

India: Intensifying BJP witch-hunt, JNU to punish “anti-national” students

By Pradeep Ramanayake
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Lending support to the witch-hunt mounted by India’s Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, a “High Level Enquiry Committee” of Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has recommended harsh discipline be imposed on 21 left-wing students for leading a protest that the government has denounced as “anti-national.”

The Committee is recommending five of the 21 be “rusticated,” i.e. temporarily or permanently expelled. These include the three students who have been dragged before India’s courts on frame-up sedition charges—JNU Student Union President Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid, and Anirban Bhattacharya.

Last month the BJP government ordered Delhi Police and the university administration to crack down on its left-wing opponents at JNU on the pretext that “anti-national” slogans had been raised at a February 9 campus rally marking the third anniversary of the hanging of Mohammad Afzal Guru. A Kashmiri, Guru was framed up by Indian authorities for the December 2001 terrorist attack on India’s parliamentary complex.

One of India’s most prestigious universities, JNU has long been decried by the BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies as a “hotbed” of leftism.

The JNU administration is eager to do the government’s bidding. Previously, it gave Delhi police permission to conduct raids across the campus in order to arrest Kumar and other participants in the February 9 event. Now it is seeking to ram through the recommendations of its “High Level Enquiry Committee.”

On March 14, the JNU administration announced that the five-member enquiry committee had found the 21 guilty of “violating university norms and discipline rules.” It then gave them less than 36 hours—till 5 p.m. March 16—to “show cause,” that is, to rebut the committee’s findings. It added that if the students failed to “show cause,” university authorities would “presume” they had “nothing (to say) in (their) defence” and proceed directly to imposing penalties.

The anti-democratic nature of the entire procedure is underscored by the fact that the university failed to even inform the 21 what specific rules they are deemed to have violated.

The JNU Teachers’ Association has opposed what it calls

“the bullying tactics” of the university administration. Association General-Secretary Bikramaditya Choudhary deplored the lack of “specific charges.” “What are the students being held guilty of? It is unacceptable.”

Meanwhile, five JNU academic deans have written to the vice-chancellor to refute the administration’s claim that they were apprised of the enquiry committee’s findings at a March 14 meeting.

The JNU Students Union (JNUSU) has passed a resolution condemning the enquiry report as “biased” and opposing the university’s demand that the 21 “show cause.” The accused “have not even been given the entire report, despite repeated demands,” said JNU Vice President Shehla Rashid Shora. They “have not even been told the specific charges against them. When they don’t know the crime what explanation will they give?”

Over the strenuous objections of the Delhi Police, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya were granted interim bail for six months Friday. They had been in prison for more than three weeks. Along with JNUSU President Kanhaiya Kumar, who was released on bail March 3, they face the possibility of being sentenced to life in prison if found guilty on the trumped-up sedition charges.

The vendetta against the JNU students is part of a much larger BJP government drive to smear all opposition to its right-wing policies as “anti-national” and to promote a bellicose Hindu communalist-laced Indian nationalism.

The BJP government is systematically placing Hindu nationalist ideologues in charge of the country’s universities and cultural institutions and working in tandem with the ABVP, the student wing of the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to target government opponents among university students and faculty across India.

This authoritarian and communalist campaign points to the broader anti-working class agenda of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP. By stoking social reaction and suppressing social opposition, the Indian ruling class is seeking to divide and intimidate the working class so as to push politics far to the right. This includes both the intensification of neo-liberal socioeconomic “reform” and the pursuit of the Indian bourgeoisie’s great power ambitions through the rapid

expansion of India's military and the harnessing of India to US imperialism's anti-China "pivot."

Human Resources Development Minister Smriti Irani, whose responsibilities include overseeing India's universities, has been front and center in the government campaign against the JNU students, and more generally to promote a bellicose, authoritarian nationalism.

According to *India Today*, Irani is now working on plans to introduce military personnel on the country's university campuses. She has urged that military officers be assigned to lecture students to "instill nationalism" and is also considering instructing the country's central universities to hire "retiring junior commissioned officers and soldiers as physical training instructors." Their responsibilities, reports *India Today*, would include inculcating "a spirit of nationalism and patriotism."

The foully reactionary and truly sinister direction along which Indian establishment politics is rapidly moving was exemplified by the expulsion of a member of the Maharashtra state assembly on Wednesday for desisting from saying "Bhat Mata Ki Jai" or "Victory for Mother India."

In a provocation intimately tied up with the dispute over the purported shouting of "anti-national" slogans at JNU, a legislator from the Shiv Sena, a Hindu supremacist party closely allied with the BJP, demanded that Waris Pathan prove his patriotism during an assembly debate by saying "Victory for Mother India." When Pathan, who is a member of the Muslim communalist India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) refused, the BJP Home Minister Ranjit Patel brought forward a motion that Pathan be suspended from the assembly for the remainder of the current session.

The opposition Congress Party and Nationalist Congress Party readily agreed. Significantly, when Patil suggested an apology might be sufficient, the Congress legislators brayed their disapproval.

This incident underscores the utterly bogus character of the Congress Party's claims to defend the JNU students and democracy—claims that the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, are promoting.

The BJP campaign of smears and repression is in part directed against the Stalinists. *Communists and Jihadists at Work in JNU* screams the title of a pamphlet recently authored by BJP Vice President Balbir Punj.

The response of the Stalinist parties to this attack has been utterly cowardly and politically reactionary. It has been aimed not at mobilizing the working class in defence of democratic rights, but at convincing the Indian ruling class of the Stalinists' loyalty and political reliability and at promoting Indian nationalism, the ideology of the Indian bourgeoisie.

Speaking in parliament on the JNU issue, CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury emphasised the Stalinists' support for "progressive nationalism." Responding to Irani's recent order that all central Indian universities prominently fly

the Indian flag, Yechury declared, "There will be a huge national flag in every central university. But, remember, the tri-colour (Indian flag) in our hearts is much larger."

JNUSU President Kumar is a leader of the CPI's student wing, the All Indian Students Federation. On the instructions of the CPI leadership, he has repeatedly declared his loyalty to India's constitution and faith in the courts.

He has also joined with the CPM and CPI leaderships in seeking to use the events at JNU to promote closer ties with the big business Congress Party, touting it as an ally in the fight for democracy and a bulwark of "secularism." Speaking to the Kolkata-based *Telegraph* last Sunday, Kumar said, "It is simplistic to brand them (the Congress and BJP) both as capitalist bourgeois parties. Their nature is different."

Not incidentally, the CPM and CPI are jointly contesting the West Bengal state assembly elections in an alliance with the Congress aimed against the BJP and the state's current ruling party, the Trinamool Congress.

It is the Stalinists' systematic suppression of the class struggle, whose political expression has been their subordination of the working class to the Congress Party—the traditional party of government of the Indian ruling class—and a host of right-wing regional and caste-ist parties that have created the conditions for the rise of the BJP and the Hindu right.

More than ever, the defence of democratic rights and assertion of the social interests of the working class is bound up with its mobilisation as an independent political force, rallying all the toilers, against the Indian bourgeoisie and all its political parties.

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