

Bans at Sri Lanka university: A far-reaching attack on students' democratic rights

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The vice chancellor (VC) of the Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka, Professor Terrence Madhujith, issued a blatantly anti-democratic directive on January 15, on the Peradeniya Student Union (PSU) and faculty student unions “completely prohibiting” them “assembling students, holding meetings, addressing students, illegal gatherings within the university or outside on any issue for one week.”

The VC warned that he would “take disciplinary action against those who act against this directive,” implying authorities’ plan to sack, suspend or legally prosecute students.

Just two days later, on January 17, Madhujith sent another letter to student unions withdrawing the directive prohibiting their activities from 6 p.m., that day because the “situation in the university and every faculty is calm and no activities were reported.”

These anti-democratic twists and turns of the Peradeniya University authorities began with the cancellation of the Political Science Students Association (PSSA)-sponsored International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) lecture entitled “How to fight against the IMF austerity?”

Acting VC Ranjith Pallegama on January 3 sent a directive to Head of Political Science Department of the university, ordering the cancellation of the lecture declaring the topic was “challenging the government's policy.”

Behind this ban was the new Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government which is committed to implementing the IMF's demands in full, including privatization and severe cuts to university funding. The IYSSE was informed that the Prime Minister's office, no less, made inquiries about the meeting.

Though the prohibition of student union activities has been withdrawn, university authorities have not lifted the ban on the IYSSE lecture.

Extraordinarily, Madhujith gave no reason for his blanket ban on student meetings. Previously bans have been imposed amid widespread student unrest or clear indication that such unrest was about to erupt. No such unrest has taken place at

Peradeniya university in the recent months.

In the absence of any explanation, one can only conclude that the consequences of the ban on the IYSSE meeting, which triggered significant opposition from students and academics, raised concerns among university authorities.

The IYSSE waged a vigorous campaign against the ban and held a public meeting under the same title in nearly Kandy.

The ban on the IYSSE quickly became a national issue. Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) issued a statement opposing the ban. Widely-read national newspapers, such as the *Sunday Times* and *Island* ran columns or reports of the ban, though not directly mentioning the IYSSE. The question of the government's involvement was raised.

Seeking to score points, opposition leader Sajith Premadasa raised the issue in the national parliament highlighting the hypocrisy of the government's posturing as a defender of democratic rights. Premadasa himself has an appalling record on democratic rights.

The JVP/NPP went into damage control mode. Responding to a question from one of its MPs, Lakmali Hemachandra, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya flatly denied that she had any connection to banning the IYSSE meeting.

At Peradeniya University, the vice chancellor sought to lay the matter to rest with a statement issued on January 10 justifying the ban. The IYSSE, in a statement published on January 14, tore apart the absurdities of his arguments.

Ridiculously, Madhujith declared that the IYSSE lecture had not been banned at all, just requested to change the topic of the meeting! He then unearthed long-ignored policies to claim that the Political Science Students Association had not followed procedure which would now be strictly enforced. He also implied that the IYSSE, as an “international organization,” had no right to hold a lecture, even though it had held a number of meetings at the university previously.

The IYSSE statement warned that the Peradeniya University's anti-democratic measures, if not fought, would

be extended to other universities.

The very next day, the vice chancellor issued his blanket ban on all student activities in a desperate bid to prevent the IYSSE from becoming a focal point for open opposition among students and academics.

Already in December and early January, the Peradeniya Student Union has been compelled to organise limited protests to oppose the privatisation of medical education, and the delay in providing students' financial assistance programs.

On January 15, he also met with the leaders of the PSU and some faculty unions who gave assurances that they were planning no meetings or protests in the coming days.

PSU leaders in recent months have been working closely with the JVP, which is now in power, and distanced themselves from the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) controlled by the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a break-away from the JVP. The PSU did not oppose the ban on the IYSSE lecture or the broader bans.

As for the IUSF, it issued a mealy-mouthed statement opposing the ban on student activities, and referred to the ban on an earlier meeting but did not name the IYSSE or oppose the university's actions. It appealed to FUTA and the government to intervene to end the ban.

The failure to defend the IYSSE is not surprising as the IUSF and PSU are fundamentally hostile to the IYSSE's socialist and internationalist perspective. They have in the past carried out physical attacks and provocations against IYSSE members.

Even though the PSU and other student leaders had kowtowed to the vice chancellor on January 15, pledging to keep calm at the university, it was not until two days later that he lifted his ban on student activities. Again, he gave no serious explanation: the campus was now calm, but it had been prior to his imposition of the ban!

There is a distinct possibility that discussions had taken place with authorities higher up in the Education Ministry run by the prime minister. The new sweeping ban had the potential to trigger wider opposition and protests, it was called off.

While the government and university want to bury the episode, it constitutes a serious warning to students as well as workers and youth of the anti-democratic methods that both are adopting. A precedent has been established at Peradeniya University, which could also be used at other universities, for the arbitrary imposition of the sweeping prohibition of student activities by university authorities. Stricter controls are now in force inhibiting student political meetings, especially those critical of the government.

Moreover, the ending of the ban at Peradeniya University was a tactical retreat only. The JVP/NPP government is

preparing to implement, sooner rather than later, drastic IMF-dictated austerity measures. These include the wholesale privatisation of state-owned enterprises; the retrenchment of more than half a million state employees; increased taxes on essentials and cuts to essential services.

Free public education faces further cuts, as the government allows private universities. For 2024, the previous government allocated 237 billion rupees (\$US800 million) for education. The JVP/NPP government allocated 271 billion rupees for 2025, a meagre increase that barely keeps step with inflation. It cannot do so democratically.

The perspective advanced by the PSU and IUSF is to pressure the government for minor concessions. Their protests only function to dissipate the opposition of students to the attacks on public education. The FSP, to which the IUSF is affiliated, hailed the election of Anura Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP government as an "expression of people's expectations."

The IYSSE and Socialist Equality Party insist that the only way to fight the monstrous attacks on social conditions being prepared by the government is not to beg them for concessions, but to mobilise the great strength of the working class independently of all capitalist parties, their trade unions and the fake left groups. We call on students to build IYSSE branches in every university and turn to the working class in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies

We urge students, teachers and workers to support our campaign to remove the ban on the IYSSE lecture entitled, "How to fight against the IMF austerity?" and to send protest letters, condemning Peradeniya University's ban with copies to the IYSSE.

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To contact the WSWs and the
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