

# A Lost Revolution: The JVP Insurrection 1971

Rohana Wijeweera was born in July 1943 in Tangalle, and grew up in Kottegoda, a small village in the Matara district. He was admitted to the Goda Uda government Primary Boy's School in the middle of 1947, where he received primary education until 1953. In 1954 he joined the Goda Uda government Senior English School and passed his General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level - equivalent to grade 10), public examination.

His father was said to be an ardent supporter of the Ceylon Communist Party. It was reported that his father was severely injured in 1952 when a fight erupted between the supporters of the ruling UNP and the Communist Party. In 1960, Wijeweera, it is said, worked for the Communist Party candidate, Aelian Nanayakara, in Devundara. Subsequently, in 1960, Wijeweera received a scholarship to study medicine in Russia. In 1962, during the Chinese-Russian split, he took the side of China. In 1964, Wijeweera returned to Ceylon on vacation, but the Russian Embassy in Colombo, on instructions from Moscow, refused to grant him visa to go back to Moscow to continue his education.

Once it was confirmed that he could not continue his studies in Russia, due to his publicly known sympathy for China, he joined the newly formed Ceylon Communist Party led by N Shanmugathasan. By the end of 1964, he joined the party as a full-time functionary, receiving a monthly allowance of Rs150. While in the party, he slowly joined dissident groups within the party, who were dissatisfied with Shanmugathasan's leadership. Among them were Sanath, Piyatilaka, Karunaratne, Loku Athula, Premapala and Milton, who after their dismissal from the Communist Party worked closely with Wijeweera in his new organization. Rohana Wijeweera and others decided in mid-1966 to launch a revolutionary party, Janata Vimukthi Perumuna (People's Liberation Front), which they had to literally start from scratch.

Towards 1967, Wijeweera and his friends started a small poultry farm in Kirinde, to generate income for their livelihood. During these days they began to formulate the five lectures or five classes. The purpose behind the five lectures was to explain in simple and plain language the politics of social revolution. The leftist and the Marxists in Ceylon expressed their views in an abstract doctrinaire fashion, with lot of high-sounding phrases, which were alien to the ordinary common man in the country. Wijeweera and his men formulated lectures on such topics such as:

- Crisis of the capitalist system in Ceylon;
- The history of the left movement in Ceylon;
- The history of the socialist revolutions;
- Indian expansion, and;
- The path of revolution in Ceylon

The classes, at the beginning, were conducted at the poultry farm in Kirinda, but when the villagers around the farm grew suspicious of the unusual movement of youths, they complained to the Grama Sevaka.

Immediately, the location was changed, and the educational camp was held at Karunaratne's house at Akmeemana in 1967. Thereafter, the five lectures were disseminated throughout the country by full-time party workers.

The government, meanwhile, was fully aware of the JVP's activities. A special CID unit was set up to probe the "Che Guevara" clique. The JVP first emerged publicly during the election campaign in early 1970. The UNP-led government claimed a plot. On March 16, 1970, at Julgama, in the Hambantota district, police arrested about 12 young people suspected of connections with the JVP, including Rohana Wijeweera. He had with him a revolver and there was evidence that he was the leader of an underground movement which had as its aim the overthrow of the government by force of arms. This led to Wijeweera being placed behind bars during the elections to the seventh parliament.

They were accused of being "Che Guverist" - a term they had never applied to themselves - and also being US agents. The JVP at this stage supported a SLFP-LSSP-CP common program, hence the opposition parties committed themselves to releasing the internees once they were elected to power. The leader of the opposition, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, had made a reference to this effect in her May Day speech in 1970.

The United Front (SLFP-LSSP-CP) won the election on May 27, 1970 and Srimavo Bandaranaike was elected prime minister for the second time.

By this time, the JVP was a force to be reckoned with. On its "A List" there were 10,000 full-time members, including some 200 women and a handful of Muslims. There was also a "B List" of sympathizers and a "C List" of those who could be approached for help.

Kegalle and Galle were the hotbeds, with over a thousand full-timers each, Badulla had around 500 members. Despite the lack of weaponry, the full-timers were equipped with blue uniforms, military boots, haversacks and were supposed to have a shotgun each.

Communication was by code. The politburo met every two months in Colombo and the district secretaries would take back message to the districts.

The JVP was organized on the lines of police divisions and police committees. From the district secretaries, couriers or "mallis" who knew the hideouts would take the messages to the cadres.

As part of the militarization of the movement, every member was asked to have a gun and 10 cartridges ready. Bombs were also made using *cheena chatty*, cast iron shells, dynamite and an elementary mechanism to blow them up. Empty condensed milk tins were ordered from factories and sent around the country to make crude bombs.

In July 1970, the United Front government released Rohana Wijeweera and the other JVP members arrested and jailed by the previous UNP government. After the release, JVPers enjoyed political freedom and were able to publish a paper called *Vimukthi* (Liberation), and hold public meetings. At this stage, the JVP continuously reminded the government of its election promises. They pressed the government to nationalize banks, plantations and implement the promised land reform and other true socialistic programs.

The first Issue of *Vimukthi*, that came out on August 1, 1970, declared in its editorial that the JVP was pledged to liberate the people of Ceylon from oppression and exploitation and to solve the problems of the unemployed youth of the country. "We certainly wish to destroy British and US imperialism and Indian expansionism and the capitalist anti-revolutionary plots. But we do not want to destroy any socialist program that the government wishes to out."

On August 10, 1970, Rohana Wijeweera was the main speaker at a rally in Colombo. He said, "We will continue to support the government if they progress towards socialism, then they will receive all our support, but if they fail to reach the goal, then we will do so."

Over a dozen well attended rallies were held at various locations in the country between August and October 1970. Those were held with the view to gaining the people's support for their future plan to take over the power. The JVP rapidly grew in popular strength. Vast crowd of thousands were drawn to its rallies all over the country.

The police began to watch the JVP activities very closely. Young Sinhala youths were being arrested in the rural areas. The police and army jointly set up a counter intelligence unit to monitor the activities of the JVP.

The movement was now gathering momentum. Between July 1970 and the end of the year, Wijeweera addressed some 20 public rallies in places such as Kegalle, Wellawaya, Tangalle, Entombed, Moratuwa and Elpitiya. The JVP also published its own paper, the Janatha Vimukthi, which was widely read.

Unemployment and economic inequalities played a major role for the JVP to gain support, but the political indoctrination classes they conducted reinforced the youths' anxieties and persuaded them to embark on the path of violence. The bulk of its support was drawn from students and unemployed youths under the age of 25 years.

In September 1970, two of workers involved in a strike at Keengalla estate were shot by police and the strike was broken down. While Rohana Wijeweera at the helm was making his final preparations to overthrow the government, in November 1970 the JVP, the LSSP-R and the YSF (Young Socialist Front) organized a mass rally at Keengalla estate to protest the killing of the two estate workers. The meeting was addressed by Rohana Wijeweera, Bala Tampoe of the LSSP-R and Illanchelyan of the YSF.

In September 1970, Wijeweera appointed Loku Athula to be in charge of the Arms Section of the JVP and directed him to collect 100,000 bombs immediately. Accordingly, shells were manufactured at a foundry in Pilapitiya and were stored at Kapila Motors, Kandana and at Weliveriya, close to Loku Athula's home.

In January 1971, Rohana Wijeweera made it known that he was the General-Secretary of the JVP when he replied to questions asked in a press conference. On February 27, 1971, the JVP held another mass rally in Colombo. It marked a big increase in the size of the audience.

Several heists were also carried out by JVP members, among them the Okkampitiya bank robbery, the Badulla mail bag robbery, the Ambalangoda bank robbery and the York Street robbery, to raise funds. Robberies were committed with the knowledge and approval of Wijeweera, Loku Athula, Karunaratne and Sanath. Some of the robberies as recounted by Justice Alles in his book are: (1) In June 1971, Loku Athula participated in the Weliveriya taxi-cab robbery where violence was used (2) In November 1970, with the assistance of Sunanda Deshapriya and two postal peons, Loku Athula robbed a sum of Rs. 10,000/= which was being transported in a mailbag by train from Badulla to Diyatalawa post-office. (3) Loku Athula took part in the robbery of a car at Kekirawa and the attempted robbery at the Kahatagasdigiliya People's Bank in December 1970, (4) In April 1971, over three lakhs of rupees was stolen from the Elpitiya People's Bank.

It is also in evidence that the monies thus robbed were given to Podi Athula ( a member of the Arms Section of the JVP) to purchase arms and ammunition. A sum of Rs. 18,000/= had been spent on the purchase of empty tins from Sigma Industries, Nugegoda for the manufacture of hand bombs. It transpired that Podi Athula had, for some time, before the general elections of 1970, been experimenting in the manufacture of hand bombs at a garage by the name of Kapila Motors, Kandana, run by Podi Athula's brother Sujeewa. On 16th December 1970, either in the course of experimenting with the bombs or in the course of demonstrating how bombs could be exploded, Podi Athula received a serious injury, necessitating the amputation of his hand at Sulaiman's Hospital, Colombo

By early 1971, recruitment to the JVP had been stopped and members were urged to collect as much money as possible, through whatever means (mortgaging lands and homes) to arm the movement. The promise was that once the JVP secured power, the members would be able to reap the fruits of their sacrifice.

At the JVP's last public rally before the uprising, held at Colombo's Hyde Park on February 27, 1971, Wijeweera made a stirring call. "Let the revolution of the workers, farmers and soldiers

be triumphant." In that meeting held at Hyde Park he made provocative statements. He openly challenged the state by saying that the day of reckoning would be decided not by themselves, but by the capitalist class. He thundered that the date of the revolution will be the one on which the state decides to attack the JVP, and hence state repression is not a bad thing, but a good thing, and more on the same lines. In conclusion, he told the receptive crowd, amid applause, "Apa mara demuwada, apa nagana handa sada nomiyenu eta!" - "Though we may be killed, our cry will not be silenced."

In February 1971, a clear warning went to the authorities that something was brewing among university students. The JVP had hidden a large number of detonators in the ceiling of Peradeniya University's Mars Hall, but due to the heat they began exploding like firecrackers. The explosions went on for five days. Meanwhile, in March, a bomb explosion in Kegalle killed five JVP members. Activated, the police began raiding JVP hideouts. Within the movement, pressure was building up to launch the revolution.

On March 6, 1971, there was demonstration outside the embassy of the United States of America in Colombo by the Mao Youth Front, an ultra-left organization led by Dharmasekera, in the course of it, a policeman was killed. The JVP denied any involvement. Also, the JVP promptly denounced the incident.

Faced with incidents of violence, the cabinet met under the leadership of Srimavo Bandaranaike on March 16, 1971 and announced the JVP's plot to overthrow the government. The prime minister declared a state of emergency and a dust-to-dawn curfew was imposed in some areas and the army and the police were given full powers of arbitrary arrest and disposal of bodies without having to carry out inquests or inform the relatives of those killed. Srimavo Bandaranaike went on the radio to broadcast an appeal to the Ceylonese people for vigilance against terrorists groups. Srimavo Bandaranaike, the prime minister, explained to the nation the reason for the declaration of the emergency. The insurgency movement of the JVP came to be called popularly "Che Guvera Movement" The prime minister detailed some of atrocities attributed to the Che Guverists, she appealed, "As a mother, I would like to ask all the parents, whether it is for a future such as this, that they have brought up their children with such love, care and sacrifice. I appeal to all parents to act with care and foresight, to be interested in, and to supervise the activities of their children so that they would not be misled by designing people into ways, which would only end up in disaster for both their parents and themselves." Srimavo Bandaranaike asserted that her government, "will not be intimidated or diverted from the firm course it has set itself in bringing economic growth, social advancement and a cultural resurgence within the framework of social democracy. In conclusion, she made an appeal to foreign governments to come to Ceylon's assistance in its hour of peril. These included the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China, India and Pakistan.

Thereafter, in March, Wijeweera traveled around the country, visiting Hambantota, Colombo, Kandy, Matale, Dambulla, Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa. By mid-March 1971, there was clear and unmistakable evidence of preparations for a violent attack against the government. Caches of homemade grenades began to explode in their hiding places, often killing and maiming some of those engaged in the manufacture.

By March 26, 1971, the government announced that nearly 300 persons had been arrested for suspected involvement with the JVP, and the arrests included Rohana Wijeweera, who was captured on March 13. The announcement also included the recovery of arms and ammunition from JVP suspects. Rohana Wijeweera and 12 others were transferred to Fort Hammenheil, a temporary prison off the Karainagar Naval base.

On April 2, a crucial meeting was held at 2 pm. Nine members of the JVP inner circle met in secret at the Sangaramaya temple of the Vidyodaya University in Kelaniya. It was a meeting that would change the course of Sri Lanka's destiny. The inner circle decided that all police stations in the country would be attacked on the night of April 5. A coded telegram was sent on April 4, saying "JVP Appuhamy expired, funeral 5". Also, the signal for the attack was the pop song "Neela Kobeyya", played over the state owned radio - Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. The meeting was apparently convened in response to a message sent from

Jaffna jail by Wijeweera, who requested that posters and leaflets should be published calling for his release and in the case of an attack, 500 comrades should be sent to Jaffna to secure his release.

On April 5, 1971 early morning, due to some confusion, the police stations at Wellawaya and Moneragala in Uva province were attacked. But later, the attack was launched as planned on the same day, but in the evening. Accordingly, police stations at Badulla, Kandy, Moneragala, Amparai and Nuwera Eliya were attacked. JVP cadres - in groups of 25 to 30 - assaulted police stations in those administrative districts, using home-made weapons. Nearly 93 of the total of 273 police stations in the country fell to the insurgents. The government also evacuated many more police stations located in the most vulnerable areas. Almost the entire area of the south and west of Ceylon fell into the hands of the JVP and it was rumored that a JVP garrison was on the move to capture Colombo, the capital city.

On April 5 during the night, Srimavo Bandaranaike had hid under her office table, as Temple Trees had received a false alarm that the JVP had managed to cross parliament building and were marching on the Galle Road, on their way to the Temple Trees, to arrest the prime minister. Felix Dias Bandaranaike had arrived at midnight and the prime minister and others left for Colombo harbor to spend the night on a ship anchored there.

The JVP had planned to take into custody Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike on the night of April 6th 1971. This task had been entrusted to JVP activist Piyasiri who was to have been assisted by Raja Nimal, an H. S. C. student of Sri Sangharajah Maha Vidyalaya, Maradana. Piyasiri's instructions to Nimal were that his group "should attack the residence of the Prime Minister, capture her and bring her dead or alive to Campbell Park that night". Fortunately, the Government received prior information of the plan and curfew was declared forthwith, thwarting the sinister plan of the JVP

On April 9th (Good Friday) Dr. Rex de Costa, a respected medical practitioner of Deniyaya was shot dead by JVP in the presence of his wife for treating injured constables and assisting them to carry out their duties in face of the JVP attacks.

Lawlessness reigned supreme in several districts of the country, notably Kegalle, Matara, Galle, Hambantota, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Kurunagala, Vavuniya, Gampaha, Ratnapura. Administration of law and order had broken down and civil administration had come to a standstill. Many civilians and police officers had been killed. Roads were impassable owing to roadblocks imposed by the insurgents and damages to culverts. Telephone lines had been cut and telegraph posts pulled down. Public transport had been halted and a shortage of food as well as petrol and oil was prevalent owing to the interruption in transport services. Insurgents looted shops and terrorised the people who lived in constant fear of their lives.

Immediate counter-subversive measures were taken by the police and the armed forces to track down and arrest the terrorists. The Police called for information from the general public about the insurgents and their hideouts and the response was encouraging.

As violence spread, the military was called out and the situation worsened. Srimavo Bandaranaike sent a distress signal to Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India. But as the telecommunication system in Ceylon by that time had been damaged, New Delhi managed only to receive a garbled cable from the Ceylon prime minister. As assistance was not forthcoming from India, K P S Menon, of the Indian High Commission, was sent to New Delhi, to personally convey the SOS (Si opus sit) nthe distress call of Ceylon.

The prime minister in her broadcast to the nation on April 24, 1971, admitted that the government was not prepared to face an armed insurrection from the youth to such dynamic proportions. She admitted that the government had not taken any military precautions to deal with the insurgents. She declared, "We found that we had inadequate weapons, ammunitions and aircrafts to meet a sustained threat over a long period of time by the terrorist insurgents."

Indira Gandhi, when she received the urgent message, hurriedly summoned her cabinet to discuss the desperate appeal. Subsequently, a decision was taken and the Southern Command of the Indian Army under Lieutenant-General G G Bevoor was alerted and within few hours crack paratroops and infantry regiments were airlifted from Bangalore and Madras (Chennai), to the Ceylon Air force base in Katunayake.

Several squadrons of Indian Air Force helicopters were dispatched to Katunayake with even greater haste. A flotilla from the Western Fleet of the Indian Navy went out of the Cochin harbor to patrol the Ceylon maritime areas to intercept, in cases of any foreign vessels entering to assist the insurgents.

At the same time, as there was conflict in East Pakistan, the military government of General Yahaya Khan was transporting military equipment and personnel from Karachi to Dacca, through Colombo as over-flying rights over India had been suspended following the hijacking of an Indian airlines Fokker friendship aircraft to Pakistan a few weeks earlier. As gratitude to Ceylon, Pakistan delivered two helicopters to Colombo for the Ceylon Air Force. England, America, Yugoslavia and Egypt rushed assistance to Ceylon.

On April 16, 1971, the North Korean Embassy was ordered to be closed down and the staff left the country for alleged complicity in the insurrection.

The Army Commander, Major General Sepala Attyagalle, sent detachments under Lieutenant-Colonel Cyril Ranatunge to Kegalle. Brigadier P D Ramanayake directed operations from Galle, up to Sinha Raja forest, which reportedly sheltered the rebel headquarters. Under Colonel E D T Z Abeysekera an armed detachment was sent to North Central Province.

At the Operation Room at Temple Trees, the newly appointed Additional Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defense and External Affairs, S A Dissanayaka was in control of the entire island-wide operation against the insurgents.

The armed forces struck back and within three weeks they broke the back of the insurgents, and by the end of the year some 18,000 insurgents and their sympathizers were in the prison camps in Senapura, Ridigama, Vidyodaya, Hammenheil in Jaffna and the Malwatte camp in Amaparai. From there, the majority of prisoners were moved to a prison cum rehabilitation center at Akkarayankulam, located off Kilinochi, in the Northern province.

The rebels were poorly armed and often badly led. Their major weapon was surprise attack, and once the initial attack was repulsed the government forces were able to regroup and make devastating counter attacks.

According to available official figures, at least 5,000, probably many more, died in the insurrection. According to unofficial figures nearly 25,000 Sinhalese youths could have been killed. Accounts from reliable sources indicate that many of suspected insurgents were summarily shot by a panic-stricken police and their bodies burnt on pyres consisting of old rubber tyres impregnated with diesel oil, thereby preventing any kind of identification. The police who had killed suspected or active insurgents, let the bodies float downstream in order to terrorise the people. Wijeweera in a statement from prison in 1972, had stated that 15,000 revolutionaries had been killed, but twice that number of innocent people had also died.

Throughout the months of June to October, the government was involved with the mopping-up operations. During those days it was reported that atrocities had been committed on a large scale. Summary executions were widely reported to have taken place, but the government denied all these allegations.

On July 20, 1971, Srimavo Bandaranaike told the parliament that a special investigation unit has been set up, "The task of this unit is to go into each of these [sic] 14,000 cases and to categorize them according to the degree of involvement of these persons and to release those, who in the opinion of the investigators need not be detained any longer."

Dr N M Purer, in presenting his 1971-72 budget on November 10, 1971, said, "The tragedy of this misguided adventure is the cost to the country. Hundreds of misguided young men and women were lost to the country. Many courageous police and service personnel had to sacrifice their lives that law and order might prevail. The material cost to the country has been considerable. The direct and indirect cost through loss of income and economic activity cannot be less than Rs400 million. A few thousand young men and young women cannot be allowed to hold this country to ransom. Those who wanted revolution in 24 hours, only succeeded in pushing back the revolutionary changes for a considerable time. Haste make waste both of time and money, is an old adage."

Similarly, the Marxist ministers in the United Front government were quick to justify the army's ruthlessness which led to termination of so many lives. Dr Colvin R de Silva, the Minister of Plantation Industry and Constitutional Affairs, who entered politics as the leader of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party in the 1940s, described the JVP uprising as a putsch and gave the following rationale for crushing it ruthlessly, "The country was facing an unusual and unprecedented situation created by a group of narrow-minded people, conspiratorially organized, who had launched an effort by force of arms to displace the duly constituted government of the day in order to replace the entire system of parliamentary democracy." - Ceylon Daily News April 30, 1971.

However, the uprising failed because the people were against the insurrection and the UNP and UF supporters joined hands to capture and hand over the insurgents to the police. Secondly, the insurgents were equipped with nothing more than missionary zeal, crude weapons and they were no match to modern weapons of the armed forces.

"The insurrection failed because it had no support from the people. The insurgents presented no serious alternative political program to the people. They were not the spearhead of a popular outburst against an unpopular regime. Instead they were opposed by a popularly elected left-of-center government which had taken office only 10 months before the insurrections broke out. There were few areas in the country the insurgents controlled for brief period in April. And during their rule of these areas they demonstrated an amazing immaturity and naivete. They showed no imagination, no fresh thinking in the administrative structure they devised. Instead their administrative machinery was a grotesque parody of the very system they were pledged to destroy. Their outlook was archaic and not modern. Finally, while these youthful revolutionaries managed to control if not occupy some areas of the island and compelled government forces to confine their activities to the large towns and main trunk roads, they never showed any solid grasp of strategy. They diffused their energies in sporadic attacks spread over many parts of the country, when concentration on a few strategic points might have suited their purposes better." *J R Jayewardene of Sri Lanka - A Political Biography - Volume Two: from 1956 to His Retirement (1989)* by K M de Silva & Howard Wriggins, page 213.

In April 1972, the government introduced the Criminal Justice Commission Act, which provided for special tribunals, called Criminal Justice Commissions, to be set up to try those alleged to be seriously involved with the insurgency. The bill was passed in the House of Representatives on April 6, 1972 by a two-thirds majority. The voting was 109 in favor and 24 against it.

Dr S A Wickremasinghe (Akuressa) Sarath Muttetuwas (Kalawana) Aelian Nanayakara (Kamburupitya) and M G Mendis (Agama), the four Communist Party Members of Parliament, voted against the Criminal Justice Commission Bill. Therefore, they were expelled from the United Front Coalition, while the Communist Party Member B Y Tudawe (Matara), the Deputy Minister of Education, voted with the government and retained his position. At the same time, Peter Keuneman (Colombo Central) one of the leaders of the Communist Party and the Minister of Housing and Construction, was away from the island when the voting took place and on his return he continued to hold his portfolio. In December 1972 the Communist Party was readmitted in the United Front Coalition until February 1977, when they finally resigned from the government.

The Criminal Justice Commission was established under the Criminal Justice Commission Act

of 1972 in the face of vocal opposition from many politicians. The concept of the commission was introduced to try persons on criminal charges outside the established courts. The government felt that the procedures of the ordinary courts were unsuitable to meet the very special and unprecedented situation of an insurrection.

The Criminal Justice Commission was not only set up to investigate matters related to insurrection or rebellion, but also to deal with large scale currency offences and the widespread destruction of property. The act was effective for a period of eight years and had provisions to be renewed to a maximum period of another five years.

The striking feature of the act was that it allowed a confession to be admitted even if it were extracted by torture and the commission would be entitled to treat it with circumspection and be entitled to discount the evidence if it thought fit. Furthermore, a confession could not be used as evidence against a co-accused, but if the confessor went into the witness box to retract any part of his confession, and his retraction was disbelieved by the Commission, then this confession become evidence against a co-accused. This was seen as a kind of blackmail to discourage the withdrawal of confessions exacted under torture.

The Commission could enter a verdict of guilty or not guilty. If it found a person not guilty, it recorded an acquittal, but it had no power to discharge the accused, who could be kept in custody in spite of the verdict. If the Commission found a person guilty, the Commission had to sentence the person as if he had been tried and convicted by the Supreme Court of the country.

Some 18,000 Sinhala youths were taken into custody following the insurgency. Subsequently, 16,000 were released and 2,000 were held for trials as convicts or for further investigations. Subsequently, according to revised official figures, it became known that the government brought 2,919 youths before the Criminal Justice Commission, where they were formally charged with criminal offences - charges under section 115 of the Penal Code - Conspiracy to wage war, conspiracy to overthrow the government, Under Penal Code Section 114 - and waging war against the Queen.

Of those produced before the Commission, 2,506 pleaded guilty. In the vast majority of the cases, those who pleaded guilty were released with a two-year suspended sentence, provided their involvement in the insurrection was not considered serious.

The 1971 April insurrection trial began on June 12, 1972, at the Queen's Club, located at the Bauddhaloka Mawatha, before the Criminal Justice Commission comprising of Chief Justice H N G Fernando (Chairman) Justice A C A Alles, Justice V T Thamotheram, Justice H Dheragoda and Justice T W Rajaratnam.

Those pleading not guilty were brought in batches before the Commission. The main case consisted of 41 suspects. They were considered to be the main architects of the uprising and the youth rebellion. They were as follows:

Piyatilake; Lionel Bopage; James Uyanagoda; Anura Ranjit Kurukulasuriya; Piyasiri; Sunananda Deshapiriya; Loku Athula; Victor Ivan; Nimal Maharage, Somas Kumananayke; Wasantha Kanagaratne, Cecil Chandra, Rohana Wijeweera; Sunil Ratnasiri; Wijeyapala; Ananda Perera; Osmund Silva; Lakshman Mahaduwege; Mahinda Wijesekera; Kelly Senanayke; Batapola Athula; Aladin Subasinghe; Kalu Lucky; Lakshman Munasinghe; D A Gunasekera; T D Silva; S D Bandaranaike a nephew of Srimavo Bandaranaike and former member of parliament from Gampaha; Dhanapala; Meril Jayasiri; Chukki Premaratne; Sanath (killed in action); Susil Wickrema (killed in action); Sarath Wijesinghe (killed in action); Milton (killed in action); W T Karunaratne; Premapala; Wimalagune, Viraj Fernando; Susil Sriwardene and Nayananda Wijekulatilake.

Of those dealt with in the first protracted trial, four were found not guilty and 32 were found guilty. The leader of the insurgents, Rohana Wijeweera, who was the 13th accused, was sentenced to life imprisonment, but later amended by the Commission to 20 years' imprisonment.



The sixth (6th) suspect, Loku Athula, the 9th suspect, Kumanayake and the 12th suspect T. D. Silva pleaded guilty to the charges against them. Having pleaded guilty to the charges, Loku Athula disclosed details of the entire conspiracy and gave a complete account of his activities both before and after April 5th, 1971. He was sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment. The third suspect James Uyangoda was sentenced to twelve years rigorous imprisonment, which the 5th suspect Sunanda Deshpriya to seven years rigorous imprisonment, Lakshman Fernando alias Kalu Lucky (29th suspect) to five years rigorous imprisonment, Victor Ivan (7th suspect) to five years simple imprisonment and S. D. Bandaranaike (27th suspect) to a suspended sentence of two years

The statement by Rohana Wijeweera to the Ceylon Criminal Justice Commission, made on November 2, 1973, is given below:

## **Statement by Rohana Wijeweera to the Ceylon Criminal Justice Commission Made on November 2, 1973**

### **Chairman and Members of the Commission**

A representative of one social class is addressing the representatives of another social class. A representative of the exploited and oppressed proletariat is addressing the representatives of the exploiting and oppressing class. Although I have been designated the 'thirteenth suspect' by this Commission in the present inquiry, the Chairman himself has stated that I am the Chief Suspect. That begin so it will be necessary right at the beginning to tell you who I, the thirteenth suspect, am. I am a Marxist-Leninist. I am a modern Bolshevik. I am a proletarian revolutionary. Marxism-Leninism is a clear doctrine. In no way is a terrorist. As a proletarian revolutionary, however, I must emphatically state that I am committed to the overthrow of the prevailing capitalist system and its replacement by a socialist system.

Honorable Members of the Commission: May I make one request to begin with? I have been subjected to every possible indignity and harassment at the hands of the ruling class and have been for several years the target of numerous defamations, slurs and slanders, mudslinging and character assassination and all this without any protection from the law. The only request that I make of you, is to respect my right to express my innocence freely and without any let or hindrance.

Honorable Members of the Commission: The noblest, the most valuable, the greatest and supreme treasure that a man has is his life. He lives only once. He should spend that life in such a way that his dying moment he will have no cause for regret, repentance, shock or sorrow; in such a way that he could really be happy in the thought to having sacrificed his life advancing the development, the liberation and the victory of mankind- the people of the whole world. I agree with this aspiration and do not wish to have reason for sorrow should the capitalist ruling clique cut my life in the prime of my youth.

I have no regret whatsoever about my life and fate in store for me. I hope to tell you everything concerning the history of the April incidents, without any qualms about possible reprisals against my person. The charges made against us are grave. We have been charged with the breach of Sections 114 and 115 of the Penal Code. According to the writ issued to you by the then Governor-General, and also according to the indictment served on us, the period at issue is that between the beginning of 1968 and the end of 1971. It is said that during the period we conspired criminally to overthrow the government of Ceylon. It is said that we have 'waged war against the Queen' of have a betted such acts. Similarly, the opening submissions of the state prosecutor have attempted to show that the birth of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna was in itself tantamount to a conspiracy. What we actually said and did during this period is the crux of the matter; accordingly my own views and conceptions are as much the subject of inquiry as anything else.

When a whole country's progress is obstructed, when the forward march of an entire nation has been halted, when a whole people find themselves poised on the brink of a dark abyss, it is not difficult to understand why just and honest men will show no signs of fear as they enter prisons and suffer untold hardship, face constant harassment and even sacrifice their lives for the purpose of saving their country and their people from that national calamity. After the second imperialist war the administration of this country was handed over to the local capitalist class, as part of a neo-colonialist stratagem entered their youth.

On winning a Medical Degree Scholarship. I left for Moscow on 25 September 1960. After the preliminary examination held there, I was admitted to the Faculty of Philology on 1 October 1960, to learn the Russian language. At seventeen, I was then the youngest student at the university and I cannot forget the great assistance my Soviet teachers extended to me. I studied Russian till June 1961. In addition, I attended the lectures on world History and Historical Materialism held there in the English language. I refer here with gratitude to the well-known Soviet Historical Professor Metropoliski. Had I not been his pupil, it is possible that I would not be here before you today. It was this great man's ideas that helped me to understand how I could be of greater service to mankind in this present era, by giving up my love for medical science and becoming a revolutionary rather than a doctor.

In June 1961, I passed with distinction the final examination in the Russian language and was accordingly selected a member of the University delegation that was to visit Soviet Georgia in August.

On 1 September 1961, I commenced my medical studies. In the same educational year I studied, as additional subjects, Political Science and Russian Literature at this university. In the same month I was elected Deputy General Secretary of the Union of Ceylonese Students in Russia and accordingly I had to engage myself in student welfare work too.

At this moment I would like to raise a question which of vital importance in relation to this trial, namely, the view of Marxists is regard to peace and violence. I do so because the question of violence is related to most of my evidence. The two most important issues of connection between the Soviet and Chinese Parties were the following problems: the question to transition from capitalism, and the question of relations between the capitalist and socialist systems in the present world.

We Marxists are proletarian revolutionaries. We do not conceal this fact from anyone. We hope for a complete revolutionary change of the existing social system and act with that goal in view. Ours is not the role of sitting on the fence with folded arms waiting for the day when this capitalist system is taken for burial on the shoulders of others; this capitalist system has bequeathed suffering and oppression to the working class of this country, which is over three million strong. It has made poverty and want the sole inheritance of the middle and lower peasants who comprise more than half the population of this country, it has become the fount and source of each and every contemporary social problem that the bulk of the nation suffers. The socialist revolution in a country can be hastened or delayed depending on the degree to which objective conditions are ripe and subjective conditions, i.e. consciousness, organization and leadership, have developed.

Counter-revolutionaries resort to violence. Therefore to ensure the safe delivery of the new social system, it becomes necessary for proletarian revolutionaries to resort to revolutionary violence against the violence employed by the capitalist class. The fundamental issue is the question of state power. The main task in any social revolution is the destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of a proletarian state, in other words, the dictatorship is the essential precondition for the transition to a socialist system. No socialism can be built without the proletariat first capturing and later consolidating state power. To retain state power the capitalist class will use violence. We Marxists are not preachers of violence. We only predict the certainty of violent acts in the course of the revolution. We prophesy that the decaying ruling classes, to prevent the forward march of society through a socialist revolution, will resort to counter-revolutionary acts of violence.

*Chief Justice Fernando:* If a burglar comes to you for advice, you may tell him: 'Well it may be necessary for you to carry a revolver because the owner of the house might also have a revolver.' Under our law you cannot carry a revolver in those circumstances.

*Thirteenth Suspect:* You have a good knowledge of your law. I have is of the view I hold and of the things I have said and done. What we have said and done have been presented here in a completely distorted form. But, when the entire truth is made known, you will be able to take any course of action the law allows.

After I was cured of an illness in February 1964, the doctor advised me to take leave one term. I decided to spend this leave in Ceylon and arrived back on 24 March 1964. During the latter half of 1963, the Ceylon Communist Party split into Russian and Chinese wings. My political mentor Dr S. A. Wickramasinghe remained in the leadership of the Russian wing, but I took the side of the Chinese wing in accordance with the policies and views I held. I even sent my congratulations from Moscow to the congress of the Chinese wing.

*Justice Alles:* Would it be correct to say that you were refused a visa to return to Russia?

*Thirteenth Suspect:* After my return to Ceylon I worked as a sympathizer of the Chinese wing. During this period I was invited by a number of student unions and other public associations from several districts to speak to them on socialism and about the Soviet Union. I was questioned by the audiences on the factors which led to the Sino-Soviet polemics and answered these questions from the Chinese point of view. For this reason the local leaders of the pro-Moscow Party became angry with me. In August 1964, when I applied for a visa to return to the Soviet Union, the Soviet Embassy refused my application without giving any reasons. At the time I was taking a greater interest in political work in Ceylon. That is the answer to the question posed by Justice Alles.

*Justice Fernando:* Why did it surprise you?

*Thirteenth Suspect:* I admit that the Soviet Union is a workers' state. I will always defend the onslaughts of the capitalist class. But there are theoretical problems that divide the Soviet Union from us. They are family problems. If you attack the Soviet Union I shall defend it. But reserve the right to criticize openly and state the difference between the Soviet Union and us.

It is necessary to bring to your certain specific incidents which occurred in 1971. The Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna was implanted in the rural proletariat, the lumpen proletariat and certain petty-bourgeois layers. In the urban working class and the estates the influence of the Old Left was still traditions of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) were strongest. The SLFP won most of its seats in the rural areas. The worst massacres during the April incidents took place in the areas held by the SLFP. The SLFP politicians had shamelessly sown the germs of communal discord against the Tamil minority. In the 1956 election the CP and the LSSP stood for party on the language issue. But what did they do a short time later? They were not only against equal status for Tamil and Sinhala, but opposed even the granting of any lesser rights. It was in these conditions that we became disillusioned with them. That is why we struggled. If anyone willingly risks his or her life, or is prepared to be shackled as a prisoner, this can only be because there is no alternative. Chairman, you are aware that after the government came to power we started our political activities in the open and they were immensely successful.

Look back and see the picture of our public meetings held in various parts of the country such as Kandy, Kegalle, Kurunegala and Southern Province and Colombo - you will see the mass of humanity, thousands and thousands of people that flocked round us, to see us and listen to us. And these were not people we had forced or cajoled with the use of guns to attend our rallies, nor have we supplied them with free lorries and buses, but people who had come of their own accord because of their interest in our politics. With every passing day we were moving forward. This process continued while another parallel process was taking place: dissatisfaction with the UNP result, with our blessing, in the election of the United Front government, with over a two-thirds majority. The LSSP and CP had told the people that

if they were brought into power with a two-thirds majority they would amend the constitution, change the system of internal administration and open the way to socialism. The ordinary people took them at their word. They expected the new government to perform miracles and that is why they put the cross against the star and key and not against the elephant.

I have already mentioned that in the early days we were not strong in the urban working class. But by 1971 we had begun to spread out from the villages to the towns and, through our political (sic) agitational campaigns, our impact was beginning to be felt in the cities, specifically in certain sections of the working class. Young workers in factories and work-sites were beginning to listen. It was then that the Old Left began to understand the threat we posed to them. They attempted to devise a course of action to deal with us. The first method was branding us as CIA agents, but you are aware that this attack failed. Then they resorted to the second method. This can be described in the words of Mr. Sarath Muttettuwagama, a leader of the CP. In a speech made at a CP mass rally in Ratnapura during the later half of 1970, he stated that the repression of the Che Guevarists should not be left to the police. It should be the responsibility of the CP.

During the same period the LSSP leaders also discussed the threat we posed. A meeting of their Polit-bureau issued instructions to their locals to unleash physical attacks against us. They asked for police protection to carry out this task. I have already mentioned these facts at our public meetings. When the second method failed, they discussed the matter in the new cabinet and considered ways and means of suppressing the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna so that it could not become an effective political force. They decided, according to a recent statement by the prime minister, not to ban us as it would have made heroes out of us. The capitalist class is well aware of the futility of banning a Marxist party. So this government suspected that even if they banned us we would carry on political activities under another name. They devised an alternative scheme, which was and continues to be implemented.

You are aware that the country is facing a severe economic crisis. It is something which everyone admits. But the crisis has not materialized out of thin air. It existed on 5th April 1971. It was there before that date. At the time the government was not in a position to add to the distress of the people, to place the economic and social burden they have now placed on the masses with impunity, because there existed a revolutionary force that would have roused the people and led them to protest against these measures. It was necessary to destroy our movement before stern measures could be taken. And accordingly they prepared their plans. After January 1971 things came to a head. Mr S A Dissanayake, a former Inspector - General of Police, was appointed Additional Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, with effect from 1 March 1971. Long before this, the CID had been using its full powers to investigate the activities of the JVP. A separate unit had been set up, which had gathered sufficient facts by April 1971 through raids and arrests of comrades from various parts of the country. They also planted agents inside the JVP rank and file.

By 1 March 1971 arrangements had been completed for the deployment of military units in various parts of the country to collect intelligence about our activities. Press reports in relation to these maneuvers appeared between 1 and 5 March. In the same week police power was vested in officers of the army. On 5 March, the police rehearsed a plan in order to find out how much time it would take them when the alarm was sounded. This rehearsal was to test alertness in emergency and it was conducted in Colombo as well as in other parts of the island. On the sixth there was an attack on the US Embassy which supplied them with the excuse needed to repress the revolutionary movement. On 13 March I was arrested and on 16 March a State of Emergency was declared. 4,098 people were arrested before 5th April 1971.

In April 1971 the revolutionary preconditions for the seizure of power by the proletariat and for an armed revolutionary struggle were absent. That is my view. In the absence of a revolutionary situation - ie, both objective and subjective conditions - an armed struggle was not possible.

My view is that, conditions were not ripe for organizing an armed revolutionary uprising to seize state power. The objective conditions were maturing fast, but they were still unripe. It had not reached a stage where the masses saw no other solution but revolution. It is true, however, that then, as now, society was moving in that direction. The subjective conditions were also lacking: that is, the existence of a revolutionary party that has steered itself, won the support of the masses and is fit to lead them in an armed struggle for power. The Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna was developing and moving towards that goal, but had not reached full maturity. We had failed at that time to establish the JVP in the Northern and Eastern provinces and in the Estate sector as a political force. And then there was the question of mass support. It is true that out of the millions who voted for the Coalition government, tens of thousands had by this time washed their hands of it.

It is also true that this section was the politically developed section. They were abandoning the Coalition government and moving Leftwards towards the JVP. But there was a section which, although disgusted and frustrated, did not break away from the government during those either months. On other words the JVP had not yet reached the stage where the masses could see it as a real alternative to the government, accept its leadership and join in the class under its banner. In our Marxist conception, a revolution - an armed uprising - is not something done behind the backs of the masses.

*Justice Fernando:* Have revolutionaries in any part of the world never made mistakes?

*Thirteenth Suspect:* Mistakes have been made. In fact they have learnt lessons from these mistakes. Mistakes can happen in the future as well.

*Justice Fernando:* I said a mistake. I meant a miscalculation.

*Thirteenth Suspect:* There can be no revolution without the participation and active support of the people. That is our stand. I told you earlier that I reject the position that it was a JVP decision to seize state power on 5 April 1971. I do not admit that. But as I discovered later and something I do not deny is that there have been instances when certain comrades of the JVP, in the face of intolerable repression, restored to a struggle against such repression.

In March 1971, a class need arose for the ruling to suppress the revolutionary movements of this country, especially the JVP. They acted accordingly. the April incidents were the result. I interpret the process as one initiated by the counter revolution. This does not mean that anyone who acted against capitalist repression on 5 April, or had mistaken a decision taken by other to be a JVP decision, or even decided on such a course on their own in the absence of another alternative, was thus a counter-revolutionary. A number of close comrades of mine are no longer living. The entire revolutionary leadership of the Matara district exists no more. Comrade Susil Wickrema, Comrade Jayatissa of Deniyaya, Comrades Piyatissa, Loku Mahatmaya, Suraweera, Jayaweera, the two Bogahawatta brothers were all both personal friends and fellow comrades. No one can speak about their fate. On enquiring from their homes all I have learnt is that are no longer among the living.

In conclusion this is what I have to say: I admit that the capitalist class has been temporary victorious. But I do not see it as a defeat for the proletariat. This is only a big retreat for the proletariat; yes, I call it a big retreat. A retreat is not a defeat, but a phase from which it is possible to recover and march again to certain victory. No revolutionary movement has raced non-stop to victory in a straight line from start to finish. Forward marches followed by retreats are quit common in revolutionary movements. I remain an unrepentant Marxist and what I am defending here are Marxist principles rather than my person. For as a revolutionary Marxist I have nothing else to defend.

Whatever the capitalist class may have expected to gain through the April incidents, their ultimate result has already been expressed by a revolutionary poet in the following stanza:

*See these blossoms strewn on earth and withered lie  
Their fragrance shall abide, shall never die,  
To raise its sweetens high to limits limitless,*

*More buds will bloom and multiply.*

The poet expressed himself in clear and plain terms. The flowers of revolution have blossomed, but how they lie withered and dead. But their perfume has not yet ceased. To enhance that perfume and with that aim in view other buds will continue to bloom. In fact, gentlemen, the capitalist cause has no real reason to celebrate its success. For in the class struggle victory is a see-saw until the proletariat finally emerges victorious.

'We may be killed but our voice will never die'. That is our belief. I have concluded my evidence.

Sources : K T Rajasingham: SRI LANKA: The Untold Story / Rohan Gunaratne: A Lost Revolution? / A. C. Alles: Insurgency 1971

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