

Sri Lankan police attack protesting students

Panini Wijesiriwardena
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The Sri Lankan courts denied bail on Monday to 18 university students arrested during a police attack on a protest last week demanding the release of six other students. The arrests are part of government efforts to suppress broad student opposition to the privatisation of universities and worsening conditions on campuses.

The students have been charged with “unruly behaviour” under the draconian Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act, which was revived in April. Under the law, university authorities have sweeping powers to ban student political activities, including protests and occupations, and to call police onto campuses. Many offences cited under the Act are unbailable and liable to imprisonment for up to ten years.

More than 2,000 students took part in the protest last Thursday in central Colombo to demand the release of their fellow students. The protesters marched to the Ministry of Higher Education and occupied the building for about an hour before attempting to leave by bus. Hundreds of riot police blocked off all the roads and assaulted students with clubs, belts, tear gas and water cannon. Eight injured students were hospitalised.

One student told the WSWs: “The police caught me and attacked me. I fell down and my right elbow was injured. They hit me with belts on my head and all over the body. Then they took me to Cinnamon Garden police station. There were another 20 students. Four of us were taken to the police station at about 8 pm and kept there until about 3 am before being taken to hospital. But others had wounds to their bodies. They were even not taken to a doctor.”

Another student described being grabbed by police when he tried to free a colleague: “When they attacked, I fell down. Then several policemen kicked me brutally. My nose started to bleed. Then they dragged me into the ministry and told me to wash my face. After that they

took us to the police station. There is a contusion on the back of my head.”

Police also attacked journalists and photographers. Journalist Bigun Gamage from *Lankadeepa* told the *Sunday Times*: “The students said they would leave the [nearby] park peacefully. The police allowed them to leave. But as soon as the students came out, the police started to assault them again. The students scattered, but the police continued to hit anyone they could catch. We saw a group of 10 policemen beating up one student. The officers chased away the others who were standing and watching.”

The police surrounded the reporters and lashed Gamage with belts. When one of Gamage’s colleagues tried to help, he was dragged away and beaten up. When reporters showed their government-issued journalist identity cards, the police abused them. Journalist associations held a protest on Tuesday condemning the attack.

The police objected to bail when the arrested students were produced in court, claiming that they had damaged ministry property, an offence under the Public Property Act. Colombo Chief Magistrate Rashmi Singappuli ordered students be remanded until October 29.

Backing the police, Higher Education Minister S.B. Disanayake insisted that the Anti Ragging Act would continue to be enforced. “We are going ahead with the objective of making this country a centre for education in the region. In the process, one, two or three students could be expelled or imprisoned and that would not be an issue. Not only one or two, in the process of restructuring our universities, we will punish even 500 or for that matter even 1,000 students,” he warned.

Disanayake’s comments about transforming the island into “a centre of education in the region” point to far-reaching plans to turn higher education into a money-

making venture by privatising the most lucrative aspects of universities and potentially bidding for foreign students. Already the government has approved the establishment of foreign-affiliated universities that will charge exorbitant fees.

On October 16, Rohan Rajapakse, acting vice chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC) told the state-owned *Daily News*: “Sri Lanka intends to bring in a new University Act shortly which will pave the way to open private universities in the country legally as the current University Act does not permit private universities in Sri Lanka.”

Government is slashing public expenditure on education as part of the austerity measures being demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The budget for 2010 has already cut the deficit to 8 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) this year—down from nearly 10 percent last year. Government expenditure on education has fallen from 2.67 percent of GDP in 2006 to 2.08 percent in 2009.

Last week’s demonstration was called by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is aligned with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Like the JVP, the IUSF is based on a mixture of Sinhala communalism and populist demagoguery. It is notorious on university campuses for the use of thuggery against its political opponents, including the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE).

Higher education minister Dissanayake has exploited the JVP’s methods to justify violent police repression. In an interview with *Lakbima* on Monday, he declared that in order to “free the universities,” the government would “sack these [JVP] thugs”. Dissanayake’s comments are a warning to all students that the government will not hesitate to use the police to suppress any opposition to its policies.

Despite its militant rhetoric, the IUSF is steering students into a political dead-end by promoting the futile conception that the government can be pressured to drop its plans. In response to the latest police assault, IUSF convenor Udul Premaratna announced that his organisation will carry out more protests shortly to demand the release of all students held in remand.

The IUSF and JVP now criticise the government but they were in the forefront of bringing President Mahinda Rajapakse to power. The JVP helped draw up Rajapakse’s 2005 election program, which included restarting the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and actively campaigned for his election victory. At the time, the IUSF’s slogan was “Motherland first”—that is, before university education. It gave its blessing for the military to operate on the campuses.

The JVP is currently in alliance with Sarath Fonseka, the former army commander responsible for the ruthless operations against the LTTE, who ran as the joint opposition candidate in the presidential election in January. In the course of the election campaign, Fonseka made clear his support for pro-market restructuring and thus by implication the IMF’s demands for large budget cuts, including to education.

The International Students for Social Equality condemns the brutal police attack on university students. We demand the unconditional dropping of all charges against the jailed students and their immediate release.

At the same time, the ISSE calls on students to reject the politics of the IUSF and JVP. The struggle to defend free university education and to halt the privatisation plans necessarily involves a political struggle against the government. Students cannot carry out this fight alone. They have to turn to the working class to build an independent movement to fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. The ISSE calls on students to form ISSE branches in every university and to fight for this program.



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