

Police repression unleashed against Sri Lankan university students

Kapila Fernando
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The response of the Sri Lankan government, the media, police and university authorities to clashes between rival student groups at Kelaniya University is a warning to young people and workers throughout the island of the methods being prepared to suppress unrest as the country's economic crisis deepens.

University authorities, with the support of the government, have seized on violent incidents involving two student groups over the last month to send in police, terrorise students and lecturers and shut down Kelaniya University. These actions were clearly meant to intimidate students throughout the island's universities and colleges.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) have repeatedly pointed out that the government's war against the island's Tamil minority is paving the way for intensified repression against the working class and youth. President Mahinda Rajapakse has previously denounced striking workers and protesting students as helping the "terrorists" of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Last Friday an editorial entitled "Liberate Universities!" in the right-wing *Island* specifically linked the war against the LTTE with the closure of Kelaniya University. "The North will be cleared of terrorism within days," it declared. "And after the war is over in that part of the country, the government will have to go all out to liberate the seats of higher learning plagued by a different kind of terrorism."

Calling for even tougher measures against students, the editorial stated: "The time has come for us to grasp the nettle. Thugs in the garb of undergrads are abusing freedom on campuses and leniency on the part of university authorities, who hesitate to call in the police, emboldens trouble makers to indulge in rowdiness with impunity. The only antidote to their violence is to order the police to move in during trouble and employ whatever methods they may deem necessary to bring the situation under control and make arrests. If the existing laws

do not permit such drastic yet essential action, let new laws be made."

The ISSE unequivocally opposes this threat and calls on all students to oppose the government's attacks on democratic rights. But it is the existing student organisations at Kelaniya University that have opened the door for police state measures. The campus student union has been dominated by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is notorious for the use of thuggery to maintain its political hold.

The IUSF is aligned to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has backed Rajapakse's war and voted for his budgets, which has resulted in sharp cutbacks in social spending and led to deteriorating conditions for students. The National Student Solidarity Front (NSSF), which is connected to the right-wing United National Party (UNP), is seeking to exploit disillusionment with the IUSF to expand its own influence among students.

University authorities seized on a clash between the two groups on February 5 to call in police who rampaged through the campus, indiscriminately assaulting students, lecturers and non-academic staff. Two lecturers and 13 students were arrested. Television coverage showed female students pleading their innocence as they were dragged away by their hair by male police officers and shoved into a police bus.

The two lecturers were released on the same day. The students were bailed out after a week, but face charges for damaging university property, unlawful assembly and stoning police. To deflect public outrage over the attack on students, the police announced an investigation, but nothing has taken place.

The police were again called to the university following another incident involving the IUSF and NSSF on February 25. The university authorities immediately shut down the campus, declaring it out of bounds for all students until further notice. Vice Chancellor Sarath Amunugama also announced a ban on extra curricular activities after 5 p.m. within university

premises.

Police told a magistrate last Friday that more arrests would be made in relation to the latest clash. As students are no longer at the university, the police are carrying out a dragnet involving stations in other areas. A police guard post has been established at the Kelaniya campus. While no official comments have been made, the government has undoubtedly given its full support to the police and university authorities.

The ISSE condemns the police attacks on students, calls for all charges to be dropped unconditionally and for the withdrawal of police from Kelaniya University. The police actions are not primarily directed at stopping the thuggery of the IUSF and NSSF which has been condoned for years. It is aimed at suppressing political activity among university students under conditions of a mounting crisis of capitalism in Sri Lanka and internationally. The ruling elite in Colombo understand very well that the radicalisation of students can be the precursor to a broader eruption of working people.

Another warning of the type of regime being imposed in universities is the decision by the University of Colombo on February 27 to deny permission to the student group *Pravada Kavaya* (Thesis Circle) to sponsor a seminar entitled "The global economic crisis and the prospects for socialism in 21st century" scheduled for March 4. University authorities cited the clashes at Kelaniya University as the pretext for a ban on all political seminars. SEP General Secretary Wije Dias was to have been one of the speakers.

Despite their bitter rivalry for political influence, the IUSF and NSSF have no perspective for defending students. Both support the government's communal war and insist that the rundown of universities and public education is completely unrelated. Their limited protests over student grievances have all been directed at pressuring the government to make concessions.

Kelaniya University students, like their counterparts in universities across the island, are facing crowded hostels and lecture theatres, the lack of support facilities such as laboratories and computer labs and inadequate staffing. But no money is available for education because President Rajapakse insists that everything must be sacrificed for the war. This year's military budget has soared to 200 billion rupees (\$US1.75 billion) while just 41 billion and 47 billion rupees are to be spent on public education and health respectively.

The government's demands for sacrifice will not stop if the army succeeds in destroying the LTTE's military capacity but will intensify as the full impact of the global economic recession hits the island. Fearful of an eruption of student

unrest, the government is taking pre-emptive action. Such methods will not be restricted to university students, but will be used against workers and the rural poor seeking to defend their jobs and living standards.

The implications of the reactionary triumphalism now rife in ruling circles in the wake of the army's victories over the LTTE were spelled out in the conclusion of the *Island* editorial. "In a country where 15,000 sq. km. have been cleared of a ruthless terrorist outfit, liberating a few universities from the clutches of a bunch of politically bankrupt ultra radical elements should be child's play," it declared.

The same language can easily be used to justify crackdowns on striking workers or protesting farmers, in fact anyone who threatens the government or the capitalist system it defends. The ISSE warns that the apparatus of state repression that has been built up over 25 years of war against the Tamil minority will be turned against all forms of political dissent and opposition.

Students can only defend their democratic rights and living conditions through a political struggle against the war and the profit system that produced it. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to pressure the Rajapakse government for concessions, students have to turn to the working class—in Sri Lanka, throughout the region and internationally—which is the only social force capable of refashioning society on a socialist basis. This in turn requires a rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism, including the LTTE's Tamil separatism, that has been used to divide working people for decades.

We urge students and youth to join the ISSE to fight for this political perspective.



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