

Solidarity Statement

Sri Lanka: State Repression of Student Activists Using Anti-terrorism Law

We, the undersigned student organizations, strongly condemn the arrest and use of anti-terrorism law on student activists - the Convenor of the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF) Wasantha Mudalige, Galwewa Siridhamma himi and Hashan Jeevantha - who were engaged in peaceful protests in Sri Lanka. The students are being detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a draconian law that has been used historically to target Tamil and Muslim minority communities and political dissidents.

Occupation sites emerged and protests broke out in the last several months in Sri Lanka as the country is facing the most severe economic crisis in its post-independence history and economic burdens became unbearable for the masses. Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt payment obligations earlier this year and severe shortages of fuel, food and medicines continue as foreign reserves depleted making imports unaffordable. Inflation has sky-rocketed, with food inflation reaching above 90%. As a result of the mounting protests, the former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had to resign and flee the country. The interim President – Ranil Wickremesinghe – then launched a ruthless attack on the protestors who participated in a largely peaceful protest campaign that drew attention internationally.

Since protests mounted this year, more than 3,400 protestors have been arrested, with at least 1,250 still held in remand custody. The IUSF as the largest organized body of public university students has consistently struggled to safeguard free education in Sri Lanka. It has also been at the forefront of the recent mass people's struggles along with other trade unions, political parties and civic groups. Student unions are now facing the brunt of state repression and the danger of being framed as a "terrorist" outfit.

We are witnessing an increase in violence, intimidation and relentless targeting of student activists under the rule of authoritarian leaders globally, including in the South Asian region. Specifically, the use of anti-terrorism laws on student leaders and student groups to suppress their voices is a troubling trend. Anti-terrorism laws allow governments to arbitrarily arrest individuals and detain them for long periods without release on bail or trial. The label of "terrorist" is slapped on individuals without any clear evidence. While in custody, they are made to endure poor prison conditions, their basic rights are violated, including access to medical care, while being subjected to rigorous interrogation and sometimes physical torture.

In Bangladesh, the anti-terrorism unit as well as the draconian Digital Security Act that bestows widespread powers to the police have been used to target students and youth activists. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party seized power in the center, the Indian state has been silencing the voices of political dissenters by arresting them under Unlawful Activities Prevention (Act) (UAPA). A total of 4,690 people were arrested under the UAPA between 2018 and 2020, with just 149 convicted in three years. While those who have committed heinous crimes – including Hindu right-wing extremists – are being released under judicial pardon, others are held as political prisoners. Fr. Stan Swamy, a renowned human rights activist arrested under the UAPA, died in prison in July 2021 as he was denied proper medical care. The colonial legacy of the sedition law has also continued in Pakistan, leading to arrests and disappearances of various student activists, journalists and political dissidents over the years without due process. Student unions have been banned on campuses in an effort to curb organized student dissent and student leaders arrested while demanding the restoration of unions and reform in education.

As student organizations, we are concerned about the assault that the anti-terrorism laws pose on students in an effort to stifle their freedom to organize, express dissent and resist against social injustices. The end goal of those in power has been to suppress dissent and crush the organizing abilities of student bodies, depriving a large body of youth from participating in the legitimate platforms for intellectual debate and growth. Such witch-hunt of political dissenters slows down the raising of political consciousness and evolution of democratic institutions.

Therefore, we support the call by the IUSF to release the detained Sri Lankan student activists, refrain from using the PTA to target protestors and take immediate measures to repeal the law. We also call on the Wickremesinghe Government to stop labelling student activists as "terrorists" which can be harmful. We extend our solidarity towards the student activists and protestors who are striving to achieve, amidst severe economic hardships, their dream for a better Sri Lanka. Victory to the struggle!

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