new Republic, the insurgents were to themselves proclaim the Republic of Sri Lanka. Public servants and the armed forces would be completely free to offer their allegiance to either government since neither would have a legal basis or a legal link with the past.”

6. From the perspective of the JVP, was there any possibility at all of this occurring in the days following 5th April 1971? Had the leadership of the JVP thought along these lines?

The JVP's ideology and programme in relation to the constitutional reform debate were indirectly reflected in and imbued with the themes of the five classes that were based on Marxist precepts. The five classes were held under the themes: Capitalist Economic Crisis; Lankan Independence; Indian Expansionism; the Lankan Left Movement; and the Path of the Lankan Revolution. Educational camps extended this process of political education provided by the five classes, where the discussions subjected the themes of the five classes into deeper theoretical analysis.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the island's economy was completely reliant on an export-oriented plantation economy (i.e. tea, rubber and coconuts). The commodity prices of exports continued to decrease while their shipping rates and the commodity prices of imports continued to increase. That economic aid was used to penetrate the economies of the developing world was evident from the high interest charged on short-term

loans provided by the World Bank and the increasing debt service ratio.

The JVP argued that the island's economy should be based on industrialised agriculture to make it self-sufficient for the benefit of the people. The policy of foreign trade should not be based on exploitation of one nation by another, but for the mutual benefits of nations. Naturally, the JVP's programme was focused on developing political strategies to achieve such an economy. This political and economic position on the island's economy helped us to understand the so-called independence donated to the island as a neo-colonial strategy. The JVP concluded that the island had become a neo-colony subjected to economic, political, military and cultural domination. So, the JVP's main task was to unite people in their anti-imperialist struggle with the other oppressed groups around the world.

This situation can be understood by the fact that when the UNP government tried to appoint a Joint Select Committee of Parliament on the Revision of the Constitution in 1968, all Left parties in the land and even the SLFP refused to take part. All those who were in the Left at the time wanted a complete break from the prevailing colonial constitution and structures, and establish a new constitution, which politically, economically, culturally and socially empowered the people, allowing them to determine their social, political, economic and cultural destiny. In the general elections held in 1970, the United Front (the UF), a coalition of the LSSP and the CP led by the SLFP, pledged to nationalise the means of production owned by the colonial powers such as plantations and banks, genuine land reform, nationalisation of banks and agency houses, and expulsion of imperial political and cultural agencies. The JVP (the 'Movement') supported the United Front at the 1970 general elections on this basis. However, once elected, the UF government choose not to carry out any of the economic reforms that it pledged to implement during the election campaign.

I do not believe the pledge to reform the constitution through a Constituent Assembly played a predominant role during the general elections of 1970. The necessity for constitutional reform arose due to a completely different issue, i.e., when the *Kodeswaran Case* challenged the legal validity of the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956 (the ‘Sinhala Only’ policy).² This became a priority for the UF regime, when the British Privy Council, which was the highest judicial decision-making body under the Soulbury Constitution, concluded that:

- The amendment or repeal of Section 29 (2) of the constitution was not allowable as it was an entrenched clause; and
- The constitutional legality of the *Kodeswaran Case* needed to be reconsidered by the Supreme Court of the island.

The UF regime then decided to exclude Section 29 (2) of the Soulbury Constitution by implementing a new Republican Constitution. By then, the UF regime had already abolished the Senate.

In the south of the country, the youth were more concerned about the government breaking its election pledges on economic reform. They had certain expectations of the UF government as they were already affected by unemployment, landlessness etc., but the ruling elite dashed their hopes and aspirations. So, it can be argued that the political decision to call a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution could also have been a diversionary strategy to move the attention of the people away from the predominant economic issues to more nationalistic issues.

At the time, the Minister of Constitutional Affairs was the deputy leader of the LSSP, Dr Colvin R. de Silva. Incidentally, he authored *Ceylon under the British Occupation*, in which he argued that sovereignty resides

² *Kodeswaran v. The Attorney General* (1969) 72 NLR 337.

with the people, while according to the Soulbury Constitution, the supreme law of the country was supreme and the constitution created the Parliament.³ Thus, he adopted a legally home-grown, nationalistic constitutional procedure to suit the purpose.

In the light of the above discussion, it seems that Dr Nihal Jayawickrama's statement in the aftermath of the April 1971 insurrection would have been based on a hypothetical situation, in particular, regarding two Constituent Assemblies evolving in a dual power situation. However, I believe that if the JVP insurrection was able to acquire a protracted status, the possibility of a proletarian organ based on socialist state power existing in parallel to a bourgeois organ based on capitalist state power would have been a serious possibility. Such a socialist power would not have in the long term been based on a constitutional assembly, but on a referendum that would have been used to test the will of the people.

7. More broadly, what was the position with regard to the general idea of a constitution within the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideology of the JVP?

8. What were JVP's specific critiques of the Soulbury Constitution?

9. If the JVP supported the establishment of a republic, what was the nature of the republic that it wanted to see in Ceylon / Sri Lanka?

In terms of constitution-making, the *Policy Declaration of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* was very clear in its position:

³ C.R. de Silva (1942) *Ceylon under the British Occupation, 1795-1833: Its Political, Administrative and Economic Development* (Colombo: The Colombo Apothecaries Co.)

“The ruling capitalist class is in control of the social, economic, political and ideological condition of the present-day Sri Lankan society. Its institutions are the most powerful. Will that class, of its own accord, relinquish its immense power to the proletariat, which is in objective conflict with it? The proletariat, acknowledging the antagonism between itself and the capitalist class, will expect the capitalist to intensify the violence of his class and will seek to defeat the capitalist system. The solution to the ever-growing socio-economic crisis of the peoples of Sri Lanka is to root-out the capitalist system and establish in its place the qualitatively superior democracy of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The JVP's stance regarding the general idea of constitution-making was to completely overhaul the existing capitalist socio-economic formation, by changing its relations of production with more equitable, fair and redistributive relations of production. It is evident from this thesis that the JVP did not believe in constitutional reforms, which it saw as a continuation of the capitalist system of exploitation:

“The development of capitalism in Sri Lanka has taken a different form from that of capitalist development in Europe and other developed capitalist countries. Unlike in the developed capitalist countries, where capitalism rooted its growth in the ashes of the pre-capitalist system, in Sri Lanka, capitalism came into existence by being superimposed upon this pre-capitalist system. As a result, capitalist society in Sri Lanka has retained within itself certain features of the feudal order. Not only the imperialist capitalist ruling class but also the neo-colonial capitalists who ruled this country for over three decades, as well as their lackeys of the upper strata of the petty bourgeoisie who masquerade as leftists, have failed to fulfil a task which is essential to the

free development of capitalism, namely, the eradication of these feudal remnants and the completion of the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Sri Lanka. It is left to the proletariat to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution which has yet been left unfinished. The proletariat will fulfil the remaining tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution at the same time as it realises its revolutionary socialist goals. The JVP will build, against all odds, the revolutionary party to lead that struggle to victory.”

It is in this context that the JVP considered that its political objective was to complete the unfinished bourgeois democratic tasks by abolishing the remaining feudal vestiges while carrying out the task of building socialism. The JVP was not much concerned about the constitutional reforms, probably due to its commitment to a socialist republican constitution. Any specific critiques of the Soulbury Constitution the JVP had are to be seen in this light of abolishing feudal remnants and building socialism. In contrast, the Soulbury Constitution’s main aim was to protect the neo-colonial regime that had been established by the imperialist forces to safeguard its political and economic interests and privileges.

Apart from the local situation, the international situation for the JVP was also important, in particular, the series of violent counter-revolutionary measures taken by the Western neo-colonial powers in many countries. The most recent at the time was the eradication of the Communist Party of Indonesia (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI), led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through a military coup carried out in Indonesia. This coup annihilated all leaders of the PKI and millions of its members, sympathisers and civilians. Locally, the then Finance Minister, Mr J.R. Jayewardene of the United National Party government advocated winding up the electoral map of Lanka for the next twenty years. Due to those CIA campaign elsewhere, in countries like Lanka,

there was the well-founded fear that the UNP regime would continue to remain in power by hook or by crook. Therefore, the 'Movement' considered that it was its paramount duty to work to dislodge the UNP regime from power.

10. What were the then JVP's perspectives with regard to the following major features of the 1972 Constitution: (a) the unitary state; (b) the Buddhism clause; and (c) Sinhala as the official language?

(a) The unitary state

We believed in establishing a proletarian state. The JVP pledged to promulgate a new socialist constitution as the basic law of the land, which would lead to the establishment of a socialist republic, where the means of production would be owned by the nation (state). A major difference was that we proposed to have this constitutional law approved by the people of Lanka at a referendum, whereas none of the constitutions or its amendments adopted by diverse capitalist regimes has ever been subjected to a referendum to test the will of the Lankan people.

Regarding the unitary nature of the state, we had a clear policy position, although at latter stages of the JVP, and even now, this policy position has been misrepresented, misinterpreted, and distorted. The policy in the *Policy Declaration* clearly opposed both autocratic centralisation and the division of the country. The opposition to autocratic centralisation was based on the principle of the right to self-determination of peoples. As we know, this policy continues to underpin the right of a people to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. I refer to comrade Rohana Wijeweera's speech delivered in Jaffna in 1982, which is now viewable on YouTube.⁴

⁴ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stmbM7Tr0e8> [last accessed, 30th July 2012]

In very clear terms, he referred to the self-determination of Tamil people as their right to determine their own destiny. However, we advocated that the separation of the country would not be advantageous for the working people, as such action would not serve their interests, but the interests of the bourgeoisie. I had emphasised this situation and the possible continuation of a border war between the two separated states comprising the island of Lanka while citing experiences elsewhere. We called for the unity of the working people irrespective of their linguistic, national, religious and cultural differences.⁵

The administrative changes the JVP pledged included guaranteeing the right to vote to every citizen over 16 years of age to elect representatives to all state and local government institutions, and the right of every citizen over 18 years of age to be elected as such representatives, thus ensuring the youth of the country became responsible and accountable in the decision-making process of the country. Though we spoke about abolishing the entrenched bureaucracy, now I believe that our expectation should have been the implementation of a less bureaucratic rule. The division of administrative districts that existed at the time was to be studied and scientifically re-divided to provide a more realistic and practical demarcation.

What we proposed was to have the non-Sinhala people accept regional autonomy in areas where they have been quantitatively predominant. We need to note that the right to self-determination is recognised in international law, not as a right of process to states or governments, but as a right of process (not of outcome) belonging to the people.

Regarding the important function of the defence and maintenance of the territorial integrity of Lanka, the position of the JVP was also to share that responsibility

⁵ L. Bopage (1977) *A Marxist Analysis of the National Question* (Colombo: Niyamuwa Publications).

with all people, thus basing such defence and protection on egalitarianism and autonomous rule.

(b) The Buddhism clause

Section 6 of the 1972 Constitution had this to say on the subject of religion:

“The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Section 18 (1)(d).”

Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution, referring to religion, states:

“The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14 (1) (e).”

The JVP's position regarding religious rights under the provisions in the two Constitutions was clear. Both gave special status to Buddhism, the religion of the Sinhala-speaking majority, and, by implication, relegated other religions to a lesser constitutional position. The Lankan state as a whole is made up of individuals who profess a variety of religions. Hence, it is not really possible for the state to have a religion. Religion is at all times a purely personal activity of a citizen. Yet, every exploitative class-state places one religion above all others. Every act of fraud, corruption, thuggery, deceit, exploitation and repression, and the production of armaments, is carried out while hiding behind the facade of religion. The prominent place given to religion by bourgeois governments is a class manipulation to trick the masses, and thus secure and defend the existing system of exploitation. Any Lankan capitalist government will continue the same process, just as the previous capitalist

governments did. A smokescreen is erected comprising the *Dharma Chakra*, the *Bana* book, the Cross and the Bible, and all manner of religious preachings! Behind this screen are the rifles, bayonets, bombs and repressive acts aimed at the oppressed masses. Such is the nature of an exploitative class-state.⁶

The JVP believed that the problem of religious faith and the extent to which the bourgeoisie can, and does, exploit it is of extreme importance. In that struggle, the proletariat must win the ability to guarantee the secular nature of the state; no more special privilege to any one religion.

Under the heading 'Religion,' the *Policy Declaration of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* declared that the secular nature of the state needs to be guaranteed, and that the intervention of religious institutions in the affairs of the state and in the political life of the country, needs to be prohibited. It also took the policy position that the right of every citizen to pursue a religion of his or her choice should be guaranteed, while discrimination on religious grounds must be prohibited. The policy declaration went further. It proposed that activities whereby people were exploited in the name of religion should be abolished. It proposed to abolish the systems of *viharagam* and *devalagam* used in the island for the purpose of feudal exploitation. However, religious institutions were to have the freedom to engage in all religious activities, and the state was not to intervene in such activities or obstruct them in any way.

(c) Sinhala as the official language

The JVP position was that in a multi-national capitalist state, any act directed at solving the problem of language is normally based on compulsion. The fact that every capitalist state invariably has an official language is a clear indication of this tendency. The proclamation of the

⁶ L. Bopage (1977) *The Constitution of Sri Lanka and the National Question* (London: Ginipupura Publications).

language of the dominant nationality as the official language of the country, is tantamount to a gross attack upon the other nationalities and communities living within that country. To this day, in capitalist countries the desire to protect the language of the dominant nation is the motivation to oppress other communities by killing the other. Therefore, in multi-national states, the issue of language should be settled in a democratic manner with all peoples and all languages sharing equal rights.

Let us look at the 1972 Constitution. In Section 7, it stated, "The Official Language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala as provided by the Official Languages Act, No. 33 of 1956." In Section 8 (1) it stated, "The use of the Tamil language shall be in accordance with the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act, No. 28 of 1958."

Original formulation of Article 18 of Chapter 4 of the 1978 Constitution, under the title, 'Language', read as follows:

The Official language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala.

Article 19 read as follows:

The National Languages of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala and Tamil.

Subsequently this was amended by the Thirteenth Amendment (1987), and now reads as

Article 18 (1):

The Official Language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala.

Article 18 (2):

Tamil shall also be an official language.

Article 18 (3):

English shall be the link language.

Article 18 (4):

Parliament shall by law provide for the implementation of the provisions of this Chapter.

Accordingly, the Lankan state has established Sinhala and Tamil as official languages, but primacy is still offered to Sinhala language. However, in practical terms, the legal position of the Tamil language does not seem to have been subjected to progressive change

The UF regime acknowledged the right of an individual to receive his or her education in the mother tongue of that person, but the question remains whether a person who completed his/her education with Tamil as the mother tongue was not subject to discrimination, owing to the official language policy of the state, when that person is due for consideration for appointment, promotion and salary increments in government institutions. Governments have continued to practise such discriminatory measures against the Tamil-educated population in Sri Lanka. It is certain that future capitalist governments will continue to carry out this process. In short, the JVP position was that changes in the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions did not reflect any real improvement in respect of the status of the Tamil language. For example, the original Article 22 (1) of Chapter 4 of the 1978 Constitution, the situation regarding the language of administration is set out as follows:

“The Official Language shall be the language of administration throughout Sri Lanka, provided that the Tamil Language shall also be used as the language of administration for the maintenance of public records and the transaction of all business by public institutions in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.”

In examining this statement at the time, the JVP posed the question whether only those members of the Tamil-speaking population of Sri Lanka who live in the Northern and Eastern Provinces that can avail themselves

of the use of Tamil as a language of administration. What was the situation of the majority of the Tamil speaking people of this country, namely the Malaiyaha workers in the plantation sector and the Islamic population, who have not been living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces? Weren't they deprived of the right to use Tamil as their language of administration? I do not doubt for a moment that the use of Tamil as the administrative language of the Northern and Eastern Provinces indeed has been a positive feature. However, 1.8 million of the 3.2 million Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka, i.e., the majority did not live in the Northern or Eastern Provinces. Thus, the 1972 Constitution deprived them of their right to use their mother tongue, Tamil as their language of administration.⁷

Section 9 (1) of the 1972 Constitution referring to the use of language in the enactment of laws, stated, "All laws shall be enacted or made in Sinhala" and in Section 9 (2), it provided that, "There shall be a Tamil translation of every law so enacted or made."

Article 23 (1) of Chapter 4 of the 1978 Constitution, referred to the same matter as follows:

"All laws and subordinate legislation shall be enacted or made, and published, in both National Languages together with a translation in the English Language. In the event of any

⁷ Subsequently, Article 22 was repealed and replaced by the Sixteenth Amendment (1988) to make provision for Sinhala and Tamil to be Languages of Administration. Now the relevant clause states as follows:

Article 22 (Languages of Administration)

- (1) Sinhala and Tamil shall be the language of administration throughout Sri Lanka and Sinhala shall be the language of administration and be used for the maintenance of public records and the transaction of all business by public institutions of all the provinces of Sri Lanka other than the Northern and Eastern Provinces where Tamil shall be so used.

inconsistency between any two texts, the text in the Official Language shall prevail.”

The so-called ‘socialist’ constitution of 1972 prepared by Dr Colvin R. de Silva of the UF regime, and the 1978 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (before its language provisions were amended in the late 1980s), stated the same thing with regard to the main language for the enactment of laws. They both confirmed that, although all laws will be made available in Sinhala and Tamil, in the final analysis, the Sinhala version will take precedence over the Tamil. Is it not difficult to see that both constitutions, while giving the status of national language to Sinhala and Tamil, have enshrined the Sinhala language in a special status.⁸

Regarding the language of the courts, Section 11 (1) of the 1972 Constitution stated:

“The language of the courts and tribunals empowered by the law to administer justice and of courts, tribunals and other institutions established under the Industrial Disputes Act or of Conciliation Boards established under the Conciliation Boards Act No. 10 of 1958, shall be Sinhala throughout Sri Lanka and accordingly, their records, including pleading, proceedings, judgements, order and records of all judicial and ministerial acts shall be in Sinhala:

⁸ Subsequently, Article 23 was repealed and replaced by the Sixteenth Amendment (1988) to make provision for Sinhala and Tamil to be Languages of Legislation. Now the relevant clause states as follows:
Article 23 (Language of Legislation)

- (1) All laws and subordinate legislation shall be enacted or made and published in Sinhala and Tamil, together with a translation thereof in English:
- (2) All Orders, Proclamations, rules, by-laws, regulations and notifications made or issued under any written law other than by a Provincial Council or a local authority, and the Gazette shall be published in Sinhala and Tamil together with a translation thereof in English.

Provided that the National State Assembly may, by or under its law, provide otherwise in the case of institutions exercising original jurisdiction in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and also of courts, tribunals and other institutions established under the Industrial Disputes Act and of Conciliation Boards established under the Conciliation Boards Act, No. 10 of 1958, in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.”

According to the 1972 Constitution established by the UF regime, the language of the law courts, at every level and throughout the country shall be, in ultimate significance, Sinhala, the language of the majority. Most of the Tamil-speaking people in the country were denied equal opportunity in the use of their mother tongue.

The JVP took the position that Sinhala, the language of the majority of the population, was being forcibly foisted upon the rest of the people of the country. Whoever accepts the necessity for an Official Language is one who accepts the oppression of one nation or race by another; is one who supports the repression of a minority by force; is one who is in favour of according special privileges to one language, while imposing restrictions and compulsions on others. The JVP did not accept this position as correct.

The policy position of the JVP was that the use of a specific language as a medium for exchanging ideas and information between different peoples in a country has been a common social phenomenon. Yet such a language needs not be given special privileges in the judicial or administrative system of a country. The constitution itself should have guaranteed equality between all sections of the population. In a multi-national state, the cornerstone of an internationalist language policy should have been that of equality among all languages, without preference being shown to any one language. Every citizen should have the right to address any state institution or social organisation in his or her language or in any language to

suit his or her convenience. No state institution or organisation should have the power to reject a petition submitted to it because it was not presented in the language that is prescribed for that specific purpose.

The JVP being Marxists-Leninists argued that a state cannot have an official language. The establishment of an official language by any capitalist state is a means by which it relegates the other languages to a subordinate position. The JVP stated that no language should be afforded special privileges. The capitalist class makes every attempt to divide the working class on language and other similar differences, and thereby perpetuate such differences. Furthermore, the JVP was critical of the UNP, the SLFP, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the LSSP and the CP for maintaining a policy of granting special privileges to one particular language.

The JVP believed that only such a policy could resist any attempt to impose a language upon any individual. Only such a policy could ensure the steadfast practice of democracy and equality among the different languages in the island. The working people in demanding the full right and opportunity for every citizen to use the language of a person's choice would be acting according to the wishes and aspirations of the people.

The JVP also believed that only a genuinely socialist government led by the working people could abolish discrimination and establish the equality of all national languages. Under the heading of 'Language Rights,' the *Policy Declaration of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* declared the adoption of Sinhala, Tamil and English as national languages of Lanka. It advocated that in the field of language, peoples' representatives in all state institutions may speak in any of the three national languages, while being simultaneously translated into all other national languages. It also pledged to issue all laws, state edicts and proposals in all national languages. It recognised the right of persons in educational institutions to receive their education in the mother tongue or in any national

language of their choice and the right to transact business with the state in the mother language or in any national language of one's choice. It assured that no citizen would be subjected to social, economic, political or any other form of discrimination on the ground of anomaly in language. I believe this policy formulation on language would have ensured that every citizen would enjoy equality of rights in the use of national languages.

With the superimposition of capitalism upon the feudal social system of the island, the English language was also introduced as the only language of administration, and as the language of education and communication. In over a hundred years of British colonial rule, a considerable section of Sri Lanka's population has been using English as its mother tongue. A small segment of the working population also has been using English as its mother tongue. The JVP believed that their contribution to social development of Lanka was also significant, and that they should be allowed to use a national language of their choice in this task. The JVP emphasised that the population in the island that used English as its mother tongue should enjoy the same rights as the Sinhala and Tamil languages, and that these people must not be discriminated against linguistically.

The JVP further exposed the hypocrisy of the representatives and agents of the capitalist class, who have been displaying their skill in the use of the Sinhala and Tamil languages in public, though in their real lives they used English as their mother tongue. They only resorted to the use of Sinhala or Tamil when addressing the servants in their homes, or the workers and other oppressed masses in the wider society. Whether they be Sinhala or Tamil, most capitalist households use English as their normal medium of communication. They educated their children, both locally and abroad, in English. Publicly professing great regard for the Sinhala and Tamil languages, they used the language question in the country as a tool to divide the working class, while conducting their every activity in English.

11. What were the then JVP's attitude and position with regard to the Federal Party's constitutional proposals to the Constituent Assembly, and more broadly, to Tamil nationalism and to federalism?

12. In the years preceding the 1971 insurrection, what were the JVP's relations with Tamils and other minorities?

13. In the late 1960s, why did the JVP not adopt the well-known position articulated in Stalin's 1913 essay on 'Marxism and the National Question' in relation to Tamil nationalism?

Up to the 1940s, the social and political divisions in the island were not based on language and religion; there was no hostilities based on the ethnicity of individuals. The Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC), which was a dominant political force in the north in 1920s and 1930s, also had an influence in delaying the emergence of Tamil ethnic nationalism there. The JYC appreciated the harmonious and tolerant relations that existed at the time between Sinhalese and Tamils, Moors and Burghers.⁹

Since 1948, the Tamils in the island have been systematically denied their legitimate rights, mainly relating to equal opportunities in areas of language, education and employment. It started with the Citizenship Act of 1948, which disenfranchised close to a million Tamil plantation workers. It was followed by the 'Sinhala Only' language policy in 1956. It led Tamil political parties to strongly demand a federal framework.

⁹ K. Nesiiah (1945) *The Mother Tongue in Education* (Colombo: Ola Books), cited in D. Nesiiah (2001) *Tamil Nationalism* (Colombo: Marga Institute).

The abrogation of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957 and the Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1965 by the Sinhala political establishment created a lot of anger, frustration and disillusionment among Tamils that eventually led to the birth of separatist militant movements.

Regarding the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and the Federal Party (FP) and their policies, the JVP had a clear class demarcation. They represented the interests and privileges of the capitalist class in the island. Many examples can be cited regarding this matter. For example, their attitude during the colonial era towards the working people in Sri Lanka, their support to the capitalist governments in the island, and the behaviour of the ACTC when the Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 were enacted to disfranchise almost all Malaiyaha Tamils. This was a deliberate act by the ruling class at that time to weaken the strong linkage between the estate trade union movement and the left movement.¹⁰

However, I believe the Federal Party (FP) was trapped when Senator M Tiruchelvam sought its support in the constitution-making process.¹¹ This was based on a promise to incorporate some responses to the demands of the Tamil people in the new constitution. The FP and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) participated in the Constituent Assembly process organised by the UF regime in 1970.¹² However, they were deceived and their demand on the use of language and religion were marginalised at the end of the Constituent Assembly process.

¹⁰ W.S. Muthiah & S. Wanasinghe (1998) *The Bracegirdle Affair: An Episode in the History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (Colombo: Young Socialist Publication).

¹¹ K.T. Rajasingham (2010) *Submission to LLRC Part IV - Muslim riots & Tamils' historic blunder of 1972* See <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2010/09/18/submission-llrc-part-iv-muslim-riots-tamils%E2%80%99-historic-blunder-1972>

¹² A.J. Wilson (1994) *S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Nationalism, 1947-1977* (London: Hurst): pp. 113-116.

The UF regime was astute in taking judicial steps to ensure that any challenges to the legality of the 1972 Constitution could not succeed. The judges in the country were forced to pledge allegiance to and uphold the constitution. When the judges complied, the judiciary of the land did not have power or authority to decide on the 1972 Constitution's legality.

This situation led to Mr Chelvanayakam's speech in 1975, after the victory at the Kankesanthurai by-election. This was a real turning point in the Tamil national struggle, which ended up in the demand for a separate state. This followed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) adopting the Vaddukoddai Resolution in 1976, demanding Tamil Eelam, a separate state for Tamils. According to Devanesan Nesiah, the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976 had a massive impact on the political landscape of the island.¹³

The State of Emergency has been a permanent characteristic of any bourgeois regime that was in power. On the slightest ground, the security forces arrested Tamil youth on suspicion, and continued to torture them and exact confessions to keep them behind bars under the Emergency Regulations. By 1975, the police excesses led to the escalation of the Tamil youth militancy and later they occupied the central role of Tamil politics.

The social base of the JVP mainly comprised of rural Sinhala Buddhist youth, semi-proletarian to lower middle class in nature. Prior to the insurrection in 1971, the understanding the political leadership of the JVP had about the problems of the Tamils and other non-Sinhala communities was minimal. Moreover, the attempts of the JVP to carry out political activities among the Tamils were extremely limited.

¹³ Nesiah (2001).

Many leaders of the JVP including its founder, the late comrade Rohana Wijeweera were originally from the Communist Party of Ceylon, Peking Wing (CPC-P). The leader of CPC-P, the late comrade N. Shanmugathasan, was a Tamil by ethnicity. By the end of 1964, Rohana became a full-time cadre of the CPC-P, but gradually joined the dissenters within the party, who were dissatisfied with the leadership. He was expelled from the party in late 1966. Rumours abounded that Rohana had left the CPC-P because its leader was a Tamil. This was not the case.

In the 1960s, some on the Left took the position that the vanguard of the socialist revolution in Sri Lanka lay with the Malaiyaha Tamils. The JVP disagreed with this position and argued that the international experience has shown that when the leading role of a revolution was based on a minority community, the ruling elite has used racism and communalism to undermine and prevent it from succeeding. More than 80 per cent of the population of the country was rural and more than 90 per cent of the country's poor comprised of the rural poor, and urban workers. Therefore, the vanguard of the Sri Lankan revolution would be the urban working class allied with the rural peasantry.

Indian Expansionism, one of the controversial political classes of the JVP, touched upon anti-Malaiyaha sentiments, at times, particularly, when Malaiyaha workers were compared with Sinhala *chena* workers. Malaiyaha workers were also considered to be potential allies of India's economic and political interests, not Sri Lanka's.

Most of the Sinhala youth who joined the movement did not have any social linkages to Tamils. The Engineering Faculty of the University of Peradeniya, where the student population was ethnically and culturally more diverse, provided one of the avenues for the JVP to reach out towards Tamil students. However, the social aspirations and the needs of many of the students of the

Science, Engineering and Medical Faculties were different from those of the students of the Arts Faculty.

The leaders of the JVP, who were held behind bars after the 1971 insurrection, made use of the opportunity to reflect back on their Maoist political roots, and to study the National Question in Sri Lanka and the related Marxist policy position. The Tamil youth led peaceful protests against the new constitution of the island adopted in 1972. The blatantly repressive measures adopted by the then government against these youth provided an enlightening environment regarding the issues affecting the Tamils.

The prisons in Hammenheil, Jaffna, and Kandy where Sinhala and Tamil youth had long been held in detention provided an opportunity for a low level exchange of political ideas. Nationalism had started crystallising in a major way among the Sinhalese in the early 1950s and for the Tamils in the early 1970s.

The policy declaration of the JVP had been finalised by the early 1970s. Its political programme recognised the significance of carrying out political activities among the Tamil and Muslim communities, particularly, living in the north, the east, and the central provinces of the island. When emergency rule was withdrawn in the mid-1970s, the JVP re-commenced its public political activities.

By this time, the JVP had already developed contacts with several Tamil comrades in the north, the east, and the plantations. Some of the JVPers had the opportunity to work in areas where Tamils and Muslims predominated, or in workplaces where they could develop initial contacts with them in Colombo and elsewhere. There were also several contacts developed between the JVP and Tamil activists, particularly comrade Rohana, when both groups were detained in the prisons in Jaffna and Hammenheil.

The first Central Committee meeting of the JVP that was held in November 1977 allocated the responsibility of

carrying out political work among the non-Sinhala communities to its Politburo. The first feeble JVP networks among the Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese in the north, in the east and in the plantations were established by the end of 1977. In the north the first political cells were established in Chunnakam and Kilinochchi in the areas where the traditional Left previously had some hold. Within the next year the network extended to many areas in the north. The JVP activities did not progress much in the east, except in the areas where Muslims were predominant. In the hill country, the JVP established small groups in Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya districts, and there were party cells established in Nuwara Eliya, Talawakelle and Hatton. Furthermore, there were strong political alliances established with the plantation workers trade unions.¹⁴

Working among the Tamils and Muslims provided the JVP with the best opportunity to understand the real-life problems and issues the Tamil and Muslim people faced in the island. On the one hand, the ordinary people of these communities had socio-economic and cultural problems very much similar to the problems faced by the majority Sinhalese. On the other hand, because of their linguistic and cultural background and circumstances, they had to face specific problems that the Sinhalese did not have to face.

Most of the resources were spent in certain areas where the social elite were resident, but the needs of the ordinary people in the villages were neglected. They lacked even the basic day-to-day means to survive. They lacked land to work on, water for irrigation, and basic educational and health facilities. The JVP experienced these problems among the people irrespective of whether they were Muslim, Tamil or Sinhala.

¹⁴ Particularly, of comrade Illancheliyan and the *Kandurata Tharuna Peramuna* (Up Country Youth Front) led by comrade V.L. Pereira.

The people who spoke only Sinhala or Tamil were treated with repugnance. If people wore their rural attire, sarong or *vetti*, they were looked down upon. In the south, to look for employment, people had to go after politicians to get a 'chit' addressed to a bureaucrat. However, in the north and parts of the east, the situation was different, because the MPs of these areas were not in the government, thus making the employment opportunities of many educated Tamil youth even more precarious. When Tamil or Muslim people whose mother tongue was Tamil, and who could only communicate in Tamil, corresponded with government departments in Tamil, they received responses in Sinhala only. To find a translator, they had to go to the closest city, adding to their misery and resentment.

Muslim people, especially in villages like Kaththankudy, had to face issues relating to lack of housing facilities, lack of land for paddy cultivation, and finding dowries to give their womenfolk in marriage. Most of the members of these families lived in small one or two roomed huts. In Colombo, for Sinhalese and Muslim families who lived in slums, the situation was just as bad or even worse. Many male members of these families had to go to sleep in shifts due to lack of room to sleep. Many were compelled to engage in minor criminal activities to eke out a living.

When the JVP approached the Tamil youth in the north,¹⁵ already most of them had gravitated towards nationalist political positions. By this time, Tamil youth had commenced associating with diverse Tamil militant groups. Communications between these youth and the JVP, both in public and in private, led to heated debates. It was clear that many young Tamil activists had committed themselves to the nationalist struggle rather than class struggle.

Many JVP cadres from a rural Sinhala background, who came to the north and east for political activities, could

¹⁵ Many private and public discussions and talks, classes, and rallies were held at houses, libraries, or parks

not see much difference between the issues facing rural Sinhalese and Tamils. Yet it was difficult for them to identify with the issues the Tamil people were facing due to their cultural and linguistic background. They did not understand the language, tradition, customs and behaviours of the Tamil people. One of the distinguishing characteristics of life in the north was the feudal remnants in Tamil society such as caste, religion and social interaction, which were more noticeable than in the south.

Yet the Tamil youth in the north were industrious and productive; parents were keen to educate their children to find good employment that would allow them upward social mobility. Similar to the people in the rural Sinhala south, the rural Tamil people in the north and east were hospitable, welcoming and open to communication. However, as time passed, the JVP also felt that there was a change in the political mood among the youth as the armed forces of the state, which were considered alien to Tamils, were present in many locations in the peninsula.

There were a few Tamil JVP activists in Alaveddy, Mallakam, Thirunelvely and Velvetithurai areas. They encountered verbal threats demanding them to stop their political activities. Which organisations carried out such threats against the JVP activities was not clear. This was because there were many militant organisations blooming at the time. In some areas like Velvetithurai and Thirunelvely, such threats also emanated from those who supported the CPC-P. In other areas, these threats were assumed to be from the militant nationalist groups.

For example, two major public events held in Jaffna in the early 1980s by the JVP were attacked. A chair was thrown at the stage when a 'Songs of Liberation' performance was held at the public auditorium in Jaffna. Stones were thrown at a public meeting where Rohana was speaking, injuring his forehead. Later on, the JVP activists in the north told us that both these incidents were reactions of the Maoist groups to protest against the

growing popularity of the JVP in the north and to frighten Tamil people from joining it. In the early eighties, when a Tamil comrade called Navaratnam was threatened by a militant organisation, and the house of one of his relations was occupied by the militants, the JVP took measures to bring this comrade down to Colombo to stay in the party office for a while.

On the other hand, there were pressures building up in the early 1980s from two sources within the JVP. One was from the Tamil comrades based in the Kilinochchi and Visvamadu area, who demanded that the JVP should specifically campaign for the rights of Tamil people without mixing up the issue of Tamil rights with the socio-economic issues affecting other people in the island. The JVP rejected this idea, as it believed that all these issues arose as a result of the capitalist economic base and the elites' astute policies of divide and rule. While raising the issues affecting all the working people in the island, the JVP also raised the issues that were related to the problems of the Tamil people.

The other pressure point was from comrades of the student wing of the JVP in the university campuses, particularly some who were at the Katubedde campus. They wanted the JVP to completely drop any public discussion on issues affecting the Tamil people. The JVP rejected this idea also on the grounds similar to the ones raised previously. We also argued that Sinhala people should become aware of the issues the Tamil people in the north and east were facing. As there was a necessity to thrash this issue out in public, and to clarify matters to the cadres, a public lecture was held in the latter part of 1981, at the Sugathadasa Stadium in Colombo.

As one of the instigators of the policy, I addressed a packed crowd at the Sugathadasa Stadium. I clearly explained the JVP policy position that the JVP accepted the right to self-determination of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. However, the JVP did not advocate separation as a solution to their problems; rather it advocated a united

Sri Lanka with regional autonomy, where all residents could live as equals. At the questions and answers session, I had to respond to many questions.

During the presidential election campaign of 1982, the JVP was able to hold successful public rallies in many places in the north and east. Yet, the number of people who voted for the JVP in the north and east was small, although not disappointing. Many JVP leaders, who had higher expectations, were not happy with the island-wide election outcome, and the number of votes the party received in the north and east. This poor election showing was interpreted to mean that the Sinhala electorate did not like the JVP advocating the right to self-determination of Tamils. This was a politically erroneous position. In the presidential election, the majority of the people were aware that only a candidate of the UNP or the SLFP would win. So, most of the sympathisers of other parties, including JVP supporters, became polarised between the UNP and the SLFP.

The JVP as a whole represented Marxist and Sinhala nationalist tendencies. The nationalistic element rested with the historic glory of the past Sinhala kingdoms. The current JVP has shed all its Marxist tendencies and has become purely nationalistic. It wants to achieve a unitary Sinhala state by defending their 'motherland.' Thus the Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity can be made to flourish, while Western cultural decadence and the influences of other cultures on Sinhalese could be negated. Their so-called idea of socialism has been subsumed by its commitment to safeguard this unitary state, which is ironically a colonial construct.

14. Since your resignation from the JVP, you have become associated with a viewpoint that is different from the present JVP on the questions of ethnic pluralism, devolution, and power-sharing. From this viewpoint, what are your thoughts in retrospect with regard to the

constitution-making process in 1970-72, and the 1972 Constitution?

My resignation letter handed over to the Politburo in February 1984, regarding the national question, stated in brief as follows:

“On the national question I cannot see a difference between what we are advocating and what a genuine parliamentary party might advocate. What we are advocating is two-faced. While recognising the right of nations to self-determination as being a Leninist principle, to have at the same time a different principle for the destiny of the Tamil people within a JVP government could only be two-faced. Every time the economic crisis intensifies the capitalist class tries to divert peoples’ attention towards the national question. Hence, regardless of how much the economy may deteriorate, the country’s specific social and historical conditions have brought the national question to the forefront as one of the primary conditions for the survival of capitalism. But the national question has in turn created an irreversible crisis for capitalism. Under capitalism, this crisis can only worsen. Hence the main task of a revolutionary party is to enquire into ways to incorporate the national question into Sri Lanka’s socialist revolution and to act accordingly.

By being servile to either Sinhala or Tamil racism this cannot be fulfilled. Even if certain militant Tamil organisations may have originally engaged in terrorist activities, if they are now prepared to follow a progressive path, how can it not be the duty of a revolutionary organisation to have a certain amount of links with these organisations and try and guide them on a correct path. What advantage can be gained for Sri Lanka’s socialist revolution by saying we will be subjected to State

repression and therefore should not have such links? I feel that we can only expect to rally the Tamil people around the banner of Sri Lanka's revolution if and only if we equate their problems with ours and agitate forcefully to solve them, and not by separating ourselves from their problems. The stance I take regarding these questions have been clarified to you before. As we have travelled further along our separate paths since then, I will not dwell on this any further."

Between 1977 and 1982, the JVP made a genuine attempt to forge links between the Sinhala and Tamil youth. This was not successful due to the different historical and nationalist trajectories of these groups, their social base, and some of the opportunistic policies that the JVP espoused, particularly since late 1982. Both the Sinhala and Tamil youth movements expressed their dissatisfaction with the state and their desire for change through political violence. Both the JVP and the LTTE adhered to a mix of socialism and nationalism. The state was their common enemy; however, succumbing to their nationalistic politics of the glories of their respective feudal past, they saw each other as enemies not allies.

The JVP was able to successfully mobilise the southern youth, but it was adventurist and they committed strategic and tactical errors. After the failed 1971 insurrection, the leadership of the JVP made use of the opportunity to reflect on its political theory and practice. Implementation of the new constitution for Sri Lanka in 1972 and the protests of Tamil youth against it also informed these reflections. That is why after the release of its leaders in 1977, the JVP decided to pursue political activities among all communities in the island.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the JVP was supportive of the right to self-determination of Tamil people, and recognised Sinhala, Tamil and English as national languages of the land. The political interaction of the JVP occurred when many Tamil youth were hardening their

nationalist positions because of the repressive policies of the state. Despite threats from some Tamil militants, the JVP persisted in its political activities in the north and the east until 1982. However, the poor showing of the JVP in the presidential elections of 1982 led to a revision: some ideologues claimed that the party's advocacy of the Tamil people's right to self-determination was one reason for this failure.

I am of the view that the right to self-determination is a bourgeois democratic right advocated by the rulers of the capitalist class as well as the working class. The principle is embodied in Article I of the Charter of the United Nations and has been embraced by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and the Founder of the Soviet Union Vladimir Illych Lenin. It is recognised as a right of all peoples in the first article common to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which both entered into force in 1976.

It is historically evident that the exercise of this right could generate a diversity of outcomes ranging from political independence through to full integration within a state. For some, the only acceptable outcome is full political independence as demonstrated in the case of the Tamil militant struggle. This situation usually arises when nations or nationalities are subjected to occupation or colonisation. Then, there have been other examples, where the demand has been a degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy, sometimes in the form of a federal relationship. For others it is a demand for the right to live on and manage their traditional lands free of external interference and incursion.

I believe that, with the JVP backing away from the recognition of the right to self-determination, it moved from being a socialist party to a chauvinistic one. The political opportunism of its leadership was a critical factor in this shift. They revived the slogan 'Indian Expansionism' which had featured in the JVP

programme before 1972. The JVP's social base mainly comprised of rural, semi-proletarian and petit bourgeois Buddhist Sinhala youth. The neo-colonial political and economic developments in the country were not conducive to building interaction between the Sinhala and Tamil youth; and the interaction of most of the JVP's membership with Tamils was minimal, so that empathy towards the issues facing the Tamil people was limited.

The JVP has been consistently opposed to the implementation of the Provincial Councils system as a measure of devolving power. Various regimes had unilaterally abrogated those pacts they had agreed which pledged to provide a measure of devolution, caving in to pressure from Sinhala nationalist groups. A typical example took place in 1997. After extensive multi-party talks, the then President presented to Parliament a draft Constitution Bill of 2000, to repeal and replace the present constitution. The parties representing minority communities responded favourably, but proposed 40 amendments. The United National Party (UNP) withdrew from the debate. The Bill lapsed with the dissolution of Parliament in 2000. In 2001, a proclamation for a referendum was made to ascertain the public viewpoint for a new constitution. However, the President decided to postpone the referendum again under pressure from multifarious chauvinist organisations. In the end, the referendum was cancelled. The JVP played a crucial role in negating the attempts to devolve power.

Lenin approached the issue from an analysis of the historical context of oppressive and imperialist Russian nationalism, whereas Luxemburg approached it from an analysis of nationalism of the oppressed people in Poland.¹⁶ Lenin explained that in place of all forms of

¹⁶ However, Rosa Luxemburg argued that “the famous ‘right of self-determination of nations’ is nothing but hollow, bourgeois phraseology and humbug”: R. Luxemburg (1918) *The Nationalities Question in the Russian Revolution*, retrieved from:

nationalism Marxism advances internationalism, the amalgamation of all nations into a larger unity.¹⁷ However, he recognised that such an amalgamation could be achieved only through complete democracy and on a voluntary basis.

The JVP degenerated into a Sinhala nationalist party that has continued to vehemently oppose federation, i.e., any devolution of power to Tamil-speaking regions. They voice slogans on national equality, but did not back them up with any active support for the struggle of the Tamil people. This is contrary to Leninist principles. Lenin wrote: “Bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism – these are the two irreconcilably hostile slogans that correspond to the two great class camps throughout the capitalist world, and express the two policies (nay, the two world outlooks) in the national question.”¹⁸ He showed that, depending on changes in the concrete conditions, the question of secession or federation can have exactly opposite solutions, and some popular movements attempted “to use the letter of Marxism against the spirit of Marxism.”¹⁹

Marxists often interpreted federation as a tendency to secede.²⁰ During that period, I was also party to this misconception that Lenin’s position regarding federation was negative, although he recognised that in certain historical conditions federation for some countries was quite warranted. Thus, in his thesis on ‘*The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*,’ he pointed out that one could be a determined opponent of federation as a matter of principle but still prefer it to

<http://libcom.org/library/nationalities-question-in-the-russian-revolution-luxemburg> [last accessed: 30th July 2012]

¹⁷ V.I. Lenin (1913) *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, in (1964) *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Vol. 20 (Moscow: Progress Publishers). Retrieved from

<http://www.marx2mao.com/Lenin/CRNQ13.html> [last accessed, 30th July 2012]

¹⁸ Ibid: p. 26.

¹⁹ Ibid: p. 433.

²⁰ Bopage (1977).

national inequality. He said that Marx, for instance, favoured a federation of Ireland and England when the English were threatening Ireland with forcible subjugation.²¹

The opportunistic shift of the Left parties on the National Question was a betrayal of working class solidarity. Other socialist groups continue to recognise this right but have marginal influence on the working class. The Sinhala nationalist groups, their coalitions and chauvinist fronts charge that those who recognise the right to self-determination encourage division and disintegration of the country. Lenin and the Bolshevik Party made a special point of educating the Russian working class on internationalism, because the success of the whole working class including the national liberation struggle depended on the internationalism of the Russian working class.

Marxists consider that a holistic solution to the National Question can only be sought through a radical transformation of the entire society. Unfortunately, we live under capitalism. So, do we wait for socialism to usher in and create a heaven with no conflicts? I do not believe so. The Left and the working class movement need to take a firm and unambiguous stand that any proposed solution to the national question includes guarantees of all democratic rights to all the citizens living anywhere in the island irrespective of their socio-economic and cultural background. It is the duty of the working class movement, socialists and democrats to continue to support the right of Tamil people to determine their own destiny.

The muted examples of political dialogue during the late 1970s and early 1980s indicate that dialogue is feasible

²¹ V.I. Lenin (1916) *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, in *Collected Works* (1964), Vol.22: pp. 143-156, retrieved from <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm> [last accessed 30th July 2012]

among restive elements on opposite sides of the political fence. In the present situation, such dialogue is essential to ensure that the aspirations of the marginalised people are fulfilled. However, this requires a paradigm shift in the attitudes and thinking of all the people residing in the island as well as the Sinhala and Tamil expatriate communities.