

Indian Democracy in Crisis: Umar Khalid, JNU Student Leader Charged Under India's "Laws of Criminal Conspiracy"

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Irrespective of the fact that student protests, ranging to thousands of participants called for a solidarity march on 18th February in large numbers, the reality of the ground has not changed. In spite of exposing how the fraudulent news channels had doctored the videos with 'Pakistan Zindabad' slogans, the strong clutches of the police still ask for more evidence, trying to force the case of sedition against the students.

Umar Khalid, one of the student leaders, who was also charged with draconian laws of criminal conspiracy and sedition, had to finally surrender on Tuesday night, in spite of the fact that there's no evidence against him. What does it mean? Within ten days, his identity was reduced to being a Muslim, not a student who got offer from Yale University or a free citizen of the country who had Right of Free Speech and Expression. Instead his family was threatened, his 12-year-old sister cannot attend school where she is being treated as a pariah. In the latest attacks, his family was threatened that 'if they want to have their son alive, he needs to leave India.'

What does it mean to our Indian democracy when vibrant student leaders have to surrender in this way? Does not it humiliate the idea of being an Indian who can voice his dissent? In a vibrant campus like JNU, where the slogan is 'If politics decides your future, you should decide what your politics should be', it's a shame that in spite of massive solidarity, students like Umar Khaliad and Anirban Bhattacharya are still seen as criminals who need to be punished.

The non-partisan and cursory comment on such student protests by those occupying the highest echelons in corporate offices state that universities are temples of education and students are just wasting their time in protesting. The students instead of marching on the streets should go back to their hostel rooms, study, graduate and do something concrete with their lives. This interpretation by those who themselves have never thought beyond their text-books is quite problematic. Firstly, they make a major portion of commentators who believe that studies cannot have discussions, arguments and debates, and should stay far apart from politics. Secondly, this kind of interpretation also evokes the understanding that protests do not serve any purpose, as it hardly gets concrete things done, problems resolved. It indeed is a problematic situation because this junta does not understand the efforts that students put in, to live for a cause that is beyond their own selves.

It's definitely a shame that Umar Khalid had to surrender. It tramples down the voice of dissent, of questioning, of reframing the political discourse. Now, it would be scarier for

students to question the government, to demand for changes, because they will fear arrest. So, how is India being different from the authoritarian dictatorships when our own democracy is being dominated with right-wing politics? Aren't we then moving towards a police state, where police commissioners are not questioned, where lawyers can assault defenseless students and protest against bail pleas?

Where is our voice? Why is it being silenced? Why is the Idea of India being made so fragile that a small questioning by students makes it vulnerable? Why cannot our country embrace the diversity of opinions, rather than haunting them down? Where are we moving, then? What is our direction?

What will happen to Umar Khalid and several others who believe in his politics? Would he become the scape-goat of Indian right-wing politics, a lesson that you should never dissent?

But most importantly, will he, after the surrender, remain safe?

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