

# Sri Lanka: Political Science Department head at Peradeniya University condemns ban of IYSSE meeting

Our correspondents

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*Professor Upul Abeyratne, head of the Political Science Department at Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about the ban of an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) public meeting scheduled to be held at the university on January 3.*

*The IYSSE organised the meeting in the form of a lecture following an invitation from the university's Political Science Students Association (PSSA). The event, which was titled "How to Defeat the Attacks of the International Monetary Fund?" was approved by the Political Science Department Head.*

*On January 3, however, just a few hours before the meeting was to begin, Peradeniya University's Acting Vice Chancellor Ranjith Pallegama told Professor Abeyratne to change the lecture topic so it does "not appear that the meeting challenges the government policies." Otherwise, Pallegama stated the event would be "suspended immediately."*

*The ban was a direct attack on the basic democratic right to freedom of expression and organisation, not only of the university students and academics, but of all working people.*

*The unprecedented directive came as a political shockwave to students and academics who issued statements condemning the university's action. Major newspapers in Sri Lanka such as the Sunday Times and the Island published articles criticising this anti-democratic act.*

*The IYSSE has credible information that the prime minister's and education minister's Dr. Harini Amarasuriya's office inquired about the purpose of the meeting. Amarasuriya has denied any intervention on her part in the meeting's cancelation.*

*It is a fact, however, that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government, which is fully committed to the International*

*Monetary Fund's austerity measures and has started to ruthlessly implement them, is nervous about the rising anger among working people and students.*

*Professor Abeyratne's remarks are a powerful expression of his determination to defend basic democratic rights.*

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Professor Upul Abeyratne:

In universities, there is a long-standing tradition, originating from places such as Humboldt University, which values open dialogue. Universities are spaces where any group should have the right to engage in discussion and debate.

This tradition has existed for a long time at Peradeniya University. Therefore, I consider the ban on the discussion titled "How to Defeat the Attacks of the International Monetary Fund?" a serious violation of this principle.

In Political Science, there are three key approaches, one of which is the normative focus—i.e., concerned with how to create a better world. I see this as an acknowledgment of the right to dream. Political Science, by its nature, is a normative discipline.

Discussing the International Monetary Fund program is an undeniable right of Political Science students. I am aware of one crucial fact regarding this incident. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts was under continuous pressure, while simultaneously, the Office of the Vice-Chancellor (VC), also faced influence because he received those communications from the Dean. I believe this was political influence. Neither the VC, nor the Dean or I should have had to stop this discussion.

On January 3, the Dean summoned me urgently and soon after, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) requested that I change the topic of the meeting. I told him: "Sir, I can't do that. This event has already been publicised. I cannot cancel it either. If you want it stopped, please provide me with a written order."

Once I received the written order, I informed the relevant

parties that the event had to be cancelled. I did not resist the written order because, as a Political Science academic, I recognise that our society is moving toward a worsening political climate.

If the government truly values the independence of universities and the right to education, it must conduct an immediate investigation to determine the source of this undue influence.

The DVC explicitly told me over the phone that the pressure came from Colombo. The Dean facilitated this communication by handing me the phone. This is a deeply troubling development. If anyone claims that the Political Science Students' Association is not registered this is simply false.

It is unacceptable to conflate university legal procedures with this situation. If a law exists solely to suppress people, that law must be questioned. Even today, I support your program and maintain my anti-IMF stance. Therefore, I personally see this as an infringement on my right to free expression.

During my 32 years of experience in academia—since 1992—I cannot recall such intense external influence on the university. In my memory, no incidents of this nature have occurred. If it is happening now, it is deeply concerning because universities must remain spaces for open dialogue.

What makes this situation particularly ironic is that it is happening under a government whose prime minister and minister of education once marched with us, demanding 6 percent of the gross domestic product be allocated to education. I find this situation astonishing.

I am also surprised by the silence of those who once championed education but now remain quiet, despite this issue being widely discussed in the public sphere.

After emailing you [the IYSSE], I immediately informed the VC that I would address this matter publicly at every opportunity as a university academic. It appears, however, that we are facing a level of influence that we cannot resist individually. There is a force being exerted upon us that even university teachers struggle to withstand.

I would also like to highlight another concerning trend. A so-called "pseudo-radical" group of self-proclaimed university intellectuals took to social media, claiming they would organise a similar discussion at Colombo [University]. In response, I stated that I would attend and share my views. No such a discussion has taken place. It is evident that some academics align with the government and justify this incident.

I am also strongly opposed to the procedural restrictions imposed on students when forming associations within universities. According to these procedures, a lecturer must serve as the senior treasurer of a student association. Does

this mean that students who fail to meet this requirement are deprived of their right to free expression?

This is not the only mechanism used to suppress students' voices. Having closely observed student politics over the years, I have documented my observations in an academic session with two colleagues from the University of Ruhuna. During that period, the majority of students were not affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. However, those who engaged in JVP politics were trained in a structured manner to dominate student politics.

At that time, a select group of students decided who would serve as batch representatives. Previously, there was a tradition of holding General Body Meetings for student decision-making. Today, that practice is nearly obsolete.

Instead, pro-JVP students strategically position themselves across campus, creating chaotic situations to suppress dissenting voices. This tactic ensures that their chosen representatives are appointed while silencing the majority. Although I am unsure how this process operates now, it remains a vicious cycle.

Since my own student days, I have been familiar with your organisation. I am a frequent reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* and actively facilitated your comrades' work at the University of Ruhuna, where I was previously employed. Jayantha Amarasinghe and I introduced some of your comrades to the university community. Even today, I support your party's work.

Communism, socialism, and various political ideologies are integral components of the Political Science curricula. These are subjects we critically discuss. I stand by Marx's call: "Workers of the World, Unite!" Both my epistemology and ontology are shaped by Marxist thought.

At the same time, I would like to share that I personally voted for your party in the most recent election.

I propose that we reschedule this lecture in a systematic manner and ensure that the discussion takes place as it rightfully should.



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