

JVP-inspired violence leads to crackdown on Sri Lanka campuses

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Sri Lanka's United National Front (UNF) government has seized upon the violent murder of a Jayawardenepura university student on November 7 at the hands of a backward mob of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) supporters as the pretext for a broad crackdown on political activities at universities.

The initial incident was sparked by the issue of "ragging"—the practice of putting new students through often degrading initiation rites. Samantha Vithanage, a third-year management student, and others had been campaigning since the new term started in September for an end to the practice, which, they argued, was a means of demeaning and intimidating new students.

On November 7, Vithanage and other anti-ragging campaigners were engaged a discussion, mediated by a Student Welfare Officer, with representatives of the JVP-controlled Student Council who defended the practice. The JVP, which falsely claims, at times, to be socialist, has established a presence on university campuses by appealing to more backward layers of students on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism. Ragging has been a means of recruiting thuggish elements to its ranks as well as intimidating its political opponents.

In the midst of the discussion, a mob of around 200 JVP supporters armed with clubs and stones stormed into the room and viciously attacked Vithanage and others. The Student Council representatives made no effort to stop the attack and left. One of the attackers broke a large glass vase. Others picked up the shards of glass to stab their victims. Vithanage was struck, fell to the floor and had a computer monitor dropped on his head.

When the ambulance arrived, the thugs stood around chanting, "We killed him, we killed him", then pulled Vithanage out of the vehicle and assaulted him again. He died in hospital two days after the attack. Thirteen

other students were seriously injured, including Indika Aththanayake, who is still hospitalised.

By evening, a large force of police had flooded onto the Jayawardenepura campus. The next day, university authorities declared the campus out of bounds for the students. Interior Minister John Ameratunga, who is accused of complicity in state-backed terror as part of a previous government, appointed a special police squad to investigate the incident.

The following night, police raided the hostels of the University of Kelaniya, 30 kilometres away, and detained several Jayawardenepura University students who had taken refuge there. Those arrested, who police claim are JVP supporters, also included students from Ruhuna University some 160 km away.

Altogether 39 students, including the president, secretary and the treasurer of the Student Council at the Jayawardenepura campus, are now in custody. Police claim that some have been identified as having been present during the attack on Vithanage.

The UNF government seized on the murder as a convenient pretext to condemn the JVP. The major component of the UNF—the rightwing United National Party (UNP)—has, in the past, allied itself with the Sinhala racists. Now, however, the UNF is seeking to negotiate an end to the country's long-running civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and faces opposition from the JVP, which is bitterly opposed to any concessions to the country's Tamil minority.

Moreover, the UNP's condemnation of violence is completely hypocritical. Like all the major parties in Sri Lanka, the UNP maintains its own goon squads and has no hesitation in using them. On the nights of November 12 and 13, mobs set fire to JVP offices in different parts of the capital of Colombo. According to

the JVP, the thugs were connected to the government.

The JVP leadership issued a statement on November 10, denying any involvement in the attack and calling for an inquiry into what took place. It dismissed Vithanage's death as "the result of a clash between two factions of students at the Jayawardenepura University on the question of ragging". However, having built its student organisations on the basis of political thuggery, the JVP is directly responsible for the murder, as well as for opening the door for a broader police clampdown on university campuses.

In the wake of Vithanage's murder, the Colombo press has joined the chorus calling for a sweeping campaign against political agitation on university campuses. On November 14 the *Lankadipa*, a Sinhala daily newspaper, carried an editorial declaring that the time had come to "clean the campuses of vicious, revolutionary, external elements that were at the root of the problems". On November 18, the pro-UNP *Island* published an article stating that "the cause for this violence is that the Marxist political currents have taken over the campuses".

The JVP has never been Marxist or socialist. It was formed in the 1960s by appealing to impoverished Sinhala youth, particularly in the south of the island, on the basis of an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and anti-Tamil racism. In the late 1980s, the JVP denounced the Indo-Lanka accord that sought to end the war through the introduction of Indian peacekeeping force as a betrayal of the nation and launched a series of fascistic attacks on its political opponents. Since 1994, with the support of the ruling elites, the JVP has been attempting to re-enter the political mainstream.

By calling for a crackdown on "revolutionary elements" and "Marxist political currents," the Colombo press is taking aim, not so much at the JVP which the media has often encouraged and promoted, but at all forms of political activity on university campuses, particularly by genuine socialists. It does so under conditions where there is opposition among students to the deteriorating conditions they face as well as concerns about broader issues, including the government's peace talks with the LTTE and the impending US war against Iraq.

On November 25, the Tertiary Education and Training Ministry responded to the media campaign by

declaring that it was taking urgent measures to invest Vice Chancellors with "more flexible powers to take autonomous decisions on internal security of the universities... The action plan will work towards eliminating a violent political culture from universities."

There are clearly concerns in ruling circles about the potential for political unrest on the campuses. Under the previous Peoples Alliance government, there was a campaign against its plans to privatise segments of tertiary education. Although the UNF government has declared that the issue is not on the agenda, the IMF is certainly pushing for privatised education.

At a major education conference in May, Education and Human Resources Development Minister Karunasena Kodithuwakku and Tertiary Education Minister Kabeer Hussein agreed with the IMF's country representative, Nadeem ul Haque, that the education system should be oriented to produce a labour force for the transnational corporations.

Haque argued that the education field should be opened up to the private sector to increase competition and provide quality education for those who can afford it. Free education for the poorest layers of society should be limited, he said, calling for Education Ministry to be relieved from managing educational institutions.

In mid-November, Chairman of the National Education Commission, Professor R.P. Gunawardana, declared in a major speech: "However it is clear that ... university level education should be opened to non-governmental and professional organisations and the private sector... University education should not be a monopoly of the government."

If the government decides to proceed with privatisation, it will certainly provoke protests. The murder of Samantha Vithanage by a gang of JVP thugs has provided a convenient pretext for the government to take preemptive measures against any form of political opposition on campuses on this or other issues.



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