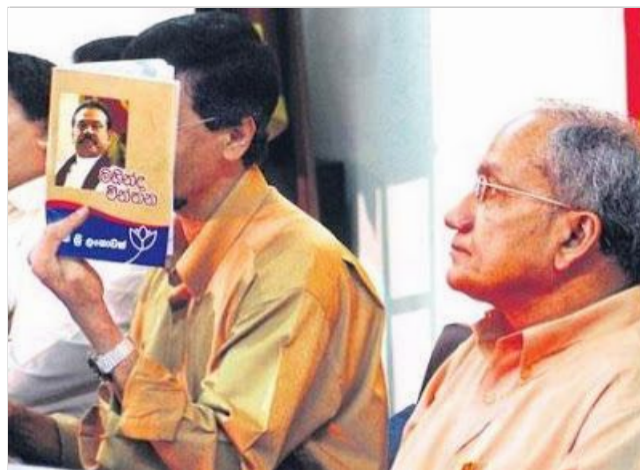


## The Second JVP Insurgency (Part One)



by. Tisarane Gunasekara

*"In any case the purpose is not really to indict the past, but to summon it to the attention of a suicidal, anachronistic present."*

- Wole Soyinka (Nobel Lecture - 1986)

### Introduction

Almost immediately after the conclusive defeat of the Second JVP Insurgency (with the killing of the top JVP/DJV leaders in November 1989), the rewriting of history began. Attempts were made to romanticise that brutal conflict by depicting the JVP as a group of angry but innocent and idealistic young men and women who became the victims of a bloodthirsty, despotic regime. Instead of the threat it was to the democratic system, the JVP was hailed as the pre-eminent defender of freedom and of human rights. A new generation inexperienced in the horrors of the insurgency is particularly vulnerable to this insidious campaign to turn the truth on its head.

The original sin in the tragedy that was the Second JVP Insurgency belongs to the JR Jayawardene administration for its unjust proscription of the JVP. The banning of the JVP was done under spurious charges. There was no evidence to connect the JVP, as a party, with the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983; nor was it secretly preparing to launch an armed struggle to overthrow the state or the UNP. On the contrary, the JVP was comfortably settling into the political mainstream. The JVP did not willingly or voluntarily leave the mainstream; it was forced out by the Jayewardene regime. Perhaps the march of folly began even earlier, with the unfree and unfair referendum of 1982. If instead of that referendum the regime held parliamentary elections on time, the JVP could have completed its transition to mainstream democratic politics by getting a few representatives elected. The Jayewardene regime, blinded and made insensible by hubris, prevented the JVP from becoming a stakeholder of the system, thereby endangering the system itself.

With its unjust and unwarranted proscription the state commenced the political attack on the JVP. But the shooting war which became the Second JVP Insurgency of 1987-89 was started not by the UNP but by the JVP. Again contrary to the prevalent myths, the JVP did not take up arms in self-defence. Until late 1987 the state did not employ lethal violence against the JVP; the repression on the part of the state security apparatus against the JVP did not go beyond detention and physical assault. In fact right up to the Indo-Lanka Accord, the main targets of the state's repressive efforts in the South were not the JVP but a handful of left grouplets and activists with connections to the (non-LTTE) Tamil rebels in the North-East.

The JVP's use of lethal violence therefore was not reactive by nature. The killing spree was not started by the state but by the JVP and its first target was not a 'reactionary' UNPer but a radical student leader with impeccable anti-UNP/anti-systemic credentials. The JVP thus drew first blood—of the left, the security forces and the UNP, in that order. The use of lethal violence on the part of all these entities against the JVP (irrespective of the magnitude) was essentially a reactive violence, a counter violence. The nature of the Second JVP Insurgency, its trajectory and ultimate fate cannot be comprehended unless this basic truth is acknowledged.

### I TARGETING THE LEFT

With its unwarranted proscription the JVP went underground. Though it continued to engage in organisational and propaganda work, its main target from July 1983 to July 1987 was not the state or the Jayewardene administration but the anti-racist, pro-devolution left. Though most of the left parties had condemned the banning of the JVP and would have been willing to work together with it on a common anti-UNP platform, the JVP opted to ally itself exclusively with the SLFP and the MEP. The JVP was instrumental in setting up the Mawbima Surakeeme Viyaparaya (Motherland Protection Front) in the mid eighties which brought together the SLFP, the MEP and a plethora of smaller Sinhala chauvinist organisations. The main basis of this alliance was neither anti-capitalism nor anti-UNPism; it was uncompromising and virulent opposition to even the slightest degree of devolution of power to the Tamils. The JVP turned patriotism - defined as opposition to devolution - into the main dividing line in the Southern political space - with the regime and the pro-devolution left occupying the wrong

The first unmistakable indication of the nature of the coming insurgency was the killing of Daya Pathirana, the leader of the Independent Students Union (ISU) of the University of Colombo. Pathirana was a radical student activist, with impeccable anti-UNP credentials. He and the ISU led by him were the only remaining impediments to the JVP's domination of the university students movement. Taking over the universities was a vital objective, because the Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF) was earmarked by the JVP leadership to be the public political face of the party. Pathirana was openly supportive of the Tamil struggle, including the Tamil Peoples' right to self-determination. Targeting Daya Pathirana was thus a 'patriotic duty', a necessary task before launching a full fledged patriotic struggle against the state.

The Pathirana murder was the first targeted political killing in the South since 1971. The SLFP administration killed Weerasuriya of the Perdeniya university and the UNP regime killed Somapala, a trade union activist and Rohana Ratnayake of the University of Colombo; but all three were killed unpremeditatedly, during police attacks on demonstrating students and workers. The Pathirana killing was a targeted assassination. Pathirana, along with a colleague Somasiri, was abducted on 15th December 1986 and taken to a lonely spot off the Bolgoda Lake in Piliyandala. The JVP abductors then began to torture him and Somasiri, demanding information about other student and left activists. The intervention of a group of pilgrims – it was the full moon poya day – saved the life of Somasiri. Pathirana succumbed to his wounds. The Daya Pathirana assassination was a watershed in the JVP's post-1983 history. It played a key role in deciding the nature and the trajectory of the JVP's second insurgency. Why did the JVP commence its 'armed struggle' by targeting radical leftists—and the very ones who had clearly spoken out against the proscription of the JVP? The JVP was not even settling the scores of 1971. Their primary target was not the old left which had played such a key role in putting down the 1971 uprising but the so called 'new left'—from Vijaya Kumaratunga and Daya Pathirana to ex-JVPers of 1971 vintage such as Nandana Marasinghe (a legendary combatant of 1971 and the creator of Vimukthi Gee) and Jamis Athugala (a radical peasant activist). In fact the JVP gave the highest priority to the targeting of the very elements who had not committed those errors and crimes it was most critical of in the old left—precisely because only such elements could have amounted to an alternative to the JVP.

In this sense the JVP, despite its attempts to identify itself with Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara, had more in common with the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), Kampuchea's Khmer Rouge and of course, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Like the Khmer Rouge it sought to annihilate anyone who expressed a contrary viewpoint. Its use of lethal violence against any (armed or unarmed) competitor is very similar to the practice of the Shining Path whose victims included revolutionary leftists and unarmed social activists. And like the LTTE which was insistent on being accepted as the sole representative of the Tamil people, the JVP was obsessive in its desire to become the sole representative of the anti-UNP forces. The killing of Daya Pathirana was not just a one off act; it signalled the beginning of a concerted campaign aimed at exterminating the all those leftists who were real or potential competitors on the anti-UNP front.

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