

Sri Lankan students, academics and media activists denounce Peradeniya University's ban on IYSSE lecture

Our correspondents
6 January 2025

Students, academics and media activists have made powerful statements opposing the University of Peradeniya vice chancellor's decision to ban an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) lecture at the university.

Titled "How to fight against IMF austerity program," the lecture was scheduled for 3.30 p.m. on January 3 at the Political Science Department (PSD). It was sponsored by the university's Political Science Students Association (PSSA), which had obtained prior permission from PSD head Professor Upul Abeyratne.

A few hours before the planned lecture, however, senior lecturer Sumudu Walakulu, who is a senior treasurer of the PSSA, informed the IYSSE that he had received a message from the acting vice chancellor, through the dean of Faculty of Arts and the head of Political Science.

The message declared that the topic of the speech at the lecture should be revised, and "advertised accordingly so as not to appear that the meeting challenges the government policies or else consider hereby that the above meeting be suspended immediately."

We publish below some of the statements received by the IYSSE condemning the vice chancellor's attack on basic democratic right of freedom of expression and speech. The IYSSE has also received copies of several protest letters from international readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which we will publish later.

K. Sivarajini, a first year arts student at Peradeniya University:

"I am deeply hurt and offended by the cancellation of the IYSSE lecture at Peradeniya University. This decision is not just disappointing—it's a violation of basic human rights and an attack on our fundamental freedom of speech.

"As students, we deserve the right to discuss and debate issues that affect our lives and future without fear of censorship. Silencing these conversations goes against the very principles of democracy and academic freedom.

"I strongly condemn this action and stand firmly against any attempt to suppress our voices or restrict open dialogue within the university."

A.S. Seneviratne, a student from the Post-Graduate Institution at Peradeniya University:

"We as students express our opposition to the banning of the IYSSE lecture by the university administration. No one should be allowed to suppress the right to freedom of speech. Suppression of freedom of expression only indicates a contemptuous attitude towards democratic rights.

"We all should unite to defend the freedom of speech in the university. If we ignore this attack on this organisation and not see it as an attack on us, other organisations will also face a similar situation in the future."

Athulasiri Samarakoon, a lecturer at the Open University of Sri Lanka, stated on his Facebook account:

"Today it is reported that the right to expression and free speech of the students has been banned by the VC at Peradeniya University. This is an incident that causes pain and frustration on us who accept deconstructive democracy.

"We accept the right for any group or a person to express their ideas under whatever situation and also to criticise violence or importance of those ideas. Universities are places where the fight between ideas takes place and challenging the violence contained in the ideas.

"Hands off the democratic right of students by Peradeniya Vice Chancellor! Universities where open speech on the IMF and any other phenomenon is prohibited will be reduced to the level of a school."

Professor Prabhath Ekanayake, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Peradeniya University, under which PSD operates, made the following comment to WSWs reporters:

"A letter came from the acting Vice-Chancellor through me to the head of the Political Science Department, saying that the topic of the meeting should be changed because it is against the policies of the government, and if that is not possible, to cancel it...

"According to the [unofficial] news, the order came from Colombo. Probably it comes from the University Grant Commission (UGC)."

The UGC operates under the direction of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya who is also the minister of

education.

“Although I am a Dean, I am an academic. People should be made aware of the IMF austerity programs. I respect the democratic right to express one’s opinion. You can criticise the IMF austerity program. This is nonsense.”

Professor Ekanayake also expressed his admiration for the Young Socialists, the predecessor of the IYSSE, adding: “During the era of the late Wije Dias [former general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party] I learnt a lot from your movement. Today’s students also need that awareness.”

Chaminda Hettiarachchi, a social activist advocating democratic rights, commented on Facebook:

“I strongly condemn the unwise and anti-democratic action by the acting Vice Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya to ban the IYSSE lecture opposing IMF austerity in Sri Lanka... I find this action is unwarranted by the University Administration and a direct violation of freedom of the speech of the University Community.”

Noting that he had been involved in the Young Socialists when he was a Peradeniya University, and that JVP student activists attempted to disrupt those activities, Hettiarachchi added: “I invite all democratic loving citizens to protest this action by the University administration, influenced by the NPP government!”

P. Kuruppu, editor of *socialist.lk* web site, opposed university administration’s cancellation of the IYSSE meeting, describing it as “an expression of the ruling class’s fear and hatred of the independent views of students, teachers and the public in general.” He warned that the NPP government’s implementation of IMF austerity was not possible “without taking away the democratic rights of the people.”

The Federation of University Teachers Associations issued the following media statement signed by its general secretary, Charudaththe B. Illangasinghe:

“The Federation of University Teachers’ Associations (FUTA) strongly condemns the decision taken by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya to obstruct a scheduled meeting discussing the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) impact on Sri Lanka....

“This action represents a blatant and undue intervention in academic freedom. Universities are foundational spaces for critical thought, open dialogue, and the exchange of diverse ideas. Academic institutions must uphold the rights of students and the broader university community to express themselves, including through discussions that may challenge prevailing narratives or present critical perspectives.

“The Vice Chancellor’s decision to interfere with this event sets a dangerous precedent. Such actions undermine the ethos of universities as bastions of intellectual exploration and freedom. The suppression of critical discourse not only curtails the academic rights of students and faculty but also erodes the trust and confidence in the leadership of our higher education institutions.

“The FUTA reiterates the urgent need to safeguard academic freedom and ensure that universities remain spaces where ideas can be freely debated without fear of censorship or reprisal.”

The statement called on the government to investigate the matter and “reaffirm its commitment to upholding academic freedom within all Sri Lankan universities.”

Dr. Deepika Udugama, head of Peradeniya University’s Law Faculty, sent the following statement to the *Island*, a daily Colombo-based English-language newspaper:

“This reported move to censor a programme, within a university, is surprising and is extremely problematic to say the least. It sets a chilling precedent.

“Universities are critically important sites of free speech because the sharing of thoughts and ideas on any subject, however disagreeable or unsavoury to the authorities or anyone else, is essential for the generation of ideas.

“If academia is gagged, the democratic spirit in the country, too, suffers. If academia is sent the message that it cannot enjoy academic freedom, then what is the guarantee to the citizens of the right to free expression?

“One hopes that this intervention will be withdrawn and confidence restored. If the government, indeed, has not prevailed upon the university to interfere with the programme, it should give assurances to the public.”

We call on students, academics, non-academic workers, intellectuals, and all who cherish democratic rights to denounce the Peradeniya University authorities for banning the IYSSE lecture. Please send your protest letters to the university authorities, with copies to the IYSSE.

To: Acting Vice Chancellor, University of Peradeniya
Email: vc@pdn.ac.lk

Cc: IYSSE
Email: iysse@pdn.ac.lk

We also urge workers, students and teachers to attend our forthcoming IYSSE meeting—“How to fight against IMF austerity program”—on January 9 in Kandy, following the anti-democratic cancellation of our meeting at the University of Peradeniya.

Meeting venue: Kandyan Arts Residency Hall, Kandy (near Kingswood College)

Date and time: Thursday, January 9, at 4 p.m.



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wsws.org/contact