# We Represent The Politics Of Hope, Not Revenge



Wimal Weerawansa, by accident or design, as historical inevitability or personal choice, resides square in the middle of our political equation. We cannot pretend he does not exist. From 1994-2008 he was the JVP’s poster boy; today he is the party’s greatest betrayer. At some level he has earned everyone’s respect for sheer oratorical skill, organising ability and indefatigable energy even if such acknowledgement arrives grudgingly. Personalities, however, are not owned or trashed by organisations, supporters or detractors. That’s the task of history. History, as is often said, has the last word. While we await that pronouncement,

Wimal has the floor.

**By Malinda Seneviratne**

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**You have been described as a brand, an icon; a hero to some, villain to others. Some even say that you are/were the JVP, that you resurrected a party from the ashes of the bheeshanaya; others say that you were merely the party's mouthpiece and still others that you, with clever turn of phrase and stage presence served to erase or hide the JVP's many defects. Can you tell us who this Wimal Weerawansa is?**

My political journey began with the JVP. It was not an easy time. Much of the 1988-1989 tragedy was deliberately and unfairly sourced to the JVP. We had to start from scratch. We were told it was impossible. However, at that time, without hesitation and with utmost resolve I committed myself to the political task at hand. And just as we contributed to rebuilding the party, the party, the process and the comrades had a lot to do with my political and personal evolution. Then, as now, those who love this country loved us and those who despise this land, this soil, vilify us.

Every era assigns tasks to societies, social groups and individuals. We had a task and we embraced the challenge. From 1994 to 2004 is a mere ten years, a decade. In that short time, the JVP grew from nothing to a formidable political force in the country, a factor capable of changing the direction of the political process. Through all this, I have strived to listen to the dictates of history, the call of a nation and to be a representative, an articulator of that call and one who contributes to achieving the objectives designed by the times.

We Broke Away.
We Are Convinced That We Have The Capacity To Read The
Political Firmament Accurately And
Choose Superior Strategies…

**The JVP, officially, subscribes to Marxism and in its political practice frequently references Marxism-Leninism, from which certain 'imperatives' flow regarding political stance, organisational principles, priorities in agitation and general reading of the political. Where are you located today in the ideological map?**

The fundamental difference which led to this situation related to the issue of ideology. I've always believed that strategies should take cognisance of realities of the moment; as understanding and assessment of political forces, a sense of proportion, getting priorities right etc. There was a significant difference of opinion regarding all this.

The greatest challenge we face today is to protect our country from the various local and international political forces that threaten it. My position is that we have to first protect the country before we can lead it to greater triumphs and prosperity (ada rata rakimu, heta rata dinamu). It is about national freedom; true independence and hence the name of the new party, 'Jathika Nidahas Peramuna' or National Freedom Front. They, on the other hand, do not seem to understand or appreciate the nature of the threat we face as a nation. Their approach can be described like this; ada rata nasamu, heta rata dinamu (let's destroy the nation today and let us rebuild it tomorrow).

We must understand that there is no definitive socialism as such. In its articulations in different countries we see a great diversity. We need to study and understand this phenomenon. The challenges that Lenin faced in the early 20th century, the forces that are in operation, their qualitative and quantitative values, the tasks at hand and such, are different from what we have before us. This is a historical moment where we have been called upon to take a nationalist position.

Does this mean that we no longer subscribe to the idea of socialism? No. National freedom, when it is won, must be made meaningful to everyone and in this notions of equal opportunity, justice, rule of law, meaningful distribution of wealth, access to education, health etc., will matter. I must emphasise that we are not fundamentalists in any way. We are ready to be nourished by a broad range of ideologies and ideas. We want, however, to stand with our feet firmly upon the ground of reality, not illusion and utopia.

**I would like to ask you to be more specific about the party, it's approach, political position and current strength, but tell me, what exactly do you understand by this word country or nation, that which you frequently call as 'rata' or country?**

The people. The geography. The potential. History. The foundations of its civilisation. The cultural uniqueness. So when I say we shall protect the nation, it is the protection of all these things. It is about being alert to whatever threat from whatever source to any and all of these things and having the resolve to stand up

and turn back such threats. These are the things that need to be protected and, once all threats are removed, need to be made to flourish.

**Let’s move on to the transformations that took place over the past 15 years. You mentioned that the JVP was forced to start from scratch in 1994 but by 2004 was a force to reckon with. What has happened now?**

Yes, it was supposed to be an impossible task; but we set to it with all our hearts and minds and overcame all challenges. From 1995 to 2005 there was steady progression in the fortunes of the party. After 2005, that is, the Presidential Election in November, we suffered a slippage. We could not hold on to what we had won. Incorrect reading of the political firmament led to the adoption of erroneous methodologies. We were unable to effectively communicate to the people, couldn’t win over the masses to our positions. We had positioned ourselves as a viable alternative to the two main parties but we essentially self-destructed.
We broke away. We are convinced that we have the capacity to read the political firmament accurately and choose superior strategies and that we have the necessary commitment and the organisational skills to triumph.

**But the political field is already cramped. Is there space for you to emerge as a third force?**

Yes. We have a unique opportunity. We have had these two parties alternately rule the country for 60 years. The people have never tasted anything else. There is a blandness in the politics that has dominated Sri Lanka and the people, we believe, are ready, are thirsty for a new flavour.
Let us consider a situation after a possible decisive victory in the Wanni. We will still have a huge task before us in rebuilding the economy in a context of soaring global oil prices and a serious food crisis. In Sri Lankan politics we see a crisis in terms of skills, integrity and commitment. The people rally around integrity. That was the success of the JVP. When you stray from integrity and engage in petty political games and show narrow-mindedness, people leave. That is the tragedy of the JVP. The challenge is to maintain integrity in the face of all upheavals, to stand ramrod straight in the face of all political tidal waves.
Is there space for us? Well, there was a time when BATA had a virtual monopoly. But DSI changed all that. A competitive, innovative product can secure a slice of the market. A skilled political entity that is unique, is fresh, speaks to the imagination of the masses, articulates their aspirations and therefore capable of establishing a

relationship with a significant section of the population, likewise, has a promising future. Our comparative advantage is that we have the communicative skills, the integrity, the energy and organising capacity and therefore will be competitive.

**When You Stray From Integrity And Engage In Petty Political Games And Show Narrow-Mindedness, People Leave. That Is The Tragedy Of The JVP.**

**If a classical Marxist was listening to all this, he/she would say you are a populist. Are you?**

Marx said that people make their history but not in the circumstances of their choice. In 1917, Lenin had a slogan: 'land, peace and bread'. Was that populism? The conditions were right; he had the organisation, the machinery and the language. The Bolsheviks triumphed. In the case of the Chinese Revolution, Mao plugged into anti-imperialist sentiments against Japan. Vietnam fought the USA. Cuba had to contend with Batista, a pawn of the USA. All revolutions have to contend with a formidable enemy.

We must remember that the things we say now were not very popular 15 years ago. There has since been a resurgence of nationalist sentiments and that didn't fall from the sky. We all contributed towards resurrecting patriotism which had been taboo in our society. History, heritage, culture, national ethos etc were strictly forbidden subjects in the dominant political discourse. So we are not piggy-backing on some popular social wave, but are a part of that organic political development. The old Marxism focuses on the state. There is no 'interim' in that discourse. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia are therefore tagged 'populists'. If that is the case even Castro's Cuba is 'populist' for the inspiration is drawn from Jose Marti. Chavez draws heavily from Simon Bo-livar. These leaders understood that in the first instance their countries needed to be protected. I see nothing wrong in that.

Some people may think that tattooing the names and images of Marx, Engels and Lenin is enough, but we know this will not translate into obtaining political power. We have to find the correct methodology, design the correct strategy in order to create a just, fair and free society.

To put it bluntly, politics is about obtaining agreement and securing the preference of the people. In this sense politics is about populism. The difference is in what you promise and what you deliver, in how you engage with people, not as an outside entity but an articulator of key public concerns. It is this fixation with categories that are external to existing realities that has been the bane of the traditional Left,

including the JVP.

**You grew up in the Marxist-Leninist school, where the notion of the political vanguard outweighs other political considerations. What is the political vanguard of your party?**

Well, there is no working class in the strict Marxian sense. The Port worker earns over Rs 15,000 and is a small property owner. We need to take this into account. Our priority is national freedom, the need to secure our Motherland from all threats, local and foreign. This requires a gathering of all like-thinking forces and these we find cut across class lines.

**Your tag line is 'rata rakimu, rata dinavamu'. Let's assume that you can muster cross-class support for the first part of your project. Can you keep them together for the second phase given inter-class antipathies?**

What is the meaning of 'crowning the nation' if not equality of opportunity, justice, the establishment of law and order, good governance? I am convinced that these forces that have come together will not be in disagreement with regard to these things.

**This talk of emerging as a third force references the 'old politics', one can argue. The SLFP/PA/UPFA didn't have space for nationalism from 1994-2004. It was peopled by those who were quite antithetical to the pancha maha balavegaya of S W R D Bandaranaike. In the 2004 General Election and especially in the 2005 Presidential Election we saw that party being taken over by a different set of people and subscribing to a very different ideology. In the politics of the 21st Century, would it not make more sense to use one of these main parties as a vehicle?**

First of all, the UPFA has not been cleansed of the political forces of the nineties. It has everyone, separatists, federalists, nationalists and so on. There is no clarity in this 'vehicle'. But yes, the JVP had that opportunity in 2005 but failed to seize it due to the parochial thinking of certain sections of the leadership.
In any event, whether or not we get into such a vehicle is something that the people have to decide and in this one has to take into consideration the all-important issue

of whether or not such a move would take forward our political project, whether or not we can give decisive direction to the vehicle.
The Presidential Election of 2005 was undoubtedly such an opportunity. The JVP missed it and worse, hurt itself and the people and the country but refusing to take that challenge. It was a responsibility and that responsibility was shirked by the party.
The result was that Ranil Wickremesinghe was given a good reason to shelve his retirement plans. Today the JVP has become an important part of his dream of capturing power. I am not saying of course that the entire leadership and the rank and file of the JVP have thrown their lot with Ranil Wickremesinghe. However we do see a convergence between the UNP and certain sections of the JVP leadership and this even after the Eastern Province debacle for the UNP-SLMC alliance.
Ranil Wickremesinghe ought to retire but the JVP with its subtle hints of support makes him stay on.

**There Is No Clarity In This 'Vehicle'. But Yes, The JVP Had That Opportunity In 2005 But Failed To Seize It Due To The Parochial Thinking Of Certain Sections Of The Leadership.**

**Are you saying that the JVP is giving Ranil Wickremesinghe a dead rope?**

No, they are not; but a dead rope is what Ranil Wickremesinghe is offering the JVP.

**Let's talk about the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna, its vision, ideology etc.**

The first discussion was held on May 1, 2008. The Jathika Nidahas Peramuna, we stress, is not an alternative to the JVP, it is not a splinter group. The foundation of the party is national freedom. Our symbol is the crown. We want the country to be crowned. The logo is two vee karal (paddy bushels) on either side of five red stars. The stars represent the qualities we represent and which we want our membership to have: love for the Motherland, love for the people, the pursuit of knowledge, humility in public service and commitment to social justice. They are red because this colour represents commitment to the ideal of equality. The vee karal symbolise prosperity and development.
The party colour is gold. Gold and the crown reference the state. We have been under colonial rule for five centuries. That period constitutes a fracture in our civilisational journey. Our civilisational mark was deliberately brought down and

trampled. We must not forget the past, the fact that we even had iron-smelting 5000 years ago. Sigiriya and Abhayagiriya speak of a splendour second to none. Our wewas and dagobas are of unique civilisational signature. What we want to do is to revive that journey. This is not about going to the past but letting the light of that history illuminate the path before us.
We have elected a politburo and a central committee and will be appointing district coordinators soon. The organisational network will thus expand. We have appointed a team of experts led by Prof G H Peiris to develop the party's manifesto. As an organisation and in terms of ideology we are confident that we can move forward to take this country to a different future.

**This party and those who left the JVP with you have been attacked by the JVP, physically and otherwise. What do you have to say about this and other challenges before you?**

Yes, they have attacked us. It appears that sections of the JVP leadership have decided to treat us and not the UNP or the SLFP as their political 'other'. Make no mistake, the JVP is not our political 'other'. Our antithesis constitutes of all forces arrayed against the masses, the nation and the histories and heritage that makes us a unique people. As for our detractors, we are confident that we can take them on and defeat them.
We are naturally hampered by limited financial resources but at the same time we remember only too well that back in 1994 the challenges were far greater. We were successful in overcoming challenges then and we will be successful in this instance as well.

**And what of the challenges that the nation faces right now?**

Historically, whenever the LTTE was cornered, certain sections of the international community came to their rescue. We can expect this drama to be replayed as the LTTE continues to suffer defeat after defeat. The question is, how will President Mahinda Rajapaksa respond? We have to ensure that he responds without compromising the will and aspirations of the people.
The economic situation is extremely bleak. It is possible that soaring prices and resultant hardships might persuade people to thrust the fight against the LTTE into second place in their list of priorities. It is our responsibility then to ensure that the public is fully empowered with knowledge of overall and specific political realities

and the consequences of taking this or that political stand when taking decisions.

**The Party Colour Is Gold. Gold And The Crown Reference The State. We Have Been Under Colonial Rule For Five Centuries. That Period Constitutes A Fracture In Our Civilisational Journey.**

**Although organisations such as the Patriotic National Movement professed independence from the JVP, they were largely seen as front organisations of the party. Today we see a scrambling to assert ownership. What is happening?**

That notion got its validity due to my presence, I agree. Today the intellectuals are with us. Of the ruling body, 16 members are with us, five with the JVP. There is a reason why the intellectuals have remained with us. We must understand that most of these personalities are not interested in power and are not interested in bandying party membership. They are there because they are selflessly committed to a cause. They are not interested in power, political or otherwise. Their loyalties are often decided by the integrity and humility of those who work with them.

**How about students? The JVP, traditionally, has used universities as recruitment grounds for membership and students, especially undergraduates to make up the numbers in agitation fronts. How about this new political party? Will it follow suit?**

**We will not leave out any segment of society. However, we will not get involved in the politics particular to that social category and the demands thereof. The focus is patriotism, it is about bringing together people who love this country, who appreciates her physical and cultural attributes and wish to improve this landscape in its totality. The JVP focuses on class; our emphasis is patriotism. The engagement therefore is fundamentally different.**

**We are very open to the idea of a broad political coalition or front with like-minded political groups. This is necessary we believe. We understand that we are only a part of the story and that it is necessary to come together and work together with others who think like us.**

**For a variety of reasons the JVP has refused to acknowledge complicity in the 1988-1989 *bheeshanaya*. You no longer have to defend the JVP. Does this mean that we will see a more self-critical reading of that tragic history from you?**

We are not in the business of revenge politics. True, the JVP is doing its utmost to hurt us, politically and personally but we would be damaging our foundational principles if we were to indulge in the same kind of politics. We can and should read history without glossing over it, but only as historical and social necessity, not revenge.
Those who subscribe to archaic theories will revile us, will hate us and sow that hatred to the far corners of the larger political field. We know this. We know also that those who want a more colourful future, a real, on-the-ground, earthy politics, will stand with us as one front with one objective.
So yes, we will criticise the JVP but we will not go overboard with our criticism. As I said earlier, the JVP is not our political 'other'. We take two tablets of Paracetamol for a headache. There is a thing called 'dosage'. In these things we will be mindful of what the proper dosage is.

**The Focus Is Patriotism, It Is About Bringing Together People Who Love This Country, Who Appreciates Her Physical And Cultural Attributes And Wish To Improve This Landscape In Its Totality.**

**What is your analysis, briefly, of the Eastern Provincial Council election and especially the performance of the JVP?**

Some JVP leaders wanted the UNP-SLMC alliance to win the election. The prediction was as follows: the Government wrested control of the east from the LTTE but the UNP-SLMC will wrest it from the Government. So they spread stories about Pilleyan being an Indian agent, that he was the new avatar of Varadarajah Perumal etc. The truth is that Pilleyan is a pawn of the Government. The truth is that India was not keen on the election being held.
The JVP has been reduced to echoing whatever the UNP says. The UNP says 'Pilleyan is the new Perumal' and the JVP says 'Pilleyan is the new Perumal'. The UNP says, 'the TMVP must be disarmed' and the JVP says 'the TMVP must be disarmed'.
As for the result, the JVP suffered a 60% loss in its voter base. In Ampara district,

without contesting 5 Pradeshiya Sabhas, the JVP obtained 12,000 votes in the local government elections. Today, in the entire Eastern Province, the JVP got only 9,000 votes. Choices feed into results. The JVP made wrong decisions, the people responded.
The JVP has tagged its future to the UNP's dreams. The UNP's dream got blurred and consequently the JVP was undermined.
We don't think provincial councils work and we don't think that it was a perfect election. We believe that the TMVP has to be disarmed, but there should be a reasonable timetable for this. The solution is not to sacrifice Pilleyan or anyone else to the LTTE. And the solution is not to postpone the election of people's representatives or postpone the expansion of democratic space. The election, regardless of who won or lost, was a positive step in this regard.

**Are you saying that these percentages will be replicated in a general election?**

Not necessarily. Things change. It depends on a lot of factors. It depends on the progress on the Wanni Front, the strength or weakness of patriotic forces at the point of election, the state of the economy, the public perception of the counter-terrorist offensive and its efficacy among other things.

**'Rata Rakimu, Rata Dinavamu' – First protect the country before we can lead it to greater triumphs and prosperity.**

**Yours is a new political party and I am sure you have a message for our readers and of course the nation?**

We appeal to the business community, we appeal to our intellectuals to stand with us, among the ordinary people of this country, and walk with us on this journey that we as a nation, a people, must undertake sooner or later.
We appeal to everyone not to view us through old, flawed and outmoded lenses. We ask that you view us with an open mind, that you resist labelling us as this or that. We have spent 60 years reading two pages, turning to one and when we get bored with it, turning back to the other. It is time that we started on a new and vibrant chapter in our history and for this we need to move on, turn the page and start writing afresh.
We don't intend to leave anyone behind and indeed we cannot afford to leave

anyone behind. All communities, Sinhala, Tamil, Moor and Burgher, people of all religious faiths, Buddhist, Christians, Hindus and Muslims, all people across class, caste, region, vocation and party affiliation must come together today. This is our hope and that which we work for, tirelessly and with all humility, with utmost conviction.