

Sri Lankan regime keeps student union convener detained

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The remand custody of Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) convener Udul Premaratne was last week extended until October 30 by the magistrates' court in Nugegoda, a suburb of Colombo. He has been in remand prison since being arrested by the police on September 17, along with 14 Ayurveda University students, while protesting in front of the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine in Navinna.

The students were demanding the opening of the outpatients department at Ayurveda Hospital in Rajagiriya and protesting against the hospital's lack of medicines, which severely affects their practical training courses.

The police, however, charged them with damaging public property at the ministry. Although the police have yet to submit a final assessment of the alleged damage to the court, media reports said it would be around 94,000 rupees. The students face large fines, calculated according to the damage caused, or prison terms, or both.

On October 7, the court ordered the release of the 14 students on personal bail after a plea by their lawyer to allow them to sit for their exams. Premaratne was excluded on the basis that he was no longer a student, but this was not the real reason for his continued detention.

The police opposed bail for Premaratne on political grounds. The prosecution told the court that "if Premaratne is released students' protests will increase" and "Premaratne is identified as a person who conducts processions inside the universities." This is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of Premaratne and the organisation he leads.

This is the second time that the IUSF convener has been arrested within two months. On August 5, police arrested Premaratne and Gihan Seneviratne, president of the Visual Art Faculty Students Union of the Visual and Performing Arts University. They were pasting wall posters that said:

"The King even has mucked up the question papers for examinations." The poster referred to incorrect questions that appeared on examination papers prepared by the department of education. The word "King" referred to President Mahinda Rajapakse who has been promoted as a triumphant monarch after the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. Premaratne was released on bail after a week but still faces a charge of defaming the president.

The IUSF is the student arm of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which campaigned loudly for Rajapakse's election as president in November 2005. While the JVP subsequently declined to join Rajapakse's government, it gave its full support to his intensified war against the Tamil minority and has voted continuously for emergency rule during the past four years.

Even as Premaratne and Seneviratne were languishing in police custody, the JVP parliamentarians, on August 6, voted in parliament once more for the continuation of the emergency, which permits lengthy detentions without trial. This month, in a cowardly manoeuvre, the party's MPs boycotted parliament to avoid having to vote and allowed the emergency law to be rubberstamped again.

While remaining in opposition, the JVP has supported the government's war budgets, which featured drastic cuts to spending on social services, including education. The IUSF's protest campaigns are not based on a political program to challenge the government but are desperate attempts to claw back its sagging support base among students and youth.

The incarceration of Premaratne underscores the government's intolerance of any opposition to its policies, no matter how mild the criticism. Over the past four years, including during Premaratne's two and half year leadership of the IUSF, the JVP's student leaders have openly argued

that the main task is to defeat LTTE “terrorism” and “defend the motherland”. All other issues, including education, were subordinated to the JVP’s support for the government’s war.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) correctly warned, the government’s war was a brutal continuation of the discrimination against the Tamil minority by successive Colombo governments and the defeat of the LTTE would see an acceleration of the attacks on the conditions and basic rights of the entire working class, not peace and prosperity.

The experiences of the five-month period since the defeat of the LTTE have vindicated this warning. The government is now waging an economic war under the banner of “nation building” to impose on workers and youth all the financial burdens created by its huge war expenditures and the world economic crisis.

The government’s arrests and detentions of students are not isolated incidents. This is a government that violates the constitution and the law as it pleases, above all through the indefinite internment of over 250,000 Tamil men, women and children in squalid military-run detention camps. The JVP’s support for this mass incarceration has only boosted the regime’s police-state methods.

On August 31, the High Court in Colombo sentenced a Tamil journalist opposed to the war, J.S. Tissanayagam, to 20 years hard labor. He was charged under the emergency laws and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which the government has maintained despite the LTTE’s defeat. On September 2, just two days after Tissanayagam’s conviction, police arrested three journalists of the pro-JVP *Lanka*, a Sinhala language weekly paper, for attempting to take photographs of a massive building built by a relative of President Rajapakse, allegedly using state resources. They were later released on bail.

The government has also deployed navy nurses to break a protest strike by civilian nurses, and police were mobilised recently against protesting electricity workers and plantation workers.

In the field of education, the government has approved two fee-levying private medical faculties this year. Meanwhile, basic facilities in public universities, including hostels, buildings and staffing levels, have deteriorated further due to drastic cutbacks. The government allocated 200 billion rupees (US\$1.74 billion) for the war this year, while

education and health services were allowed only 47 billion and 42 billion rupees respectively. Because of the lack of facilities in the university system, only 15 percent of those eligible can find a place.

The IUSF and the JVP exploit the genuine grievances of students to orient them in a reactionary nationalist and Sinhala chauvinist direction. At a protest demonstration in front of the Colombo railway station last week, the acting IUSF convener Sangeewa Bandara shamelessly declared: “This government has forgotten its beginnings. Mahinda Rajapakse came to power with the support we mobilised among workers, students and others.”

Bandara continued: “*Mahinda Chinthanaya* [Mahinda Vision] stated that it would protect free education. But what has happened now? This is not a patriotic government. When we started the campaign against cease-fire agreement in 2002, the present so-called patriot was under the bed.”

The speaker blamed “corruption and misuse of funds”—not the war and the government’s pro-business program—for the privatisation of education and the cuts in free education. Demagogically, he threatened to “mobilise all sections of society against the government”.

This is a prospect that the JVP and the IUSF are intent on preventing. For years they have used their influence among students and youth to prevent any independent struggle in defence of education and jobs. Their toothless threats serve only to keep students, youth and working people away from waging a struggle for a socialist alternative to the private profit system.

Despite unbridgeable political differences with the JVP and the IUSF, the SEP and ISSE demand the immediate release of Udul Premaratne. His incarceration is an attack on fundamental democratic rights that can and will be used as a precedent against others.



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