

Indian government jails student leader on trumped up sedition charges

Pradeep Ramanayake
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In a flagrant attack on democratic rights, India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has had Jawaharlal Nehru University Student Union (JNUSU) President Kanhaiya Kumar arrested and detained on trumped up sedition charges.

Home Minister Rajnath Singh personally ordered last Friday's arrest of Kumar, whom he has publicly accused of making "anti-national" statements.

Shortly after heavily-armed Delhi police seized Kumar from the JNU campus, India's Home Minister tweeted, "If anyone shouts anti-India slogan (sic) & challenges nation's sovereignty & integrity ... they will not be tolerated or spared."

In addition to arresting Kumar, the Delhi police raided student hostels across the JNU campus, in a purported search for several other students likewise accused of making "anti-national" statements.

One of India's most prestigious universities, JNU has long been a center of left-wing activity and, as such, a *bête noire* for the Hindu right.

The events that led to Kumar's arrest began on Tuesday, February 9, when JNU students affiliated with the Maoist-led Democratic Student Union (DSU) organized a protest to mark the third anniversary of the judicial murder of Mohammad Afzal Guru. A Kashmiri Muslim, Guru was tortured and framed-up for the December 2001 terrorist attack on India's parliament. In February 2013, the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government ordered Guru be hanged in secret so as to prevent legal appeals against his execution and public protests.

JNU authorities withdrew permission for the DSU event after complaints from the Akhil Bharathiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student group that is affiliated to both the BJP and the shadowy Hindu supremacist organization from which it draws most of its cadres, the RSS.

Outraged by this attack on students' rights to dissent and protest, many JNU student groups including the officially-recognized JNUSU joined the DSU protest.

The ABVP then complained to the police, alleging that

Kumar and other protest leaders had raised "pro-Pakistan" slogans. More importantly, the ABVP also appealed to their friends in government. By Thursday BJP National Secretary and Delhi MP Maheish Girri was publicly demanding the central government intervene.

Kumar and other eye-witnesses have vehemently denied the claim that they raised pro-Pakistan slogans, which has all the markings of a smear aimed at providing a pretext for state repression.

The BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies routinely denounce their critics, especially those who point to their promotion of Hindu communalism and complicity in communal violence, as "anti-national" or "pro-Pakistan."

In the days since the February 9 protest, Kumar, who is a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI)-led All India Student Federation, has repeatedly declared his loyalty to the Indian state and constitution and confidence that the Indian judiciary will dismiss the charges against him.

In any event, whatever Kumar and others at the protest said, the BJP government's attempt to proscribe speech and jail those whose views it deems "anti-national" is deeply reactionary and a threat to the basic democratic rights of all working people.

In the face of a mounting outcry over Kumar's persecution, the BJP government has intensified its smear campaign and encouraged physical attacks on those protesting his arrest.

Home Minister Singh claimed Sunday that the February 9 protest had been supported by Hafiz Saeed, the head of the Lashkar-e-Taibi, a Pakistani-based Islamist terrorist group. This was so outrageous a lie that India's intelligence agencies felt compelled to disassociate themselves from it.

On Monday, JNU students and teachers who came to support Kumar at a court appearance were ruthlessly attacked by goons mobilized by the BJP and ABVP. Journalists were also targeted by the pro-BJP mob, which chanted that JNU is a "den of anti-Indian elements and terrorists." The police stood by even as the goons attacked

people inside the court building. A video clip shows BJP MP O.P. Sharma pushing a CPI leader to the ground, then later saying, “I would have opened fire if I had a gun.”

The smears and violence have failed, however, to stem the protests over Kumar’s arrest. A student strike has shut down JNU and on Wednesday there were protests at universities across the country. Some sections of the media are describing the protests as the biggest student agitation in 25 years.

Shaken by the extent of the opposition, the Shiv Sena, a Maharashtra-based fascistic party that is part of the BJP’s governing coalition, has called for “All those who are sloganeering against India” to be “immediately put behind bars” and for MPs who support the student agitation to be stripped of their “elected status.”

Yesterday, a local Delhi court ordered the JNUSU president be held for a further 14 days at the maximum-security Tihar prison. Later in the day, India’s Supreme Court made the Delhi police commissioner “personally responsible” for Kumar’s safety after it learned that just prior to his Wednesday court appearance the student leader was set upon by a group of pro-BJP lawyers and “badly beaten up”.

The BJP’s vicious attack on political dissent at JNU is part of a far broader anti-democratic and communalist agenda, which includes the systematic promotion of its chauvinist Hindutva ideology, the claim that India must be a “Hindu state.”

A major element in this rightwing offensive has been the drive to assert control over the country’s educational and cultural institutions, by placing them under the charge of Hindutva ideologues, rewriting education curriculum, and suppressing dissent.

Last month, a Ph.D. student at the University of Hyderabad, Rohith Vemula, committed suicide after the university stripped him of his fellowship and expelled him from his hostel under pressure from Smirti Irani, the BJP central government minister in charge of education.

Vemula and several colleagues were victimized after a false complaint was lodged against them by the ABVP unit at the university. An ABVP leader claimed he had been assaulted by Vemula and others when the ABVP tried to prevent the screening of Nakul Singh Sawhney’s documentary film *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai*, which depicts the BJP role in inciting anti-Muslim riots at Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh in 2013.

The police and university administration cleared Vemula and the four other members of the Ambedkar Student Association whom the ABVP had accused of violence. However, on the insistence of BJP Human resource Development Minister Irani the university held a second

“inquiry” which declared them guilty and imposed exemplary punishments.

By whipping up communalism, the BJP seeks to divide and intimidate the working class so it can press forward with neo-liberal “reforms”—including privatization, subsidy and social spending cuts, and the gutting of restrictions on mass layoffs and plant closures—and integrate India ever more deeply in US imperialism’s war preparations against China.

The mass opposition to the BJP’s repression at JNU has surprised and rattled the establishment opposition parties. Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi has denounced the BJP for suppressing dissent and debate at JNU, while accommodating to the BJP’s whipping up of Indian nationalism by declaring “anti-Indian sentiment ... unquestionably unacceptable”.

The Congress’s claim to protect democratic rights is a fraud. It has a long history of suppressing worker struggles, as in the frame-up of the Maruti-Suzuki workers, and conniving with the Hindu right, as in the secret hanging of Afzal Guru. Moreover, no less than the BJP it supports socially incendiary economic policies aimed at making India a haven for cheap-labour production for world capitalism.

The Indian Stalinists have denounced the BJP provocation at JNU. Communist Party of India (Marxist) General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury compared it to the Congress Party’s imposition of “emergency rule” between 1975 and 1977, the last time a JNUSU president was arrested. But in the name of defending democracy, the Stalinists promote unity with the bourgeois establishment and systematically suppress the class struggle.

Workers and students across India must oppose the state persecution of Kanhaiya Kumar and recognize that the answer to the BJP’s reactionary communalist and anti-democratic agenda lies in the independent political mobilization of the working class on a socialist program.



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