

Sri Lanka: “Government tax policies are based on deals” - Dr. Harini Amarasuriya

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National People’s Power or NPP, the major alliance of JanathaVimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is in a historical juncture of its political journey as its leaders have visited India on an invitation by the Indian Government. In the 1980s the JVP took a strong stance on India, especially against the Indo-Lanka pact signed under the J. R. Jayewardene government. Taking a more flexible line on geopolitics compared to several decades ago the NPP is ready to deal with any foreign power by placing national interest in the forefront. Talking about transformation from once a revolutionary movement, Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, academic who was elected to Parliament on NPP’s national list, criticised how tax policies have been implemented by the government and went on to share how the party is going to deal with IMF’s loan restructuring process.

Excerpts of the interview:

Q: You are a member of the NPP and are you a you member of the JVP as well?

No I am not a member of the JVP.

Q: How does this statement make a difference?

JVP is a political party which is part of the National People’s Power (NPP), which is a broader coalition that consists of about 28 other organizations of which the JVP is the leading political party. But there are other organisations which are also part of the NPP and I am a member of the Progressive Women’s Collective (PWC) which was started in 2019 and the National Intellectual Organization (NIO) which was started in 2017 or 2018.

Q: Who made the decision for you to be an MP? Was it made by the JVP or NPP?

Well it was a decision that was taken collectively by NPP when we met soon after the election and there was a discussion about what we should do in the aftermath and also about who we should send as our national list MP. To be honest the JVP is represented in our national steering committee and each of our organizations has two representatives in the NPP’s Steering Committee and the proposal that it should be made came from the JVP representatives in the steering committee. And the rest of the committee agreed.

Q: Is this understanding between the JVP and NPP continuing from strength to strength or where does it stand now?

We made the decision in 2019 itself when the NPP was formed that future elections will be contested by the NPP. Since 2019 and 2020 we have been there as the NPP. So at the Presidential Elections, Anura Kumara Dissanayake will be contesting as the NPP Presidential candidate and at the General Election we will be contesting as the NPP. Already we have worked together over the last few years and this is one of the biggest achievements. During the last couple of years we have been drawing in new people into the movement. Some of them are coming through the JVP and some of them are coming through NIO and some of them are coming through DWC and the other women’s

organizations. There are other organizations like Aluth Piyapath, the youth groups and trade unions that are involved with us.

Q: Certain critics of NPP/JVP allege that the decision making process is not clear and takes place secretly. What are your comments?

There is nothing underground or clandestine how we do things. In fact neither is the JVP an underground or a clandestine movement. The leadership is very evident. Everybody knows who the leader is and the leadership of the NPP is very public. This perception that you are talking about is a perception that is created and how our opponents try to challenge us. In a political arena our critics also have to come up with something. So this is kind of going back to history and labelling it as a secretive Left organization and a guerrilla type movement. Attempts are made to delve into the past to try and indicate that this is what is happening now as well. Even if you take only the JVP forget the NPP, the JVP has been in parliament and part of the democratic system since 1990s. We are a registered political party, so is the JVP. And JVP and the NPP are a few of the political parties that actually conduct proper audits and submit them to the Election Commission. You can check on that. So we have been very transparent in our dealings. Of course we have a decision making structure. Our decision making structure, unlike the traditional parties, is not the leader, who makes our decisions for us. Ranil Wickremesinghe can decide what he wants to do with the UNP. But Anura Kumara Disanayake doesn't decide on what to do with the NPP or with the JVP. We have a leadership council. We have a steering committee at the NPP and the decisions are made through discussion, debate and dialogue. And once a decision is made we all stick to it.

We are actually a democratic party where the leader doesn't have the sole authority to decide on things for us. Clandestine decision making in a secret organization is really an old way of thinking and one that the JVP discarded several decades ago.

Q: As a solution to the ongoing economic crisis, the government has come up with the plan to go with the IMF and none other than the Central Bank Governor says there is no other alternative even if there is a change in government. Even some opposition politicians are also of the opinion that this is the way forward. What is the stance of the NPP?

First of all this idea that there is no alternative is something that needs to be examined carefully because there is always alternatives. There are always alternatives for everything and it is very dangerous limiting way of thinking if we start off by saying that there is no alternative. In that case the human history will never change or will never evolve. That is an extremely narrow way of thinking. What we are talking about relates to a specific situation, context and crisis right now.

We would have dealt with this crisis in a different way perhaps. Had we been in power we might not have had to declare a state of bankruptcy. That would not have been the path we would have taken. But that path has already been taken. It is beyond our control now. That is the path that the previous government had taken. Now we have to sort it out from there. Once a country declares a state of bankruptcy you have to restructure loans. The restructuring process has already emerged. A new government cannot suddenly decide on going back to the drawing board on that. However we don't necessarily agree with all the conditions or all the decisions that are being made by this government under the guise of an IMF agreement. The IMF will tell you to balance the account. How you balance your account is up to your government. The IMF will say get your tax system in order. How you do that is up to each government. The IMF is not going to say or specify that you should raise your taxes up to 18 percent or 25 percent or whether it is that VAT that needs to be increased or some other tax. The IMF will say come up with a rational tax policy. What we disagree on is the manner in which this government is using the IMF agreement or the IMF restructuring agreement to make decision about the economy.

Because those decisions have been proven to have failed. We are not doing anything different now that we haven't already done. Privatisation didn't start today; it started in the 1990s. This tax system has been around for years. Selling what we consider as our important national assets is not a new thing either. So it is these policies that were badly managed which led to this crisis. So nothing has changed.

Q:So what needs to be changed primarily?

Primarily what needs to be changed is the political culture in this country or the politics of this country where all decision making is actually based not on policy but on corruptions and deals. So the government tax policies are based on deals. They are not based on the most rational tax policy for a country such as ours, but what is the tax policy that will benefit your friend. At the end of the day that is what happens in this country. You decide on a development project not based on science or evidence on discussions with the public, but from where you get the best commissions. That is what needs to be changed first.

This government keeps talking about successive governments that had ruled this country and about the importance of the private sector. What have they done to support the private sector? What have they done to enable the private sector to function in a way that doesn't mean that a private sector has to make friends and deals with politicians in order to get things done?

It is extremely difficult for the majority who are really ethical and honest private sector people who have integrity to function in this country. The only people who thrive or most of the people who thrive do so because they have connections with the politicians. We want to change that. There needs to be policies in place. That's the role of the government.

Q:Do you mean that the tax policies are based on deals and vested interests?

That's what I said. I mean I take an example. How was that tax on sugar imposed? We are a country with certain tax exemptions. How come? OK, you need to have room for a government to have tax exemptions. But the way tax exemptions are being granted in this country have benefited those having political connections.

Q:But when the Restructuring Process was introduced there were conditions laid by the IMF itself to follow anticorruption policies and introduce a transparent system? Doesn't the government know about it or is that the IMF ignores them?

The IMF is not intervening in political decision making. In the Governance Diagnostic Report too they have stated how corruption is one of the major reasons for the political crisis. So they have recommended that you bring in laws to prevent corruption. We all supported the Anti-Corruption Bill. Has it being implemented? Has the necessary institutional infrastructure required to implement the Act being set up? No. So to this idea that to sort economic issues laws can be removed from politics and that will effect change is really a misguided idea. You need a political will.

Q:So provided an NPP lead government assumes power at the next elections would you continue with the IMF or not?

If we are elected we will be elected on the mandate on which we campaign. In that campaign what we will say is that we will free ourselves from this crisis. We will present a plan as to how we are going to resolve this crisis. And we don't think the IMF will be opposed to that plan. We don't see any reason why the IMF will be unable to work with us.

Q:Results of certain surveys have been released and NPP is even more popular than the

Samagi Janabalawegaya (SJB), the main opposition party. But when the election results are released we don't see this popularity being reflected in the final count. Can people expect something different at the elections this year?

I think what you saw in the past was that the JVP wasn't popular like the way we are at present. The citizens of the country are more aware, have a conscience and are mobilised. The second factor that is being ignored is that we as the NPP have worked really hard at the grassroots level to educate the citizens of this country to provide that political mobilization and political education and what citizenship really is about. We have also educated them about the need and the role of a citizen in doing this in a very critical moment. We are talking about a different time and different period where a lot of things have changed.

Q:Do you have any estimation as to what percentage of the vote base the NPP can account for?

That's a tricky question. We want to be able to form a government with the majority and be able to bring about changes. So we are working towards winning that majority. And we want to be able to establish a government that will enable us to bring about the transformation this country so desperately needs.

Q:Over the passage of time the JVP has been branded as an anti-west or an anti-American political movement. Certain past leaders of the party strongly used this slogan during the party's campaigns. Does the NPP has similar views?

We are not anti anything. We are only anti people who have destroyed this country through their corruption and through their extremely petty personal agendas. We have been having meetings with the diplomatic community on a regular basis over the past few months and years. We have very cordial relationships with all the diplomatic missions in this country.

Q:If we talk about the geopolitical situation right now Sri Lanka is being hounded up by super powers like China, India, Japan and the United States. What is the relationship NPP is going to have with these super powers specially China and India?

We will engage with every country based on a foreign policy that we feel is most suitable for us. So we will have a foreign policy that we will be developed based on what will be to our best interest. The ideal position for us to take is one where we are not aligned too much with any one country, but one which allows us to be open with every country. We must engage with a country based on an agenda that best suits us. Whether it's India, China or America no other country is going to come and work with us or engage with us without an agenda. The problem is that we don't have an agenda. And then we have to go with their agenda because we don't have one. When we sit at a discussion table we are in a weak position. We don't know what we want. We can't really engage with them in a straightforward manner because at any moment the minister might ask for a bribe. They know that we are already on the backfoot. We must make the changes that'll enable us to engage in business matters with mutual respect. And when we sit down having an agenda we can look at areas of common interest and work with common cooperation and collaboration and trust.

Q:Traditionally the JVP with its Marxist ideology has had a soft corner for China hasn't it?

This relationship had not been denied by the party leadership as well.

Obviously China is a socialist country and JVP is a socialist party, so there is a engagement that exists between them. I mean Communism and socialism are international movements. It's not that

something happens in isolation. Of course there are areas where political ideologies are more sort in sync with others. But it is a different situation when you engage with a political party and when you engage with the government in power. When the Chinese government engages with the Government of Sri Lanka it doesn't happen on a communist agenda. Then how on earth is it working with Ranil Wickremesinghe who is the most right wing of all presidents and also with Mahinda Rajapaksa? So this is not how foreign policy works.

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