

# Sri Lankan government revives law to suppress student protests

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The University Grant Commission (UGC) in Sri Lanka recently issued a circular that revives legislation aimed against political protests on campuses throughout the island. The notice comes as the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse prepares to bring down its delayed budget that will slash social spending in line with the International Monetary Fund's demands.

The pretext for the measures is the practice of “ragging”—various initiation rites that are forced on new students. The Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF)—the student organisation of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—is notorious for ragging that has provoked considerable opposition among students.

The UGC and the government have seized on these backward and sometimes violent rituals to justify far-reaching measures that can be used to crack down on student protests and other political activities. The circular is based on an Act passed in 1998 entitled “Prohibition of Ragging and other forms of Violence in Educational Institutions” that university administrations have largely not enforced.

The circular notes that forms of ragging such as sexual harassment, grievous hurt, threatening violence and causing injury are offences. At the same time, it emphasises other offences, including “unlawfully obstructing any students or a member of the staff of an educational institution” and occupying “by force, any premises of or under the management or control of, an educational institution”. The UGC warned that university authorities could call on the police to intervene.

The sweeping character of these “offences” could be used to effectively outlaw longstanding methods of

student protest, including picketing, demonstrations and the occupation of university premises. The regulations also make clear that political meetings and the distribution of political leaflets could be targetted. All that university authorities have to do is claim that coercion was involved in convincing students to participate.

The penalties are draconian. The circular states: “[M]any of the offences listed under the above [1998] Act are unbailable and liable to rigorous imprisonment up to ten years. It is also possible that a student, if found guilty under the provisions of the above Act, could be expelled from the institution and also liable to pay compensation for any damages to property or injuries caused on the victims.”

Students will be compelled to sign a declaration, to be countersigned by a parent or guardian, to the effect that they will not engage in any form of ragging and violence inside or outside the premises. Higher Education Minister Wishva Warnapala told the *Daily Mirror* on March 24 that no student would be admitted to university without signing the document. Warnapala boasted that ragging and violence would come to an end once the new guidelines were implemented. The new academic year starts in June.

The JVP-backed IUSF is directly responsible for creating the conditions for the government and the UGC to intervene. The IUSF has used ragging as a means of attracting a following among more backward students. It enforces its claim to represent all students through thuggery directed against any political rivals. IUSF officials have on several occasions tried to bar International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) members from campaigning on campuses.

Under Rajapakse, the IUSF has held demonstrations against cuts to education spending, deteriorating study and accommodation conditions and university privatisation. These protests, however, have been isolated events aimed at letting off steam and pressuring the government for concessions. Like the JVP, the IUSF supported Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and insisted that students had to place the war effort before all else.

As its influence among students has waned, the IUSF has increasingly resorted to threats and violence. Such methods have only allowed the government and university authorities to take increasingly repressive measures on campuses.

In February 2009, police and university authorities at Kelaniya University used a clash between the IUSF and a student group aligned with the right-wing United National Party (UNP) to justify a full-scale police operation. Police 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.

Following the incident, an editorial in the right-wing *Island* newspaper applauded the police actions. Pointing to the ruthlessness with which the military was waging its final offensives against the LTTE, the newspaper called on the government "to go all out to liberate the seats of higher learning plagued by a different kind of terrorism". Calling on police to "employ whatever methods they may deem necessary", the editorial declared: "If the existing laws do not permit such drastic yet essential action, let new laws be made."

Last September, police arrested IUSF convener Udul Premaratne and 14 Ayurveda University students engaged in a protest in front of the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine to demand better educational facilities. They were charged with damaging public property and detained for weeks while the police made a damage assessment. A court ordered the release of the students on October 7, but held Premaratne until the end of the month.

It is no accident that the UGC has revived the 1998 anti-ragging Act now. Having won this month's parliamentary

election, the Rajapakse government is preparing a budget that will cut spending on essential public services, including tertiary education. The IMF is demanding that the budget deficit be halved by next year as a means of alleviating the huge debts accumulated during the civil war. Rajapakse delayed the budget, due last November, until the election was out of the way.

According to official figures, public investment on education has been slashed already, from 23 billion rupees (\$US202 million) in 2008 to 17 billion rupees in 2009. Over the same period, health investment was reduced from 19 billion rupees to 13 billion. At the same time, the government has been opening up the tertiary education sector to the private sector, particularly foreign investors, over the past five years.

The revival of the 1998 legislation is not directed at ending ragging on the campuses. Governments and university authorities have tolerated such practices and the IUSF for years, knowing full well that the organisation played a useful function in containing student unrest. What the Rajapakse government fears is a new wave of student radicalisation that will link up with broader unrest among workers and the rural poor over declining living standards.

To counter these attacks, students must reject the IUSF's bankrupt perspective based on Sinhala chauvinism and turn to a genuine socialist alternative. Students can only defend their basic rights by turning to the working class and helping to build an independent political movement aimed at abolishing capitalism and refashioning society to meet the needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. That is the program for which the ISSE, the student organisation of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), is fighting.



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