

Sri Lankan government shuts down three universities to block protests

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The Sri Lankan government has intensified attacks on the democratic rights of university students during the past several months, including by closing campuses to quell protests. The government is seeking to intimidate students and suppress opposition to worsening educational conditions and plans to allow the establishment of private universities.

* On March 27, Mahinda Rupasinghe, the vice chancellor of Sabaragamuwa University, banned the University Student Union and five faculty student unions. The government and the education ministry gave the go-ahead, using the anti-democratic provisions of the University Act. Education secretary Sunil Navaratne declared: “We will not hesitate to take stern action against any student movement if it is used for the deterioration of the university.”

Just before the ban, the authorities closed down the university for the second time this year in a bid to curb student demonstrations demanding an end to the suspension of 58 colleagues. The university administration accused the suspended students of “ragging” new university entrants, a practice that the government outlawed under sweeping legislation aimed at stamping out student protests and political activities. The student union denied the allegations.

The “ragging” charge appears to be nothing more than a pretext for cracking down on students at the university, where there have been frequent student campaigns over inadequate facilities and, more recently, anti-privatisation protests. Sabaragamuwa University was established in the 1990s amid widespread demands by parents and students for an expansion of university places. Despite the promises of

successive governments, there have never been enough staff, lecture theatres and other amenities at the institution.

Higher education minister S. B. Dissanayake publicly backed a ban on student unions at a press conference on March 26. He declared that the government would not hesitate to close down universities, even for six months, and dismiss students in order to establish “discipline”. Police have been told to arrest students who were involved in protests at Sabaragamuwa University.

Dissanayake also warned university staff that the government would not tolerate their involvement in activities that “disturbed” the universities. Thousands of teachers from all universities took part in a one-day strike last month, demanding higher pay.

* On March 31, the Eastern University in Batticaloa was closed indefinitely after Tamil students began boycotting classes and demanded the removal of a police post on the campus. The boycott followed a clash between Tamil and Sinhala student groups on March 28, after Sri Lanka’s victory in a cricket World Cup semi-final. Tamil students claimed they had been attacked by the police as well as Sinhala groups.

Student associations accuse the university authorities of deliberately inflaming communal tensions under conditions where there is considerable discontent over inadequate facilities. The main university campus at Vanatharumoolai, near Batticaloa, was nothing more than a high school when it was established and still lacks proper educational and other amenities.

* On April 6, the administration of Ruhuna

University in Southern Province closed down the institution and barred students from entry after a clash between two rival political groups on the campus. A pro-government student group apparently provoked the violence by attacking a member of the main student union, which is dominated by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), an affiliate of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The closures follow a series of protests last year against the establishment of private universities and demanding better facilities. Last October, police physically attacked about 2,000 students protesting in front of the higher education ministry. Eighteen students were arrested and charged with “unruly behaviour” under the reintroduced Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act.

Last year, university authorities suspended about 200 students on various charges. About 100 students are still under suspension and several face court cases.

The IUSF has been prominent in the anti-privatisation protests, but has promoted the illusion that President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government can be pressured to change its policies. As it implements the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund, the government has no intention of slowing down or stopping its privatisation agenda.

The bankruptcy of the IUSF’s politics is summed up by its approach to UN officials on April 2. The IUSF complained about the government’s attacks on student unions, the media and opposition parties, and called on the UN to “intervene before it is too late.” After meeting UN officials, IUSF convenor Sanjeeva Bandara handed over a petition to the American, British, Russian, French, Cuban and Indian embassies in Colombo.

What sort of “intervention” the IUSF is proposing is unclear. The cynical way in which the major powers use “human rights” to prosecute their own strategic and economic interests through the UN is all too clear. While the IUSF was hobnobbing with UN officials, the US, Britain and France were “intervening” in Libya

with warplanes in an attempt to install a more compliant regime.

The IUSF’s arguments also reveal the communal character of the organisation. Its petition complained to the UN that even though Sri Lanka “won the war” against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the “anticipated change” had not eventuated.

The JVP fully backed Rajapakse’s renewed war, demanded that working people sacrifice for the war effort and defended the regime’s war crimes against the island’s Tamil minority. The IUSF insisted that students had to forgo their own pressing needs for decent education. Today, its calls for democratic rights do not extend to the thousands of Tamil youth being arbitrarily detained without trial as “LTTE suspects.”

The “anticipated change” sought by the Rajapakse government is the transformation of the island into a new cheap labour haven for foreign investment and a financial hub for South Asia. This objective will be achieved only through a dramatic lowering of the living standards of working people and youth.

In order for students to oppose this agenda, including university privatisation, they must turn to the working class and the building of an independent political movement for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom on different priorities: to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, including the right of young people to free, high-quality education, not the profits of the wealthy few.

This is the program fought for by the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student wing of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. We call on students to join our struggle to build ISSE branches in every university.



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