

Sri Lanka: Peradeniya University tries to justify ban on IYSSE lecture

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
14 January 2025

The vice chancellor of Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka, Terrence Madujith, issued a press release on Friday stating that “the University wishes to address the concerns raised by various groups regarding the public meeting titled ‘How to fight against the IMF austerity program?’”

The statement was referring to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) meeting that was scheduled for January 3 but banned as a result of a letter sent on that morning by Acting Vice Chancellor Ranjith Pallegama. The meeting had been sponsored by the Political Science Students Association (PSSA) at the university’s Political Science Department.

The press release not only suggested that the planned meeting was an unauthorized event, but foreshadowed the imposition of stringent restrictions on future meetings and thus the freedom of expression at the university.

The vice chancellor hastened to issue his so-called clarification, just seven days after the cancellation of our lecture, because this blatantly anti-democratic action sparked outrage among academics, intellectuals, students and workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Firstly, Madujith claimed that the meeting was not banned, saying that the acting vice chancellor was simply asking innocently for a change to the topic of the meeting. This is false as the request came with an explicit threat.

The letter to the head of the Political Science Department specifically declared that the topic be changed so as “not to appear that the meeting challenges the government policies or else consider hereby is suspended immediately.”

Secondly, the press release implied that the student organisation, the PSSA, was not duly registered in the

university; and did not go through the relevant authorities to obtain approval. As a result, PSSA allowed an “international organisation,” that is the IYSSE, to hold the meeting.

As far as the PSSA is concerned, it obtained permission from the head of the Department of Political Science for the meeting, was allocated a lecture room for the event and informed the IYSSE. In the past two years, the PSSA has sponsored lectures not only by the IYSSE but also other organisations.

The IYSSE has held several lectures sponsored by the PSSA: *The Ukraine War and How to Stop It*, on August 22, 2023; *An introduction to historical materialism*, on October 26, 2023; *The Centenary of Trotskyism*, addressed by Joe Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US) on December 07, 2023; and on the *Communist Manifesto* on February 21, 2024.

Many students along with some academics and non-academic employees have taken part in these lectures which have prompted discussion and debate.

Only now, when the IYSSE was about to hold a lecture, entitled *How to fight against the IMF austerity?*, did the university authorities fault with the PSSA and the IYSSE for not obtaining due permission!

This is not accidental. The IYSSE and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone have been exposing the newly established Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government that is now centrally imposing the harsh IMF austerity program in full. That is why there was an inquiry about the lecture and its purpose from the prime minister’s office, despite subsequent denials.

The vice chancellor concludes his press release by hypocritically declaring that “the University of Peradeniya remains steadfast in its commitment to

upholding academic freedom and cultivating a culture of critical inquiry and intellectual engagement...”

This “culture of critical inquiry and intellectual engagement” is to be severely circumscribed, however. The previous paragraph declares that the university has a “strict policy” that “prior permission [for meetings] must be obtained from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor/ Vice-Chancellor through the Chief Marshal, the University Proctor and other relevant officials.”

The university authorities have suddenly unearthed this “strict policy” when it suits their political purposes. The target is very evident, as the letter banning the IYSSE made clear: it is a meeting or activity that “challenges the government policies.”

Moreover, in the Sinhala language but not English language version of his press release, the vice chancellor appears to taking aim at the IYSSE in particular.

Reportedly, it declares, “these associations distributing leaflets and other materials and holding meetings within the faculty, without permission from the University, have attempted to sabotage the faculty’s education activities.”

While we are not named, the slanderous insinuation is that the IYSSE is not only engaged in political activities “without permission” but has “attempted to sabotage the faculty’s education activities.” Clearly this is an attempt to intimidate students and academics, stifle political discussion in the Political Science and other faculties and prepare to bar the IYSSE from campus.

What the university bureaucrats and the government fear is that students will begin to oppose the drastic austerity measures that the JVP/NPP is preparing to impose on schools and universities. Moreover, under the IYSSE’s influence, students will turn to the working class, which already confronts an immense social crisis, and help build a mass movement based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

We warn students, teachers and workers: the attack on free speech and association by Peradeniya University authorities, if not answered and fought, will be extended to other universities, institutions of higher studies and schools.

There has been a longstanding tradition in Sri Lankan universities that students have a right to freely engage in political activities. In the past, political parties and

their youth organisations had university branches, organized public lectures, meetings and debates, and on occasions invited international figures to deliver speeches.

University students have organized mass protests against the cutbacks to education funding as well as campaigned on many other issues. Successive government have increasingly brought in laws and regulations to curb students’ legitimate activities, exploiting reactionary ragging incidents.

Now, however, Peradeniya university authorities on behalf of the JVP/NPP are preparing to ban political activities that challenge government policies. It is a measure not just of the right-wing anti-democratic character of the JVP/NPP government but of the immensity of the political and economic crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism.

We urge students to vigorously oppose this attack on the democratic rights of students and on the IYSSE at Peradeniya University.

The IYSSE calls for:

- End the ban on the IYSSE lecture “*How to fight against the IMF austerity?*”
- Hands off freedom of speech and academic freedom!
- Defend free education! Billions to expand and upgrade education facilities available for all who need them!
- Build IYSSE branches in all institution of higher education including universities!

We also call on you to condemn the ban by Peradeniya University authorities on the IYSSE lecture. Send protest letters to the university authorities, with copies to the IYSSE.

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact