

Sri Lanka: Military discipline for university students

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In another unprecedented, anti-democratic step, the Sri Lankan government will require all students entering universities to undergo instruction in military camps. Higher education ministry secretary Sunil Jayantha Navaratne told the *Daily Mirror* last week that a program had been discussed, with the support of defence ministry, to give students two weeks of “leadership training”.

Navaratne said students would be trained in “presentation skills, visionary thinking and conflict resolution skills”. In the name of leadership training, the government is seeking to brainwash students, above all in the supremacy of the military in all aspects of society.

The plan was first announced by Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake on January 5. “They (students) will learn about waking up on time, working on time, how to study well, how to stand properly, how to use cutlery, how to eat properly, how to walk properly and how to talk properly and how to respect others,” he said.

The program, which is due to commence in May, is another significant step in the militarisation of Sri Lankan society. President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the island back into civil war in mid-2006 and ruthlessly prosecuted military operations against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), resulting in thousands of civilian deaths.

Since the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009, Rajapakse and his close aides, including his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, have demanded that workers and students learn from the military victory and make “sacrifices” for the nation, just as the armed forces did during the war.

The government has increasingly brought civilian affairs under the control of the military establishment.

Last year, the Urban Development Authority and Land Reclamation and Development Board were placed under the command of the defence ministry in order to prepare for the eviction of 66,000 slum dwellers from Colombo city to clear land for investors.

The introduction of military “training” follows protests by students against the deteriorating conditions in the public universities and the government’s moves to privatise university education. Dissanayake has announced that a bill would be introduced soon to allow private universities to be established.

In April 2010, during the final month of the war, the government reintroduced “anti-ragging” measures that effectively prohibit all student protests. Dozens of students were arrested in violent police attacks last year, and university authorities suspended about 250 students. Some suspensions have since been partially withdrawn, but some 100 students remain suspended. The arrested students have been released but were warned by the courts not to engage in any future protests.

Like other governments around the world, the Rajapakse regime is implementing austerity measures dictated by the international financial markets. The International Monetary Fund has imposed conditions imposed on a \$US2.6 billion standby loan in July 2009, requiring the government to reduce the budget deficit to 5 percent of gross domestic product by next year, down from 8 percent last year.

To realise the target, the government has already begun cutting public expenditure and raising taxes on basic food and other essentials. Slashing free education and making room for international investors to exploit the resulting private education “market” is bound up with these attacks.

The conditions of students are becoming unbearable

after successive governments have systematically starved state universities of funds and facilities.

At Kelaniya University, just outside Colombo, for instance, out of 8,000 students, only 2,500 have hostel facilities. For years, the hostel accommodation has not been expanded. As part of last year's repression, some male students were evicted from on-campus hostel facilities and forced to go to hostels several kilometres away.

The main library has not been expanded since 1983 and is sufficient for just 550 students. A new building for the commerce and management faculty has been "under construction" since 2000. The commerce and management faculty has no professor. There are no permanent music lecturers in the fine art section. Forty unfilled vacancies for academic staff exist in the medical and science faculties. The situation at other universities is no better.

In order to suppress protests, students' union activities have been banned at Kelaniya University and the Student Council Office has been removed.

President Rajapakse summoned university vice chancellors on October 26 and instructed them to ensure "discipline" among students. To spy on university students, the police have set up CCTV cameras at the Colombo and Jayawardenapura universities. At Jayawardenapura University, many of the suspended students were identified using CCTV cameras.

At a media conference on January 7, Udul Premaratne, convener of Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) which affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), described the military training as "an initial step towards turning the country to a military state."

However, the JVP and IUSF fully backed Rajapakse's war, insisting that students had to sacrifice and put the "Motherland First". The Rajapakse government now uses the same slogan to justify its anti-democratic measures. The JVP, which is politically aligned with former army commander Sarath Fonseka, continues to venerate the military.

Police brutality and the militarisation of society are not limited to Sri Lanka. Last November, students in Britain protesting against education cuts were subjected to violent attacks by police. In Spain, the government used emergency laws to force striking air traffic

controllers to work at gun point.

Students cannot defend their democratic rights by pressuring the Rajapakse government. The root cause of the attacks on basic rights and living standards lies in the crisis of the profit system. Student must turn to the working class and the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government to completely refashion society on a socialist basis. This is the program advanced by the International Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party.



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