

India: BJP-backed student union unleashes violence at Delhi University

Pradeep Ramanayake
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At university campuses across India there has been an outpouring of anger and opposition against the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad's use of intimidation and violence to silence students at Delhi University who are critical of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its noxious Hindu supremacist ideology.

The ABVP (All Indian Student Council) is the student organization of the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is itself the ideological mentor of the BJP and the training ground for much of its cadre.

The ABVP's attack on left-wing students at Delhi University's North Campus is only the most recent episode in a concerted, government-supported campaign to stamp out political dissent and freedom of expression at India's universities.

The ABVP prevented Delhi University's Ramjas College Literary Society from holding a two-day "Culture of Protest" seminar, scheduled for February 21-22.

The BJP-aligned student group denounced the participation in the seminar of two Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students, Umar Khalid and Shehla Rashid, who are activists in the All India Student Federation (AISF), the student wing of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI).

Bowing to ABVP pressure and in the purported name of "keeping peace and harmony" at Delhi University's North Campus, the principal of Ramjas College cancelled Khalid's and Rashid's participation in the seminar. This only emboldened the ABVP. Its activists cut the power supply and locked down the venue of the seminar so as to ensure that it could not go ahead.

The ABVP had branded the JNU students Khalid and Rashid as "anti-nationals." The BJP, RSS, and ABVP routinely label anyone who opposes their right-wing, communalist agenda as "anti-national," with the sinister insinuation that they are "enemies of the state."

Khalid was the target of an ABVP-BJP witch hunt last year after he spoke at a JNU rally opposing state repression in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, and the 2013 execution of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri who was convicted on frame-up terrorism charges. (See, India: Intensifying BJP witch-hunt, JNU to punish "anti-national" students)

As a result of the right-wing furor whipped up by the ABVP, Khalid and two other JNU students are still facing prosecution for sedition.

On February 23, Delhi University students, including members

of the AISF and the Maoist All India Student Association (AISA), and the Delhi University Teachers Association called a march to demand the police take action against the ABVP harassing its opponents and disrupting the seminar.

The ABVP responded with fresh violence. First its members tried to lock the students and teachers inside Ramjas College. When the protest nevertheless proceeded, ABVP goons attacked the demonstrators with hockey sticks and pelted them with glass bottles stolen from nearby shops. Journalists were also attacked. At least twenty persons injured during the melee had to be hospitalized.

Nandita Narain, the president of the University's Teachers Association, told the media, "There have been clashes between students before, but what we saw yesterday and today is different. Teachers were attacked."

Debjani Sengupta, a lecturer from English department said, "This is the face of fascism," while Saumyajit Bhattacharya, who teaches economics, noted, "It's happening in campus after campus."

The ABVP goons were actively assisted by the police. The one hundred or so police who had been deployed to "keep order," not only failed to intervene to stop the attack on the demonstrators protesting ABVP violence and intimidation. They themselves attacked the protesters. Video footage shows students and reporters being manhandled by the police.

Facing mounting public anger, Police Commissioner Devendra Pathak tried to cover up the police's blatant, politically motivated support for the government-aligned ABVP goons, terming their conduct "unprofessional." He suspended three policemen as scapegoats.

The antidemocratic attack at Delhi University has been condemned by university students and lecturers across the country and internationally. A statement issued by academics including from Columbia, Cambridge, Pennsylvania, Toronto, California, New York and Gottingen universities said: "We stand against the rule of state-tolerated violence on college campuses." The statement went on to say that "the ruling party's student wing" is practicing "thuggish censorship" and with the aim of banishing "progressive politics and allow(ing) only the politics of violent cultural nationalism."

While shamelessly lying about its role in the ban on Khalid's and Rashid's participation in the Ramjas College seminar, the ABVP is stepping up its intimidation campaign. The *Economic Times* has

reported ABVP Organising Secretary Sunil Ambekar as saying the student group will write all universities “alerting them against any ‘anti-national’ sloganeering and invitations to ‘controversial’ persons.”

Last Thursday, the group held a counterdemonstration at Delhi University against “Communist forces” and threatened more attacks on “anti-nationalist forces.”

The threat of violence was underscored by the ABVP’s putting up of billboards and placards denouncing “Communist terrorism.” The display included pictures of the mutilated body of an RSS activist in Kerala, where there have been violent clashes between supporters of the Stalinist-led state government and the RSS.

Earlier last week an RSS leader in Madhya Pradesh announced a 100 million Indian rupees bounty for the head of Kerala Chief Minister and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) Politburo Member Pinarayi Vijayan.

The Stalinist CPM and CPI have nothing to do with communism. For decades they have functioned as part of the bourgeois political establishment, including sustaining in office governments that have implemented neoliberal reform and pursued a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

However, the anti-communist campaign being fomented by the ABVP and the Hindu right is directed at stoking reaction and suppressing any political opposition, above all from the working class.

Students and teachers at Delhi University complain that due to the ABVP’s influence the university is experiencing “silent censorship.” Fearing attacks from the ABVP, university authorities are very reluctant to grant permission to events that challenge the nostrums and prejudices of the Hindu right.

Adding to the climate of intimidation is the deployment of some 500 policemen around the Delhi campus.

The BJP government for its part has brazenly supported the ABVP campaign of violence and intimidation. Asked about the events at Delhi University’s North Campus, Minister of State Jitendra Singh said: “The message should go out loud and clear that India will not allow premium on anti-India activism... Freedom of debate doesn’t allow debating to instigate anti-India activism.” Singh added that “even the most liberal democracies of the world including the US and UK” are clamping down on dissent

The Hindu supremacist BJP and its right-wing allies are indeed encouraged by the strengthening of ultra-right-wing nationalist forces across the globe, including the coming to power in Washington of a president who makes no secret of his hostility to basic democratic rights and constitutional constraints.

The events at Delhi University are part of a broader attack by the Modi-led BJP on democratic rights. Faced with mounting opposition among India’s workers and toilers to its austerity and pro-investor measures, the BJP government is increasingly resorting to state repression and reactionary communalist and militarist appeals.

The BJP has celebrated the illegal and highly provocative Special Forces’ raids it ordered inside Pakistan last September as proof of India’s new prowess and suggested that any questioning of the actions of the military is not only “unpatriotic” but semi-

treasonous.

Dissent is increasingly being depicted by the government as a threat to the “unity of the nation” that must be suppressed.

Large numbers of workers and students are outraged by the BJP’s communalist and authoritarian politics. But the Stalinist CPI and CPM are responding by redoubling their efforts to harness the working class to the political parties of the ruling elite and the Indian state.

To the right-wing overtly Hindu communalist nationalism of the BJP, the Stalinists counterpose a so-called “progressive” Indian nationalism and on this basis justify aligning with the Congress Party, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, and a host of right-wing regionalist and casteist parties.

Thus, when addressing students during a march last week, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury declared, “Our nationalism is ‘We are Indian’ not ‘who is a Hindu’?”

A CPM Politburo statement urged that pressure be placed on the government and police to arrest “all those who indulged in violence to disrupt the seminar and attack the democratic protest.”

Workers and youth must draw a critical balance sheet of the pro-capitalist politics of the CPM and CPI. For years they sustained in power right-wing governments at the Center, most of them Congress-led, claiming that this was necessary to bar the BJP’s path to power. This policy only served to open the door for the BJP to exploit the mass anger over the failure of the Stalinist-supported program of neoliberal “reform with a human face.”

The defense of democratic rights requires the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force advancing a socialist solution to mass poverty, unemployment and ever-widening social inequality.

The author also recommends:

Oppose Indian government’s witch-hunt of JNU students
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