



MURAGALA | CPPP
CENTRE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & POLICY

STUDENT POLITICS IN SRI LANKA

Summary Paper



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Abbreviations

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Economiques et
Commerciales (AIESEC)

Communist Party (CP)

Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)

General Certificate of Education Examination (GCE A/L)

Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA)

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Inter-University Student Council (IUSC)

Inter-University Students' Union (IUSF)

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

Lanka Sama Samajaya Party (LSSP)

Maoist Communist Party (MCP)

National People's Power (NPP)

Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs)

North Colombo Medical College (NCCMC)

Socialist Student Union (SSU)

South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM)

Tamil Student Union (TSU) United Nations (UN)

United National Party (UNP)

United States (US)

University Grant Commission (UGC)

Student Politics in Sri Lanka

About This Summary Paper

A webinar on student politics in Sri Lanka, hosted by Muragala | Centre for Progressive Politics & Policy (CPPP) on 27 June 2024, focused on Sachinda Dulanjana's chapter titled "Finding a Way Forward amidst the Contemporary Challenges to Sri Lankan Student Politics."¹ This chapter is featured in the Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education.² In the chapter, the author explores the historical background of student activism in Sri Lankan state universities and its impact on the higher education sector. The chapter also examines the challenges faced by Sri Lankan student activists in their political engagement and mobilisation.

Student politics in Sri Lanka has been primarily confined to public or state universities. Student politics were predominantly shaped by two groups: the Lanka Jathika Shishya Sangamaya, the student wing of the pro-Moscow Communist Party (CP), and the Lanka Shishya Sammelanaya, aligned with the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samajaya Party (LSSP). Ideologically, the CP adhered to the Soviet line, while the LSSP followed Trotskyism. These groups were later

challenged by the Socialist Student Union (SSU), the student wing of the pro-Maoist Communist Party (MCP).³

After the 1971 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection, university student politics became integrally linked to revolutionary left politics in Sri Lanka. The JVP is the main political party in the National People's Power (NPP), a centre-left alliance which formed the government of Sri Lanka since September 2024.

Today, student politics is largely directed by the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF), which aligns closely with the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), and previously, more closely with the JVP. Founded in 1978, the IUSF remains the largest student-led organisation in Sri Lanka, identifying itself as an advocate "against all types of privatisations of free education and fighting for a better educational system that confirms equality for all students and a better society" (Front Line Defenders, 2021).

Student politics has historically intervened in national political issues. Student unions have actively resisted the

1 Sachinda Dulanjana is a former speaker of the Sri Lanka Youth Parliament and the official Sri Lankan youth delegate to the United Nations, where he represented Sri Lanka at the 71st UN General Assembly. He also held the position of Asia regional representative of the Commonwealth Student Association, promoting student governance across Commonwealth member states.

2 Dulanjana, W. (2024). Finding a Way Forward amidst the Contemporary Challenges to Sri Lankan Student Politics. In M.Klemenčič (Ed.), Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation in Higher Education (1st ed., pp. 307–325). https://muragala.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Student-Politics-in-Sri-Lanka_Sachinda-Dulanjana.pdf.

3 Samaranayake, G. (2015). Changing University Student Politics In Sri Lanka: From Norm Oriented To Value Oriented Student Movements. *Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences*, Vol.1 No.3–23-32. [https://socialaffairsjournal.com/Archive/Fall_2015/3_SAJ_1\(3\)Samaranayaka.pdf](https://socialaffairsjournal.com/Archive/Fall_2015/3_SAJ_1(3)Samaranayaka.pdf).

privatisation of medical education. For instance, the North Colombo Medical College (NCMC), Sri Lanka's first private medical school established in 1980, faced significant opposition especially from state university student bodies (Gunatilake, 2024). This culminated in intense protests by 1989, leading to the government's nationalisation of NCMC after deploying the military to the campus, citing security concerns.

Another example is the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM), founded in 2008 by Dr. Neville Fernando and awarded degree-granting status in 2013. This sparked protests led by the IUSF and the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA). The demonstrations disrupted student education, delayed exams, and affected patient care across hospitals island-wide.

A hunger strike by the parents of state medical students ultimately led to the government abolishing SAITM on November 8, 2017 (Gunatilake, 2024). University student unions have also advocated for improved infrastructure, timely disbursement of the Mahapola scholarship for students from low-income families, and increased student support services.

The IUSF and university students recently gained public attention and support for their active role in the 2022 aragalaya, mass protests calling for the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government to resign and for a system change.

This Muragala | CPPP webinar focused on contemporary issues related to student politics and their potential future directions. The session included a talk by Sachinda Dulanjana (former speaker of the Sri Lanka Youth Parliament and the official Sri Lankan youth delegate to the United Nations) on his book chapter, followed by comments from three panellists: Professor Prabha Manuratne from the University of Kelaniya, political analyst Dr. Ajith Amarasinghe, and Dr. Kaushalya Perera from the University of Colombo.

Student Politics in Sri Lanka's Higher Education - Mr Sachinda Dulanjana

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Politics and Representation (2024) is a project by the Department of Sociology at Harvard University, with Dr. Manja Klemenčič as the principal investigator. This handbook discusses student politics and representation in 25 countries and also covers regional organisations such as the All African Student Union, Commonwealth Student Association, European Student Union, Latin American Student Union, and the Global Student Forum.

The handbook critically discusses student politics on a global level, connecting the experiences of several countries. Seven Asian countries are included in this handbook. The handbook features contributions from 76 authors, including 57 individuals representing various countries, student leaders, activists, and representatives. In addition to that, 357 ground-level student representatives have written chapters for the handbook.

The handbook also discusses the agency of students, meaning students' ability to effectively influence education. This influence is examined in two ways: "self-formation agency", which refers to individual students, and "student political agency," which explores how students impact politics through their involvement in student societies.

The handbook highlights the advantages and disadvantages of student representation in higher education. The advantages include community participation and studies, the value of student input, and the demonstration of students' democratic rights through their representatives. The disadvantages include students' short-term self interests due to their limited time in university, which can affect their ability to influence long-term organisational goals, their lack of expertise, the challenges of making decisions by consensus in organisations, and issues related to the legitimacy of student representation.

During his talk, Dulanjana mentioned that his research on student politics was limited to Sri Lanka's state universities. This is because there is currently no organised student politics at the national level within private higher education institutions. Even when considering students in private universities or educational institutes more generally, they do not engage in politics at the national level.

The first student union in Sri Lanka was the Sri Lanka Law School Student Union, established in 1894. However, its impact

was limited, with little contribution at the national level. In 1953, a significant event occurred when university students clashed with the police during a hartal incident at the University of Ceylon (now the University of Peradeniya), with connections to Marxist political parties. In the 1960s, there was not much unity in student politics in Sri Lanka.

Historically, it is evident that university students were involved in national politics. The 1971 and 1988-1989 JVP youth-led insurgencies were particularly noteworthy, with student involvement being significant in them. The Socialist Student Union (SSU), the oldest student union in Sri Lanka was formed in 1986 by Rohana Wijeweera and was dominant in student politics by 1971. The JVP's proscription after the insurgency was lifted in 1976. The power of the JVP to mobilise university students was evident again in 1988-1989.

In 1977, the UNP government attempted to exert influence through student unions, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. The JVP had already gained substantial power by 1988, leading to a struggle within universities to re-establish student discipline.

A significant issue that emerged in student politics in 1981 was the response to the Sri Lanka Education White Paper, presented by Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene and his administration from the United National Party (UNP). The UNP government in 1981 attempted to introduce reforms to the education system in Sri Lanka through

a White Paper proposed to the parliament (Polity.lk, 2024). The White Paper aimed at reducing disparities among government schools, restructuring the education system, and enhancing teacher training to promote equity and national integration. However, it faced criticism for inadequately addressing the needs of all ethnic groups, particularly the Tamil community, with many feeling that the proposed reforms did not sufficiently consider the specific challenges and concerns of marginalised communities. This dissatisfaction led to increased mobilisation among various student groups, who demanded more inclusive reforms.

The author also highlighted an often overlooked aspect of the student movement—the activities in the North and East of the country. During the same decade, the Tamil Student Union (TSU) was active, although with different dynamics. The TSU operated as an armed group, advocating for Tamil students who faced injustices within the university system at the time.

Dulanjana next noted the recent prominence of the Inter-University Students' Union (IUSF) in student politics. The IUSF, which gained prominence in 1978, has been heavily influenced by the JVP over the years. While the JVP's direct influence was well-known, the prominence later shifted towards the FSP. The IUSF's three main objectives are to stand up for

the problems of the common people of Sri Lanka, support the national free education policy, and advocate for the welfare of students. These objectives continue to guide the activities of the IUSF. He emphasised the importance of discussing the present to learn lessons for the future and pointed out that during the people's struggles in 2022, the IUSF was able to gain some favour and power among the people. During his research in 2021-2022, Dulanjana observed a breakdown in the IUSF at some universities, with different groups forming within the student union and sometimes acting independently. He also discussed the internal structure of student politics in Sri Lanka, where the IUSF is considered the main student movement. Within universities, there are student associations at both the university and faculty levels, which are governed by legal frameworks outlined in the University Act No. 16 of 1978.⁴ These associations operate with a recognised regularity and are integral to the student unions within universities.

Dulanjana made a few recommendations regarding student politics issues. He identified how ragging and bullying of first-year students by seniors have been justified by perpetrators as being a form of political socialisation. He argued that universities should clamp down on ragging and introduce methods of socialisation such as community projects, innovation, entrepreneurship, and other creative endeavours. These initiatives could

⁴ Universities Act - Part XIV: University Students Union And Other Associations. (N.D.). University Grants Commission - Sri Lanka. https://www.ugc.ac.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=40%3Auniversities-act-part-xiv&catid=6%3Auniversities-act&Itemid=195&lang=en.

potentially strengthen student movements by encouraging unity and participation.

Low participation of women and different ethnic groups in student movements is another key issue. He questioned whether women's voices are truly heard and taken into account within student politics and highlighted the need for genuine leadership opportunities for women within the university system. Furthermore, he expressed concern about the role of student communities within civil society, observing that civil society in Sri Lanka has become increasingly project-driven, often influenced by NGOs and donors, rather than being focused on common societal interests. He emphasised that student communities have the potential to play a significant role in shaping civil society, provided that they develop a concrete political consciousness.

Reflecting on the 2022 protests in Sri Lanka, Dulanjana noted that while it was a significant moment, there was a missed opportunity to transform it into a movement that could have had a lasting impact on Sri Lankan politics. With a deeper political consciousness, students could have influenced the political process more effectively. He suggested that student politics should evolve with the times, effectively incorporating new advocacy tools such as the Right to Information Act, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and social media. He also highlighted the importance of gender equality and leadership opportunities for women, referencing his experiences at Edinburgh University, where women held the top

positions in the student union vote.

In conclusion, the author stressed the need for student involvement in national-level policy planning and the importance of integrating youth and education policies. He acknowledged the long-standing role of student politics in preserving free education since 1945 but suggested that the focus should shift to ensuring fair and quality education opportunities for all youth in Sri Lanka.

Panel Discussion

Professor Prabha Manuratne

Prabha Manuratne highlighted the inherent difficulties in studying the student movement and student politics in Sri Lanka. She emphasised that data collection is a significant challenge due to the fear and reluctance of student leaders to openly talk about the issues within student politics in higher education institutions. She recalled her own experience in a project on ragging and sexual gender-based violence conducted in eight Sri Lankan universities through the University Grants Commission (UGC). The primary hurdle was obtaining data, as students were hesitant to express their opinions, censoring themselves due to fear of repercussions. This structural violence, deeply ingrained in the university system, creates an environment where expressing dissent is highly risky.

It was noted that the student movement's responses often align with the expected 'right answers', indicating a failure to engage in genuine political discourse.

Manuratne stated that more effort is needed in data collection and analysis, and deeper exploration of the student movement's history is necessary. She critiqued the superficial understanding of student movements, pointing out that much of the history, especially concerning non-JVP student organisations, is often overlooked. She emphasised the need to analyse how historical events such as the 1972 Policy of Standardisation which limited the number of Tamil students admitted to certain faculties in the universities and the 1978 formation of the Inter-University Student Council (IUSC) have shaped the current student movement.

Furthermore, Manuratne discussed the inadequacies in addressing class antagonism within the student movement. She pointed out the lack of deep analysis of class divisions and how neoliberal policies undermine the effectiveness of student activism. She observed that the student movement has a limited grasp of the political impact of neoliberalisation of the education system's political effects, often reducing complex issues to simplistic critiques of institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). She highlighted this inability to centre historical developments by certain student groups and the outdated cultural attitudes prevalent in Sri Lankan universities, which hinder the development of a truly democratic student movement. She identified two major challenges for the student movement in Sri Lanka: the under-representation of women in leadership roles, and the failure to acknowledge the

political aspirations of the Northern (Tamil) student movement.

Dr. Ajith Amarasinghe

Dr. Ajith Amarasinghe was a student activist during the 1980s and shared his experiences of what he defined as one of the most challenging periods in Sri Lanka's university system. He entered Colombo Medical College in 1984, during a time when President J. R. Jayawardena had banned all student unions after the July 1983 riots. This left student activists, including Amarasinghe, to continue their activities in secret. The absence of democratic processes, such as voting for student union leaders, led to an increase in violence and allowed ill-suited individuals to assume leadership roles. Amarasinghe stated that he joined the Student Action Committee at Colombo University to address the crisis of private medical schools, adding that the problems he observed then still exist in today's student movements.

Amarasinghe also discussed the low participation of women in student movements and politics in Sri Lanka, a point also raised by Prabha Manuratne. He argued that empowering women alone is not enough to involve them in politics. Despite women being a majority in professions such as medicine and academia, they often avoid politics due to its violent nature. Amarasinghe recalled his efforts at the University of Colombo, where, under a liberal Dean, the Student Action Committee created a safer environment for women, resulting in a

higher number of female leaders. He emphasised that reducing violence in student politics is important to increasing female participation.

Violence, according to Amarasinghe, remains a significant issue in both student and national politics. He also pointed out the lack of factual understanding in current student movements. When he joined the Student Action Committee in 1986, he said that there was little information available on the private medical colleges crisis, forcing him and others to gather data from the National Archives and news reports. Through this research, they developed clear slogans and mobilised support from groups like the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) and university professors, turning the issue into a matter of public concern. Amarasinghe noted that today's student movements largely lacked this strategic approach, often failing to connect with the broader public.

Amarasinghe also observed that political diversity within student groups once played a key role in student struggles. However, attempts by political parties such as the JVP to dominate these movements led to increased violence. He highlighted ongoing issues of violence and lack of accountability, with both physical and mental bullying posing dangers. Amarasinghe stressed the importance of providing students with a solid understanding of political theory to prevent them from succumbing to dogmatic ideologies. Reflecting on his own experience, he noted that his political understanding was shaped by reading

across different ideologies, which helped him develop a nuanced perspective. He emphasised the need for political education to protect students from being easily influenced by dogmatic and extremist views.

Dr. Kaushalya Perera

Dr. Kaushalya Perera stressed that student movements and student activism in higher education institutions were under-researched areas of scholarship in Sri Lanka, in pedagogical studies and in social science research. Among the key challenges in studying this issue was the limited access to the student community and censorship by students, due to a shrinking space for views and concerns to be openly shared by students within higher education institutes.

Perera emphasised the necessity of studying such topics to understand not only student organisations but also political movements in Sri Lanka—specifically, who participates and how? Perera raised a methodological concern regarding Dulanjana's work, and suggested that such studies would benefit more from conversations which could elicit more qualitative data rather than surveys that were more quantitative-heavy, as the former allowed asking participants more in-depth questions.

Perera also emphasised the lack of representation of women and minorities in student movements, as highlighted by earlier speakers. She also noted that when nomination lists within student union

elections included minorities (gender, ethnic, etc.), it was generally tokenistic and did not reflect the diversity that exists in reality among the student cohorts. She also highlighted the issue of ragging, which frequently occurs in separate groups along ethnic lines. Students from minority groups, such as Muslims and Tamils, often engage in ragging among themselves rather than mingling with Sinhalese students.

Another aspect highlighted was the relationship between student movements and the English language, which ties into class divisions, as Manuratne had previously pointed out. Perera observed the contentious nature of the usage and teaching of English in state universities. She noted that while the government has mandated English language teaching in many programmes, some faculties attempt to transition to English instruction overnight, which affects students, their knowledge, and the capacity of teachers.

Furthermore, she added that student movements do not address the need for English but instead portray English medium instruction as a negative development, as elitist, due to the unequal access to English education among the students. She added that the real issue was not the English language per se, but a larger question of the role of universities and public education. She noted that student unions are often excluded from this critical discussion, stressing the importance of thinking beyond English to consider broader educational issues. In giving feedback on the chapter, Perera observed that Dulanjana initially romanticises the

student movements and the JVP but later adopts a neo-liberal approach, suggesting that student associations should be entrepreneurial and sustainable. She stated that this appeared contradictory, arguing that a student movement focused on entrepreneurship and sustainability is at odds with one dedicated to preserving free education. She pointed out that organisations such as AIESEC and Rotaract are apolitical and suggested that student movements should become more like social movements, involving not just students but also educators and other key individuals and/or groups. Perera acknowledged the challenge of creating such a social movement and asked how these two approaches could coexist.

Discussion Session

In responding to the panellists comments, the author Sachinda Dulanjana explained that the survey used in his chapter was a global survey designed by Harvard University, which he translated into Sinhala. He highlighted the difficulties in collecting data, especially since union presidents were often reluctant to provide information, making it a challenge to convince them, with some refusing to respond altogether.

Dulanjana acknowledged the broader issue of limited research in this area, attributing it to fears that deter students from speaking openly. Dulanjana also agreed with Perera's observations about Rotaract and the Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (AIESEC), recognising them

as highly professional organisations, and acknowledging that it is unrealistic to expect student movements to reach their level within the same timeline, particularly given the challenges posed by unequal access to the English language. He pointed out the irony that students often view English as an adversarial issue during their university years, only to recognise its value later. He also noted how efforts by English departments are frequently hindered by student unions. Dulanjana suggested that instead of trying to mould student activities after organisations like Rotaract or AIESEC, a different approach should be adopted for ongoing projects or changes.

Dulanjana acknowledged the difficulty of changing a student's mindset, especially considering the diverse backgrounds and disparities from which students come, even under the free education policy. He brought out how some schools offer limited opportunities in sports or subjects, forcing students to select something they may not be interested in. These students, he explained, are easily manipulated into believing that English is reserved for the privileged, only to later realise they have been treated unfairly. He emphasised that progressive change is slow, particularly in environments where diverse opinions are not welcome. Despite these challenges, Dulanjana stressed the importance of initiating change, even on a small scale.

During the discussion session, a member of the audience expressed admiration of the strength of student movements in Sri Lanka compared to (what was identified as)

the more apolitical nature of student groups in the United States (US.) He asked about the role of leadership, values, and group identity in Sri Lanka, and particularly how the IUSF and individual student unions had evolved over time. In response,

Dulanjana reflected on the fact that if students had been politically socialised rather than simply taught slogans, there would have been more progressive developments in Sri Lanka's higher education sector. He observed that while students passionately preach slogans during their university years, they fail to bring significant societal change after graduation. Echoing Manuratne's earlier comments, Dulanjana pointed out that students lack deep ideological understanding, resulting in no real value-based change or leadership development. He noted how by their third or fourth year, students who had once stood up against ragging often failed to work together later, indicating that they are under pressure from political manipulation.

Manuratne added to the discussion by highlighting a key issue within student movements, particularly within the inter-university student body and student unions: the lack of clarity regarding accountability. She pointed out that the IUSF operates without a clear system of rules, leading to uncertainty about who is responsible for the actions of student leaders. She recounted the experience of a second-year anti-ragging student who questioned the group about the accounts for collected funds and was subsequently beaten for asking where the budget for the

money in the tills was allocated. Manuratne emphasised the importance of accountability in politics, whether to a political party, a constituency, or the student body. She argued that due to this lack of accountability, student movements remain trapped in a mentality from the 1980s, while the students themselves have become more neoliberal, with no clear understanding of who is responsible for them and student politics.

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