ACTIVISM UNDER ATTACK

Understanding the Repression of Student Activism

Written by: Amy Kapit
AMY KAPIT is a visiting Assistant Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies at Swarthmore College. She holds a PhD in International Education from New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development and a BA in Religion and Peace and Conflict Studies from Swarthmore College. Her research and teaching focus on the relationships between education, armed conflict, and violence; paradigms of humanitarian aid; and critical analysis of global indicator frameworks. Amy previously worked as the Research Director for the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack and as Research Director of the Assessment of Learning Outcomes and Social Effects of Community-Based Education in Afghanistan, a research project led by Dana Burde and Cyrus Samii (NYU) and Joel Middleton (University of California, Berkeley). She has consulted with a variety of organizations, including the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, Scholars at Risk, UNESCO, and USAID. Amy is also the mother of an active and delightfully stubborn toddler, who she hopes will grow up to be civically engaged and passionate about the fight for social justice.
I am grateful to SAIH for the opportunity to write this report, which underscores the threat that illiberal democracy and authoritarian regimes pose to university student activists. Thank you especially to Lauren Berntsen, who worked closely with me on this report, provided direction, and was a sounding board for all my ideas. I am especially grateful to my three research assistants here at Swarthmore College - Brandon Archer, Jiwoo Choi, and Crystal Secaira. Given that this is a report about student activism, it was invaluable to have them working with me every step of the way. Their insights and advice are incorporated into the pages that follow. I would also like to thank the individuals who shared their time and insights with me during interviews and to those additional people who spoke with me “off-the-record.” Finally, thank you to those who reviewed the introduction and case studies and contributed their expertise, including: Giovanna Modé, Fernando Romani Sales, Peter Kwasi Kodjie, Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua, Hedme Castro, Aung Soe Htet, Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Than Lwin Oo, Hannah Cooper, Line Khateeb, Ilker Gökhan Sen, Héctor Ríos-Jara, McDonald Lewanika, Kasper Landmark, Palak Rao, Eftychia Kalaitzidou, Rachel Hasting, Naomi Moland, and Anne Campbell, as well as those who wished to remain anonymous.
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After decades of unprecedented human development, the world is now witnessing a significant democratic backlash characterized by an increase in populism, propaganda and violent repression and criminalization of critical voices. At the forefront of opposition movements, we find academics and students rising up to defend fundamental freedoms such as the right to expression and peaceful assembly, as well as safeguarding education as a public good. In recent times, the consequences of such efforts have posed a significant risk and, in many cases, a high cost to the lives of these individuals.

Higher education institutions, and civic space in general, have increasingly become targets of authoritarian forces. Despite increased coverage of this issue, based on our experience working with student movements, we observe that a considerable number of attacks on this group go unreported. Additionally, being a human rights defender has become more dangerous, yet student activists across the world continue to take on this role. Therefore, understanding the trends of these attacks, the methods of repression used by perpetrators, and the different struggles of student activism is of utmost importance for systematically documenting attacks on student activists and movements and ultimately, increasing their protection moving forward.

The protection of student activists isn’t a new topic for SAIH. As a solidarity organization, supporting our peers at risk has been a central focus of our work and one of our most successful lobbying efforts is precisely the creation of the Students at Risk (StAR) program in Norway – a program that has provided a temporary safe haven for nearly one hundred persecuted students. I myself am one of the beneficiaries of this program. After leaving Honduras in 2018, I have been able to finish my studies and continue the fight for human rights and democracy from Norway. The StAR program has allowed us to discover the complexities of protection work and is one of the reasons for our re-defined approach to this work. In order to protect student activists, we see the need for a three-pronged approach: (I) documenting repression of student activism in a systematic way; (II) mobilizing international, regional, and national advocacy efforts to fight back on such repressions and hold the perpetrators to account; and (III) establishing local and international protection mechanisms to safeguard activists’ human rights. This report provides a founda-
tion for us and other relevant stakeholders to advance in strengthening the protection of student activism.

More concretely, this text seeks to underline the need for more comprehensive research and reporting on attacks against student activists. This report marks a new stage for our organization, one based on the desire of supporting student movements worldwide, inspired by, and aimed at, complementing other important initiatives carried out by Scholars at Risk, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, among others.

The report provides an array of country cases, showcasing the global span of repression of student activism and presenting initial findings of more subtle, often ignored, means of repression. Direct and subtle attacks against students undermine free and open civic space and universities' educational environment. Broader civil society, including the higher education community, urgently needs to commit to the protection and promotion of student activism – recognizing its value as an important component of learning and civic engagement, both on and off campus.

This report is done in solidarity with student activists globally, and calls on states, higher education institutions, human rights organizations, and ultimately society as a whole, to contribute to strengthening students' civic identities and political agency. The information and analysis presented here can be an essential tool for raising awareness of the threats student activists and movements are facing, the importance of recognizing them as subjects of the right to academic freedom and taking action to protect their human rights.
STUDENTS AND STUDENT UNIONS have been important political actors throughout history, mobilizing around contested issues and often inspiring spin-off movements that influence institutional politics. Questions raised within the classroom often transcend the university campus and shape societies at large. However, as this report shows, the repression of student activism has become more frequent, more coercive, and intense. Unions have been banned, student activists and leaders are continuously persecuted and ultimately become targets due to their tireless activism. Thousands of learners have been deprived of their right to education because of their attempt to shape their educational realities, lives, and futures.

Despite this, few mechanisms are in place to protect students’ rights or monitor the real-life costs students’ pay for their activism. Consequently, students are often forced to create new pathways outside established structures, often with limited resources or support. Additionally, as this report highlights, we are likely not seeing the breadth of violations that student activists face.

With student solidarity as a fundamental pillar, the Global Student Forum (GSF) was founded in 2020 as the formal unification of the world’s largest student federations and their national organizations. Through its 202 member unions from 122 countries, GSF is the democratic and independent voice of learners worldwide, representing the economic, social, cultural and educational interests of more than 200 million secondary and tertiary students from across the globe. As the global umbrella union of student organizations, GSF is proud to partner with SAIH in the launch of this important research.

This report offers important insights into the realities of student activists across contexts, highlighting their role in shaping institutions as well as societies. It will serve as an important testimony of the impact student activism can have while also highlighting the repression activists face as the price for their political efforts. By gaining a better understanding of the problem, we can mobilize our membership and advocate for solutions.
INTRODUCTION

ON OCTOBER 2, 2022, students at Iran’s Sharif University joined nationwide protests—which had erupted three weeks earlier—against the Iranian government after a twenty-two-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, died while in custody of the country’s morality police. As they had elsewhere, state police and security forces, along with the Basiji, a plainclothes militia force, violently cracked down on the demonstration, firing rubber bullets and paintballs at the protesters. The brutality at Sharif University set off solidarity protests at universities across Iran and students at Sharif University engaged in silent sit-ins to demand the release of their peers who remained in police detention. The Basiji and security forces responded in a similarly violent fashion. Since then, protest actions have occurred across campuses in Iran on an almost daily basis, with 685 university students arrested by early January, according to the Volunteer Committee to Follow Up on the Situation of Detainees. At least 44 students have been sentenced, most to multiple years in person, with at least one student facing the death penalty if convicted. Students who disappeared during protests have been later found dead. Other students have been suspended, expelled, or banned from taking exams.

Such scenes are not isolated to Iran. Similar acts of repression against university students protesting occur frequently in other places across the world. In Myanmar, thousands of university and secondary school students have been detained for their role in protests following the February 2021 military coup. In many instances, merely being a member of a student union is sufficient reason for arrest in Myanmar. Almost all students arrested have been charged with making comments that “cause fear” or “spread false news.” Arrested students reportedly face maltreatment, including beatings and solitary confinement, in some cases dying while in custody. For example, in December 2021, Ko Aung Bone Kyaw, a geology student at Yangon University and student activist died at an interrogation center the day after being taken there. His body was cremated before his relatives were informed of his death.

In Turkey, student protests against government intervention in university administration and for more affordable student housing have been met with police
violence and widespread arrests and detentions. In one case, on October 22, 2021, police arrested 45 students participating in a protest against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s appointment of a new rector to Boğaziçi University (BU), allegedly using excessive force when making the arrests.\(^9\) Often the basis for arrest is the disruption of public order or disorderly conduct.\(^10\)

Scholars at Risk’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, which monitors attacks targeting higher education communities, found that approximately 41% of the incidents that it identified between September 1, 2021, and August 31, 2022 were acts that repressed student expression.\(^11\)

However, repression of student activism does occur in more subtle ways as well. Belarussian students participating in protests against the government in 2020 had their academic records reviewed under a tacit threat of expulsion.\(^12\) Authorities in various places have publicly tried to discredit university student activists by linking them to western imperialism – as in Zimbabwe – by calling them “terrorists” – as in Honduras and Turkey – or by mobilizing anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments against students – as right-wing governments have done in Brazil and Turkey. In other instances, governments and university administrations have sought to neutralize student activism by co-opting students into student organizations they have established or control, or by offering incentives in exchange for political support. In some cases, governments also pressure activists by intimidating or coercing their family members into revealing information about them. Digital surveillance is also a significant problem. Media and human rights investigations have for instance shown that governments around the world are using the Israeli spyware Pegasus to hack the phones of students, human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, and politicians.\(^13\)

A Problem of Limited Attention and Insufficient Protection for University Student Activists

STUDENTS ARE MEMBERS OF civil society and human rights defenders insofar as they are “individuals, [members of] groups and associations ... contributing to, the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals.”\(^14\) Civic space is critical for student activism as “the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies” i.e., as spaces where people are “accessing information, engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent or disagreement,
and joining together to express their views.”15 The past years have seen significant civil society mobilization, particularly by marginalized populations.16 University students are at the forefront, or at least active participants of many of these fights, with some analysts speculating about whether a new global student revolution is occurring akin to that of 1968,17 which is widely considered the year that student movements “changed the world.”18

However, despite university students’ important role as social and political activists, the space they engage in as activists is often not fully included in measurements of civic space or academic freedom. Organizations seeking to protect civil society do not necessarily focus on students specifically; students are rather included in human rights reports or in the work of human rights defenders primarily when they also represent other marginalized populations. In other words, the focus is on the individual’s marginalized identity whereas the individual’s student identity is incidental. Likewise, students are often not seen as having a specific right to academic freedom.19 Groups focused on analyzing and protecting academic freedom typically focus on the process of teaching and learning. And while there is a good case to be made that student activism is an important vehicle for learning, this is not universally agreed upon.

It is particularly important to understand the students’ activist role in the current global context of rising authoritarianism, increasing illiberal democratic practices, and shrinking civic space.20 In the past decade, a growing number of researchers and civil society organizations have begun expressing concern over increasing restrictions and government intrusion into civic space.21 Among the biggest threats to civic space today are military coups, government manipulation of law, fraudulent elections, right-wing populism, disinformation, and political polarization, which makes people hesitant to voice their opinions for fear of backlash.22 According to CIVICUS, only 3.1% of the world’s population currently lives in countries rated as “open,” while, by contrast, nearly a quarter of the world’s population lives in countries rated as “closed.”23 According to the V-Dem Institute, there has been a decline in democracy over the past decade, with 2021 levels of democracy being comparable to those of 1989—the end of the Cold War. Importantly, since 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has also provided justification and means for enacting restrictions on public space and the freedom of assembly.24

15 See Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, “OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space”. https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space (accessed February 10, 2023). OHCHR operationalizes civic space as reliant upon the freedom of association*, peaceful assembly**, and expression***. *The freedom of association includes the right to form or join a formal or informal group, such as a club, cooperative, NGO, religious association, political party, trade union, or social movement. **The freedom of peaceful assembly includes the right to gather publicly or privately and to engage in collective expression. This includes the right to engage in peaceful protest, meetings, strikes, sit-ins, etc. ***The freedom of expression includes the right to free speech, as well as the right to access information and to publicly draw attention to shared concerns without fear of retribution.


23 CIVICUS (2022).

24 CIVICUS (2022).
While some argue that civic space is shrinking, others argue that governments are reorganizing civil society, selectively including civic organizations that align politically with the regime and excluding others. In either case, as SAIH’s research has previously shown, even in democracies, university students, particularly those aligned with opposition politics, face reduced space for dissent. In line with this trend, according to V-Dem, restrictions on “freedom of academic and cultural expression” were among the top ways that authoritarian governments have brought about autocratization—or democratic backsliding—over the past ten years.

Ensuring that student activists have access to protections and the skills and knowledge to protect themselves is also important as they are typically more likely to put themselves at risk. As one advocate working with human rights defenders notes: “It’s the nature of students—they’re youthful, they’re young, they’re full of energy—protection is the last thing that they want to talk about.”

Passionate about their causes, student activists may care more about achieving their goals than about the risks they take in doing so. Consequently, an important part of potential protection work for students is ensuring that they are able to analyze and assess their own risks and know where to reach out for help if they need it.

Four Mechanisms for Suppressing Dissent: Lawfare, Delegitimization, Co-option, and Factionalization

**THE GOAL OF THIS** report is to provide a better understanding of how student activism has been repressed historically as well as today. It suggests that repression is consistent regardless of how open a society is, although the relative importance of different means of repression may vary according to the context. In the most open and most closed societies alike, rules and regulations may play a significant role in repression—one that is more significant than, or at least as significant as, physical violence or deprivation of liberty (e.g. arrests, detentions, or forced disappearance). Consistently, across contexts, we found that governments, university administrations, and other members of society use four subtle strategies for repressing student dissent: (1) Lawfare, the use of law prohibiting public disturbance or terrorism to constrain student organizing; (2) Delegitimization, the use of rhetoric that labels student activists as “terrorists,” “hooligans,” “criminals,” “idiots,” or “perverts;” (3) Co-option, the establishing or empowering of government-controlled or -aligned student organizations or the incentivizing student support for government policies in ways that neutralize political opposition by students; and (4) Factionalization, the inflammation of broader political or social tensions within the student population. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can in fact work in tandem. For example, the use of inflammatory rhetoric aimed at specific groups of students (such as hatefully calling LGBTQIA+ students “perverts”) can escalate animosity towards them from other student groups.

This finding has important implications for understanding where and how students’ rights to free expression, assembly, and association are being restricted. While

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28 Interview conducted on November 22, 2022.
focusing on physical forms of repression is important for ensuring that activists’ lives are not at risk, paying attention to more subtle forms of repression is necessary for understanding where authoritarianism may be expanding, civic space shrinking, and student activists’ lives and wellbeing being put at risk. Because students are active civic participants and leaders in movements for social and political reform, student activism can be seen as the “canary in the coal mine.” Tracking the overt and subtle ways in which student activism is repressed can give us important insights into rising authoritarian impulses even in apparently open and democratic societies.

In order to paint a picture of how university student activism is both repressed in ways that are life-threatening and in coercive and subtle ways, this report draws on information from a number of sources: a database tracking acts of repression, interviews with human and students’ rights advocates, and a review of relevant academic and non-academic literature. It should be noted that this report is illustrative rather than exhaustive in its descriptions and explanations of repression. In addition, the report is just a first step in understanding the mechanisms of repression that are emphasized: lawfare, delegitimization, co-option, and factionalization. There is still more work to be done to nuance and operationalize them. SAIH plans to continue this work, throughout the present and following year, by conducting interviews with university student activists.

The remainder of this introduction proceeds as follows: We present a definition of student activism, a more detailed discussion of the protections available (or unavailable) for student activists, and an overview of the ways student activism is being repressed. We also present our methodology for collecting data on acts of student repression and a brief overview of our findings. Nine case studies are presented in the body of the report, selected with the aim to understand how repression may vary in places with different levels of academic freedom. We selected the following countries: Honduras, Ghana, Palestine, Morocco, Brazil, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.
WHAT IS STUDENT ACTIVISM?

[A student activist] is someone who tries to make visible what they are dealing with, what their friends are dealing with… through any medium: translations, shouting on the streets, digital activism … someone who tries to find other people to organize with. To hold others visible and accountable.¹

STUDENT ACTIVISM IS TYPICALLY characterized as “claim-making outside of formal decision structures” and is associated with “contentious politics and non-institutionalized forms of claim-making, such as protests, boycotts, and campaigns,” but can include “any collective political action to bring about social and political change.”² Student activism can include both one-off acts or events and long-term organized and strategic movements. It can be either nonviolent or violent.³ Indeed, student activism often starts off as nonviolent, but it can still turn violent eventually, often in the face of stalling tactics or repression.⁴ Accordingly, analysts studying student activism have often characterized student activists as either “idealists” or “rebels.”⁵ Student activism is often associated with protest movements,⁶ but can also take other forms, such as letter writing campaigns, acts of solidarity, boycotts of classes, or teach-ins. This report considers all these forms as student activism.

Another aspect is that student activists may either make education-related demands with the goal of changing university policies and structure or seek broader social and political change, such as government form or democratization. In fact, the latter may be more common.⁷ Importantly, these two are often connected since university structures typically reflect society

¹ Interview conducted with Turkish human rights activist, October 31, 2022
³ Klemenčič and Park (2018).
and are shaped by government policies. For example, in recent years in the United States, the broader Black Lives Matter Movement has found resonance on college campuses in students’ activism to highlight racism and lack of inclusion in the university. Likewise, the South African #RhodesMustFall movement, which began in 2015 and originally sought to remove a statue of British imperialist and former Cape Colony governor Cecil Rhodes, spurred a student movement aiming to decolonize education in the country. A former student activist from Honduras described in an interview how, during the 2010s, university governance in his country reflected the authoritarian nature of the government. When he and other students demanded university governance should be democratized through increasing student participation, these demands were seen as highly threatening to the status quo.

Student mobilization has therefore been deeply intertwined with movements for political, civil, and social rights. In many countries with a strong tradition of student activism, this activism is rooted in anti-colonial struggles. During the 1960s and 1970s, students across the Global South mobilized actively for independence and social and political reform as well as against bureaucratic control and the rigidity of university structures and politics. Globally, the year 1968, and, more broadly, “the long sixties”, was a period of significant student mobilization across much of the Global South and Global North.

Later, during the 1990s and 2000s, students studying at African and Latin American universities were at the forefront of agitation against structural adjustment policies and poverty and for democratization. Neoliberal reforms, shaped by principles of market reliance and consumer power, had a significant impact on higher education, leading to the commodification of educational services; privatization, including a significant increase in the number of private higher education institutions and a greater reliance on tuition fees; increasingly bureaucratic management, including greater competition and performance-based funding; marketization of curricula; and greater precarity for university staff. While these reforms expanded access to higher education, they also made it more expensive as government funding for education declined.

The resulting financial grievances have been a focal point for mobilization among university student activists. In the 2000s, student unrest was triggered in many places by the commercialization of higher education, increased tuition fees, and market competition among universities. The world has seen a “wave of student unrest … since 2008 to oppose these commodifying trends.” In many places across the globe these trends have coincided with increased political repression, authoritarianism, and economic downturns. Ironically, as several of the case studies in this report demonstrate, rising authoritarianism has in some places meant that privatization of higher education has gone

8 See, e.g. Conner (2020).
10 Interview with former Honduran activism, conducted November 11, 2022.
13 Klemenčič (2020).
16 For a detailed discussion of these reforms, see della Porta et al. (2020), pp. 10-12.
18 della Porta et al. (2020).
20 Hodgkinson (2020).
hand in hand with increased government interference in university governance, with Ministries of Education assuming more power to appoint university leadership.

One should bear in mind that student activism is distinct from other forms of student engagement such as formal student representation in university governance structures. In contrast to these “ordinary” forms of participation, student activism is “extraordinary” and often less institutionalized—although not always. For instance, student representatives who sit on university councils can either make activist or passive approaches towards pushing for educational, social, or political change. Similarly, student unions may either be vehicles for oppositional—as in the cases of Myanmar and Zimbabwe detailed in this report—or cooperative engagement with university and government authorities. The approach of student representatives, therefore, matters more than their specific role.

Universities are centers for development of knowledge, transmission of ideas, and critical debate. Progressive educators like John Dewey have long established that socialization is a core function of education. Educational institutions, particularly universities, are supposed to prepare students to become active participants in political and civic processes. The kind of politics that occur within the university space is an important vehicle for creating and disseminating knowledge. University spaces can serve as “testing grounds” for ideas and actions that can be used to change society.

For students, universities are above all spaces for learning, and the fact that learning happens both inside and outside of the classroom is often insufficiently recognized. Engaging in student activism is an important way for university students to learn, develop skills, and gain experience. Some argue that student activism, when it is nonviolent or focuses on volunteerism or service learning, is a form of civic education.

The university space also both facilitates and triggers activism. Students’ time at university is temporary, yet typically life-changing. This also often involves an important experience of independence. University students will often have the opportunity to self-reflect and engage with their peers and become increasingly engaged in society. The space of the university itself facilitates activism, particularly if students attend a residential institution or live near their campus. Indeed, “the very characteristics of university life are said to facilitate [the] intense networking” needed for effective mobilization.

For example, from the 1960s to 1980s in Myanmar, university students were the main source of opposition to the military dictatorship because of the way college campuses facilitated organizing.

At the same time, students—particularly those with marginalized and historically excluded identities—may experience oppression while at university. Historically, universities are elite institutions, designed to cater to the culturally and socioeconomically advantaged. Students with marginalized backgrounds may find themselves unsupported and unrepresented within their institutions, which might potentially force them into activist roles. Consequently, universities play a dual role when it comes to student activism in that they create both the space and the need for it.


Student activists ostensibly have access to protection mechanisms in their capacity as members of civil society, human rights defenders, and members of academic communities. In practice, however, none of these mechanisms provide comprehensive or targeted protection for student activists under threat.
Existing Civil Society Protections

The International Human Rights framework is a useful entry point for understanding how student activists ideally should be protected. Enshrined in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration for Human Rights (UDHR), the right to freedom of expression and opinion (Article 19) and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (Article 20) are key to student participation and activism flourishing in social and political processes. These rights are also protected by the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is a binding document, and signatories to the covenant have a responsibility to uphold these rights for all. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by consensus by the General Assembly, is another instrument that warrants protection to human rights defenders in general, and accordingly, students acting as human rights defenders and engaging in peaceful protest should be protected. There are also regional and national human rights frameworks that protect these rights. On that account, human rights organizations and UN frameworks, such as UN treaty bodies, Special Procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review do address repression of student activism when relevant under the wider umbrella of their work.

This means that student activists have access to protections offered by a variety of international, regional, and national groups. This includes emergency assistance to human rights defenders and civil society activists in the form of financial grants, relocation, medical and psychosocial support, legal representation, and secure transportation. Various international and national NGOs also provide trainings on physical and digital security to human rights defenders and civil society activists, they connect activists to each other, and they engage in advocacy for supporting activists’ work. There is also a wide variety of online resources for human rights and protection training.

Existing Protections for Academic Freedom

Human Rights Mechanisms also lay out strong protections for members of academic communities to engage in activism, including the freedom to freely express beliefs and debate ideas. For instance, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) defines academic freedom as including “the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfill their functions without discrimination or fear of repressions by the State or any other actor.” In addition, academic freedom is closely related to and an important component of democratic participation and a free and open civil society. Acts that restrict or repress academic freedom in general and student activism in particular are often also acts that violate freedom of association, peaceful assembly, or expression.

Several organizations support members of the academic community who are at risk by tracking repression. Some national groups that engage with students include the Sexual Rights Center and GALZ in Zimbabwe, Uniküir in Turkey, and Colors Rainbow in Myanmar. Additionally, groups like the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund provide emergency assistance to human rights defenders and civil society activists in the form of financial grants, relocation, medical and psychosocial support, legal representation, and secure transportation. Various international and national NGOs also provide trainings on physical and digital security to human rights defenders and civil society activists, they connect activists to each other, and they engage in advocacy for supporting activists’ work. There is also a wide variety of online resources for human rights and protection training.
sion and providing support for relocation and resettlement. For example, the Scholars at Risk Network’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project extensively tracks cases where student protests are violently suppressed and students detained, arrested, or expelled. Likewise, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) monitors and reports on attacks targeting university personnel, students, and infrastructure, focusing its reporting on contexts of armed conflict.

There are also small programs that focus on providing support to students at risk. For example, a few European countries have programs for providing scholarships to persecuted or at-risk students or those being denied education in their countries of origin. These include Norway’s Students at Risk program, initiated by the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH), the National Union of Students in Norway (NSO), funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and administered by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills; Germany’s Hilde Domin Programme, administered by the German Academic Exchange Service; and Poland’s effort to support students, scientists and teachers from Belarus. The European Student Union (ESU) has also proposed a similar program. Other European countries have also expressed interest in developing scholarship programs for at-risk students. Similarly, the Union of Exiled Students supports students living in France who are unable to return to their country of origin and wish to resume their studies, by providing them with resources and training and engaging in advocacy.

**Protections Under the Right to Education**

**FINALLY, STUDENTS’ RIGHTS TO** engage in activism can also be construed as protected by the right to education, as guaranteed in a variety of human rights documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While the right to higher education has received significantly less attention than the right to primary and secondary education, there have been recent efforts to remedy this. For instance, the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 focuses on lifelong learning.

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10 See Students at Risk’s website: https://www.studentsatrisk.no/about.
14 Email communications with students’ rights advocate, February 2023.
15 See the Union of Exiled Student’s website: https://uniondesetudiantsexiles.org/en/about-us.
Limitations of the Human Rights Frameworks

DESPITE THESE EFFORTS, THE human rights framework, including its protections for human rights defenders and civil society activists, academic freedom, and the right to education, is limited as a means for protecting student activists in a number of ways. First, the frameworks broadly focused on human rights and civic engagement do not typically have an explicit focus on students, meaning that student activists can easily be excluded or ignored. Still, the vague and under-specified nature of the Declaration gives relevant civil society activists an opportunity to contextualize, frame, and advocate for at-risk groups, such as student activists.

Second, the extent to which students have a right to academic freedom is ambiguous. Often, the concept of academic freedom is operationalized narrowly, confined to the freedom of expression and focused on the work of scholars and researchers—not on students. Several scholars argue that while students do have rights to freedom of expression and assembly, they do not have specific rights to academic freedom. This is perhaps one reason why the current measures of academic freedom do not directly take students into account. For instance, the Academic Freedom Index (AFi) uses five indicators to measure academic freedom: institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression, and legal commitments to academic freedom. These are closely related to the space for student activism on campus, but they do not directly measure students’ academic freedom.

Similarly, the largest projects aimed at protecting members of the academic community focus on the protection of academics. For example, Scholars at Risk (SAR) provides relocation assistance to at-risk academics by facilitating temporary positions at alternative academic institutions, as well as providing them with advice. Other organizations, like the Institute of International Education’s Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) and the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), provide similar support to academics. However, while these groups define “academics” more or less broadly—for example by including lecturers—they do not include students in their protection work. There are good reasons for this, such as capacity, resources (there are many more students than academics), and the impetus to protect those who do research and teaching. The fact remains, however, that students are not included.

Still, others contend that students academic freedom is about learning. But as mentioned, the fact that activism is an important learning experience often goes unrecognized in practice. For example, SDG Goal 4 recognizes the importance of “education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship…” but does not specifically address activism or civic engagement. Likewise, a recent paper by UNESCO that presents a framework for the right to higher education assumes that educa-

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21 The AFi is a collaborative initiative that was launched in 2019 between researchers at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), the V-Dem Institute, the Scholars at Risk Network, and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi). See V-Dem, Academic Freedom: https://www.v-dem.net/our-work/research-programs/academic-freedom/.
tion leads to civic engagement but does not view civic engagement itself as a form of education.  

More often, students’ learning via activism is invalidated. Students are more likely to be imagined as violating others’ right to freedom of expression, even though “it is difficult to identify more than a handful of instances when recent student protests have substantially violated the rights and freedoms of anyone, including faculty members and other students.” For instance, a “Free Speech” Bill, discussed in more detail in the UK case study, currently under debate in the British House of Lords, has been justified as protecting the free speech of university speakers, including in the face of student protests. This entails that, for example, when students strike, it is easy to spin student activism as disrupting learning. In this instance, student activism is construed as a barrier to learning rather than a vehicle for it.

To some extent, an understanding of students as “highly emotional rebels” is grounded in the student movements of the 1960s, when student protests led to street clashes with police.

Third, there is a related question concerning what constitutes “legitimate” activism that is deserving of protection. In particular, the stipulation that human rights defenders are only deserving of protection when they are nonviolent leaves little room for nuance. For instance, do student activists forgo their right to protection even when the repression is disproportionate to the violence that they engage in (e.g., when student activists are met with live ammunition or rubber bullets for throwing stones)?

Lastly, the human rights mechanisms are better designed for focusing on physical repression than on subtle forms of repression highlighted in this report. For example, the types of repression that groups like GCPEA and SAR track related to student activism, as described above, include primarily physical violence and denials of liberty. This is a bias in repression research in general. Likewise, UN treaty bodies also highlight physical instances of repression. This is partly because physical repression is more tangible and easier to measure and describe. Notably, states are often the parties responsible for these forms of repression. Yet, research has shown that “when seen as wholly about state violence, repression is easy to identify but woefully under-inclusive.” In other words, physical repression is only one mechanism through which activism is undermined.

University student activists are at significant risk of repression because they are so actively involved in civil society and movements pushing for higher education reform. While the existing human rights framework provides protections for them in theory, it is insufficient in practice.

29 See, e.g. della Porta et al. (2020), pp. 16-17.
30 See also, Millora and Karunungan (2021).
ACTIVISM UNDER ATTACK — METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

THIS EXPLORATORY AND ILLUSTRATIVE report is the first step in an ongoing research project aimed at informing the development of indicators to monitor and document students’ rights violations, especially those student activists face. This initial report draws on several sources of information: qualitative and semi-structured interviews, an events database constructed by a small team of researchers, and a review of academic and non-academic literature on student activism. This report will be followed by a second report that draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with student activists to understand the complex forms of oppression they experience.

Interviews

IN TOTAL, THE AUTHOR of this report conducted 18 interviews with individuals working for organizations that do advocacy, research, or protection work related to human rights in general, academic freedom specifically, or higher education. Seven of these interviews were with individuals working for organizations based in the Global North and with a global focus for their work. The author reached out to nineteen organizations in total, identified through the networks of the author and SAIH. Among those the author reached out to, two responded that they did not focus on university students, one initially responded that they did not do relevant work but later identified a staff member to be interviewed, two agreed to off-the-record conversations—which informed the conceptualization of the research but were not used as data—and the remaining organizations never responded.

In addition, the author conducted 12 interviews with individuals with country-specific expertise. This primarily included staff members of national NGOs working with students in their own countries. Outreach for these interviews was conducted primarily among SAIH’s partners and was limited by language capacities—the author conducted interviews solely in English. We eventually interviewed six persons with expertise on Zimbabwe and individual persons who worked respectively in France, Honduras, Myanmar, Syria, Turkey, the United States, and Zambia. These interviews were complemented by informal and off-the-record conversations with three university student activists who had left their countries because of the risks they faced there. These conversations were not used as data but informed the conceptualization of this report.

All interviews consisted of three parts. In the first, we explored to which extent each individual’s organization focuses on student activism or tracked the repression of student activism. In the second, we asked which kind of protections each organization offers to student activists. In the third, each interviewee was asked to characterize and define student activism and repression of student activism.

1 One of these individuals was able to speak to two students’ experiences in two different countries.
Database of Repressive Events

THE SECOND SOURCE OF information for this report is data that tracks events that repress student activism. To collect this data, the author worked with three research assistants. Events were identified by use of data from the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project and Scholars at Risk’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, complemented by English-language google media searches and twitter searches. We sought to determine which key terms, hashtags, and twitter accounts that would yield the best information for each country, which we documented for future use.

In total, we identified 326 events that occurred in 17 countries during a 22-month period from January 2021 to October 2022. We researched an additional 4 countries in which we identified no events. The full list of events is available online. It should be noted that this research is selective and illustrative rather than wholly representative of global repression against student activists. The shortcomings of events-based analysis of repression are described in more detail below. However, not all events of repression appear in the media, and students do not always report repression. It should also be noted that these events took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the manner of teaching, learning, and activism on university campuses, including the increased risk of surveillance in online classrooms. It is possible this resulted in fewer events of physical repression than might have been seen if gatherings were not so restricted.

In an attempt to understand how acts of repression vary across contexts, we selected countries to include in our database by drawing on V-Dem’s AFi. Countries were selected to account for varying levels of academic freedom and geographic diversity. As mentioned, the AFi does not specifically focus on student freedoms, so we sought to understand whether the events we were able to track reflected the way a country was rated on the AFi. The index ranks countries in five categories (A-E), with “A” countries rated as having the highest levels of academic freedom and “E” countries as those with the lowest levels of academic freedom. We then narrowed this list down to the nine country case studies included in this report. Chart 1 shows the countries we researched according to their ranking on the AFi. Case study countries are shown in bold text.

We coded each event thematically in order to help us understand what issues students were organizing around, the techniques of activism that students employed, the form(s) of repression or suppression the students faced (some events included multiple forms), and the perpetrator responsible for the act of repression or suppression. Our codebook is available online.

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2 See ACLED's website: https://acleddata.com/.
3 See SAR’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/academic-freedom-monitoring-project-index/.
Literature Review

**FINALLY, THIS REPORT DRAWS** on a non-systematic review of academic and non-academic literature on student activism, academic freedom, social movements, and repression. Publications were identified using Google and Google Scholar Academic, using search terms such as “university students AND academic freedom,” “university student activism (+ [country name]),” “repression of university student activism (+ [country name]),” “higher education system + [country name],” “university autonomy + [country name],” “academic freedom + [country name],” “suppression of university student activism (+ [country name]),” “shrinking civic space,” “authoritarianism,” and “authoritarianism AND student activism.” Through this literature review, we sought to understand and contextualize the relationship between physical repression and more subtle forms of suppression in general and in the countries we profile as case studies.

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5 Countries were categorized using V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for the year 2021: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/
[The repression of student activism] is either denying or plotting against one’s ability to voice or to be heard, or one’s capacity to have agency around an issue that they think is real. Suppression also means great fear and intimidation — to the level that you let go of something worthwhile and compromise for the sake of simplicity and life … Suppression is incapacitating someone to act on something that is a pressing need that is bound to change the status quo and benefit a wider spectrum of people.¹

AS THIS QUOTE ILLUSTRATES, repression occurs in ways that are both physical and overt or subtle and coercive. Our research illustrates these diverse means of repression, showing, first, how physical repression is just the tip of the iceberg, and second, that repression occurs everywhere, across both open and closed societies. This section presents some of the conclusions we were able to draw from our exploratory research.

Initially, we found a significant discrepancy between the data we managed to collect while constructing our database and what our interviews and literature review revealed. The database is heavily biased towards violent repression and the deprivation of liberty. However, while our interviews revealed that these are significant forms of repression, repression can also be less tangible in reality.

Among the 326 events in our database, the most common forms of repression we identified were the deprivation of liberty, such as the arrest, detention, and imprisonment of student activists (used in 58 percent of the cases), which include arrests and detention and the associated charges, sentences, and penalties, and physical violence (used in 53 percent of the cases), including tear gas, pepper spray, live ammunition or rubber bullets, batons, or beatings used by state or private security forces when breaking up student protests, sit-ins, strikes, or other public gatherings, even when these protests and gatherings were peaceful.

¹ Interview with member of a Zimbabwean human rights organization, conducted September 29, 2022.
It is important to note that these most visible forms of repression are overwhelmingly perpetrated by state security forces, including the police and military. While other actors may also use physical violence to quell student activism — the cases of Palestine or Morocco are examples of how violence between student groups can be a significant threat to activism — these instances are dwarfed by the frequency of state violence, which is significantly more public and easier to track. 2

In contrast, our interviews revealed a different picture, highlighting that surveillance and threats are common means used to suppress activism. For instance, a former Zimbabwean student activist described how he was told by his lecturers that the university administration and government were aware of his activities and that he should “be careful.” 3 Another human rights advocate described how heavy police presence could function as a threat. 4 This is notable given that threats are underrepresented in the database, reported in only eight of the 326 events we tracked.

One reason for this discrepancy is that threats are likely under-reported. On one hand, the media is more likely to report events that are vivid and devastating. On the other hand, where threats regularly occur, student activists may not report them for a number of reasons. First, students may not know where or how to report the threats they experience. UN mechanisms in particular are highly bureaucratic and complicated. Student activists under threat may not have the energy to figure out these mechanisms and may not have connections or personal relationships that can help connect them to the existing mechanisms. 5 Second, activists may become numb to the threats that they receive, viewing them as unremarkable and not worth reporting. In contexts where life-threatening violence regularly occurs, activists may also view threats or surveillance as insignificant in comparison. Third, students need to trust the


3 Interview with Zimbabwean students and human rights advocate, January 5, 2023.

4 Interview with human rights advocate, November 22, 2022.

5 Personal communication with human rights advocate, February 3, 2023.
people they report to. Several interviewees described how challenging it is to get information from students they do not have a pre-existing relationship with. By contrast, one human rights advocate observed how reciprocal relationships facilitate trust. For example, he noted that providing support to students, such as a bus fare for a student released on bail to check in at a police station, facilitates communication: “They will tell you stories and things that they thought they could not tell anyone: all the intimidation, the phone calls, the messages that they are receiving. Because you’ve built a conduit of trust.”

Our research, therefore, underscores how events-based reporting can have the “paradoxical effect” of making “the most repressive environments appear comparatively benign.” In other words, in the most repressive contexts there may be little space for public activism, which also means there is less room for activists to face visible violence or to be publicly arrested.

While it may outwardly appear that few repressive events are occurring, this does not mean that activism is not being repressed. Chart 2 below illustrates this point. It compares how the number of events we managed to identify in each country relates to the degree of academic freedom as rated on the AFI.

**The chart is both** intuitive and counterintuitive. As one might expect, the places with a lower degree of academic freedom, such as Myanmar and Turkey, are also the places where we identified the most widespread events of repression against student activists. However, in other places ranked low on the AFI, such as Belarus, Nicaragua, or Eswatini, we found very few reported cases of activism. The case of Palestine underscores the discrepancy between AFI and the repressive events we identified. On the West Bank, which AFI rated as the more “free” part of Palestine, we identified 25 repressive

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6 Interview with Zimbabwean students and human rights advocate, January 5, 2023.
8 The Varieties of Democracy Project calculates country-specific scores for overall levels of democracy, and also includes indexes for specific characteristics of democracy, including participatory democracy, electoral democracy, liberal democracy, deliberative democracy, and egalitarian democracy. We have chosen to explore the participatory democracy index because it incorporates measures of civil society participation. For more information on the V-Dem indexes, see the project’s reference materials: https://v-dem.net/data/reference-documents/.
events, compared to just one in Gaza, typically considered less “free.” We conducted the same analysis with V-Dem’s Participatory Democracy index (PDI) (not pictured) in order to compare repressive events with a measure of civic space. The findings were very similar to what we found when connecting the analysis for the AFI. This is unsurprising given that there is a correlation between the PDI and AFI.

Likewise, events-based reporting does not reveal the extent to which repression takes place even in democratic and open societies. Again, as one might expect, in the contexts with greater academic freedom as measured by the AFI, like in Israel, Honduras, or the United Kingdom, it was relatively challenging to identify discrete events of political violence or arrests of student activists. However, this does not necessarily mean that repression is not occurring in these places. Indeed, our case studies illustrate how consistent repression is across both open and closed contexts. In all contexts, policies and institutional norms play a significant role in repression. Moreover, in the most closed spaces repression may either be overt and violent, where activists are willing to take risks, or it may take more covert forms like self-censorship or veiled threats.

Unpacking Lawfare, Delegitimization, Co-option, and Factionalization

THROUGH OUR CASE STUDIES we identified four means of repressing student activism that are pervasive across both closed and open societies. While there is more work to be done to fully conceptualize these mechanisms and their impact on student activism, this report presents an initial framework.

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<th>MECHANISM OF REPRESSION</th>
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Lawfare

The first mechanism we highlight is “lawfare.” This includes criminalization of students engaging in student activism or restrictions placed on student activists, such as travel bans. Our case studies in Honduras, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe provide good examples. In each of these contexts, students were arrested and detained for acts the government categorized for example as disturbing the public order or terrorism. In one case—Honduras—student activists were charged with abduction when they went on strike and barred access to an academic building, accused of kidnapping those inside the building.9

Such lawfare can be facilitated by the often close relationship between public universities and national governments. Universities reproduce the broader social and political structures of the society in which they are embedded.10 In many authoritarian contexts, university administrations are intertwined with the ruling political system, with university leadership being either directly appointed by the state or having close ties to it.11 One such example is Zimbabwe, where the president is the chancellor of all state universities. Likewise, over the past couple of years, Turkish student activists have sought to prevent increasing state encroachment into university administration.

Delegitimization

The second mechanism involves authorities from across the spectrum seeking to neutralize student dissent by delegitimizing student activists. The cases of Brazil, Honduras, Turkey, and Zimbabwe provide examples of this. In Brazil, former president Jair Bolsonaro called student activists “useful idiots.”17 In both Brazil and Turkey, student activists have been linked to movements for LGBTQIA+ rights, with authorities
taking advantage of misogyny and patriarchy to mobilize harassment, hatred, and violence. In Zimbabwe, student activism is often linked to anti-Western sentiment that views the fight for human rights as part of a neo-imperialist agenda. This delegitimization of student activists is therefore closely linked to the growth of right-wing populism and the spread of misinformation.

**Co-option**

**THE THIRD MEANS FOR** repressing student activism that we consistently identified was the co-option of students and neutralization of dissent. Students are encouraged to do politics the “right” way, with activism channeled into institutional forms.\(^\text{18}\) The cases of Honduras, Ghana, Morocco and the UK provide illustrations of this. In these contexts, government and university authorities are able to pacify students by engaging them in political or university processes. In Ghana, which ranks as a relatively open society, for example, youth wings of political parties play an important role in campus life, and politicians seek to exert control over student politics by ensuring that their own members gain authority and by incentivizing student leaders to support their policies.\(^\text{19}\) The case of the UK illustrates how these pressures neutralize student activism. For instance, some UK universities have invested in upgrading student union facilities, an act that some view as a way to appease students angry about tuition fees.\(^\text{20}\) University managers have also developed closer relationships with student unions to improve student life and the student experience, leading student unions to “foreground their representative function, often at the expense of campaigning activities.”\(^\text{21}\)

**Factionalization**

**FINALLY, OUR RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS** the negative impact of factionalization on student organizing. Universities often function as mirror images for what is happening in the wider society and reproduce existing social and political divisions.\(^\text{22}\) Such factionalization can intimidate potential activists and funnel student engagement into violent clashes among student groups rather than into more peaceful activism. For instance, the case of Morocco illustrates the occurrence of clashes among student groups with different social and cultural affiliations. Likewise, while not a case study, a more striking example is India, where student unions reflect communalism and polarized politics. As such, student unions have been highly politicized, and student activism is characterized by “frequent student union clashes, boycott of classes, strikes, roadblocks, manipulation of


voters, display of muscle power, disruption of academics and violence.” In particular, rising right-wing extremism has found significant expression in Indian student politics through the rise of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP, All India Student Council), and ABVP-affiliated students often perpetrate violence against other students (and faculty), particularly those from marginalized groups. As the case of Palestine illustrates, factionalization can also make it more challenging for a unified movement to come together and achieve goals that would benefit all students—like freezing tuition rates.

By pointing to these four mechanisms of repression, our research illustrates the ways in which the suppression of student activism is representative of an increasing infringement on civic space across the globe. As this introduction has shown, university students are important and often leading actors in the fight for human rights, social justice, and political change. A better understanding of the ways in which their activism is suppressed can in turn help us to better understand the global threats to civil society. This report provides a first step in this direction. On the following pages we present nine case studies, presented from highest to lowest AFI score. All case studies have been reviewed by at least one academic with expertise on student movements within the country. Most cases have also been reviewed by a student activist or student rights advocate from the same country. For each case study we present—in broad brush strokes—how student activism has evolved in each country and highlight the primary mechanisms through which activism has been repressed.


Repressing Student Activism Beyond Borders: The Case of China

While this report primarily focuses on the repression of student activism within national borders, it is important to recognize that such repression can have global reach. Chinese university students studying abroad have faced such pressures for years.

According to research by Human Rights Watch, the Chinese government is carrying out an extensive surveillance operation on Chinese students and academics abroad as well as on researchers studying in China. Students from China studying in other countries are afraid to speak up in class for fear of the Chinese government finding out what they have said. In some cases, students have reported threats to their families in relation to things they have said in class.27 Chinese students have also been required to sign letters swearing loyalty to the Chinese government before studying abroad. For instance, an investigation by the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter found that at least 30 Chinese doctoral students studying in Sweden had to commit to “[serving] the interests of the [Chinese] regime” and “never [participating] in ‘activities’ that go against the will of the authorities.” The letters also stated that the students’ families could end up in financial debt to the Chinese government if the students did not abide by their pledges. The letters also stated that the students’ guarantors could not leave China while the students remained abroad.28 In another example, a graduate student studying for a professional degree in the U.S. reported intimidation from a Chinese government official in the same program. The official threatened the student by saying they would tell the government that they had said demeaning things about it.29 According to a former university student, the extensive surveillance in effect means that studying abroad is not any freer than studying in China.30

29 Interview with Sophie Richardson, China Director, Human Rights Watch, conducted on October 28, 2022.
30 Interview with Sophie Richardson, China Director, Human Rights Watch, conducted on October 28, 2022.
Thousands of students from the Movimiento Estudiantil Universitario (MEU) in Honduras protested throughout July in the streets of Tegucigalpa. These were some of the biggest mobilizations seen since 2009 and ended with the adoption of the country’s first ever citizen bill, which ordered the National Autonomous University authorities to reinstate a student democracy and stopped their re-election. The sign in the picture reads “Revolution is not violence, it is mobilization of conscience”. (Photo by Betsabe Szentannay)
HONDURAS IS RATED AS having a high level of academic freedom. Nevertheless, the space for student activism and student participation in university governance has been increasingly under siege since the 1980s. Repression of student activism has been both overt, materializing in the criminalization of student activists, and subtle, with student activists delegitimized and students co-opted by ruling political parties. The year 2018 saw students win some of their demands for participation in university governance, and 2022 ushered in a democratic government. However, the end of 2022 saw student protests again escalate as university elections were postponed. With the Honduran government putting into effect a state of emergency with the stated goal of addressing high levels of crime and violence, student activism risks further suppression.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Honduras: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
2 The 1980s, which saw a massive increase poverty in Latin America, is called the “lost decade.” It is also the decade when Latin American governments, including Honduras, adopted the US “national security doctrine,” which involved low intensity warfare in a fight against the “war on drugs.” Among the people they targeted were those marginalized by poverty who were demanding social justice. See: Williams, G., & Disney, J. (2015). Militarism and Its Discontent, Resistance in Twenty-First-Century US—Latin American Relations. Social Justice, 41(3 (1371)), 1–28.
A Brief History of Student Activism & University Autonomy in Honduras

THE HISTORY OF STUDENT activism in Honduras centers around the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), the country’s main university and an important social actor.¹ To illustrate the UNAH’s importance, the Council of Higher Education, which regulates higher education, has twelve members: six UNAH representatives, three representatives from other state institutions, and three representatives from private institutions. It is also chaired by the rector of UNAH.²

Moreover, student activism is deeply intertwined with UNAH’s autonomy,³ and it is difficult to talk about one without the other. While the University Student Federation of Honduras (FEUH) was established in 1925, students did not organize for systemic change until the mid-1900s. At the time, the 1944 revolution in neighboring Guatemala—in which students played a leading role—led to a democratic government and progressive reforms that inspired Honduran students to push for more progressive political, social, and economic structures in their own society. Among the reforms students demanded was more democratic and autonomous university governance. In 1954, a series of protests that university students engaged in, alongside school students and campesinos, led to a series of constitutional reforms. Among these, Article 160 of the constitution granted UNAH full autonomy and co-governance, with students holding fifty percent of governing authority.⁴

However, shared governance started to weaken in the 1980s when the Honduran Supreme Court annulled the results of a vote re-electing Juan Almendares as UNAH’s rector and required new elections to be held without Almendares’ participation. Almendares had been highly critical of the United States’ military presence in Honduras,⁵ and the Supreme Court’s decision was a violation of UNAH’s autonomy. Since then, shared governance has been eroded. In 2004, students’ share of university governance was reduced to 33 percent, with the professors and university administration each holding an additional third.⁶ Today, UNAH is governed by the University Council, which is composed of one-third students, faculty, and administration each and the executive board of top administrators, including the rector, to which members are supposed to be elected by the University Council.⁷

The 2009 military coup in Honduras further weakened university autonomy, resulting in an authoritarian environment that paralleled the authoritarian political regime.⁸ Reforms to the education system following the coup continued to weaken student participation in university governance. For instance, in 2012–2013, the National

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¹ Interview with Héctor Ulloa, November 11, 2022. In total, there are six public universities and 14 private universities in Honduras.
⁶ Fúnez-Flores (2020).
⁷ Contracorriente (2022, December 12). El Boletín, No. 84.
⁸ Fúnez-Flores (2020).
Congress passed a modification of the organic law regulating universities that gave the university administration the authority to choose student representatives.9

However, UNAH students really started to mobilize after new academic regulations were passed that raised the requirements for academic performance, resulting in more than 10,000 students being expelled or denied permission to enroll.10 Héctor Ulloa, a former student of Law and Economics at UNAH, vice-president of the Law Students’ Association of UNAH, founder of the Progressive University Movement (PRO), and currently the President of SAIH, describes students’ response to these changes:

It was very harsh on students. For example, if you failed a class, I think three times, then you were expelled from the university. You’re talking about expelling a student in a country with high inequality and where you only have one public university, you’re basically saying, you don’t have access to higher education. And there were a lot of other rules like this as well. If your average was very low, then you would have restricted access to how many classes you could take every semester. So, when these rules start being applied, that’s when the student movement starts. Because then all these students are losing their right to education.11

IN THIS CONTEXT, UNAH students organized the University Student Movement (MEU), an umbrella association of the many student associations within the different departments, colleges, and campuses at UNAH. The MEU’s demands quickly evolved from focusing on the new academic regulations to university governance. Héctor Ulloa describes this evolution, highlighting how the MEU’s goals shifted to focus on democratic norms deeply linked to the authoritarian political context:

The problem is [the new academic regulations] were voted in a place where [the students] are supposed to have 33 percent of the vote. But we don’t have [this voice]. And then the whole discourse changes. And we say, we want to stop the academic regulations. That’s an immediate demand. But our ultimate demand is that we need to have student democracy. And after that, we will discuss the academic regulations with the university. So, if you look at this, it is an undemocratic context that is in line with the country on democratic practices. But it is an academic and internal democracy kind of fight that we started.

TO ACHIEVE THEIR DEMANDS, UNAH students engaged in activism that was at the same time intellectual, constitutive, and strategic. On the one hand, student activists organized research teams to analyze the reforms that were implemented after the 2009 coup, the constitution, and the ways in which student co-governance had been
co-opted by political authorities. They published articles, and their analysis informed their strategic demands.12

On a constitutive level, UNAH students used their activism to substantively create the mode of democratic participation that they wanted to see enacted within the university governance structures. Student associations held regular assemblies outside, usually in the small plazas in front of their colleges. There, they held public discussions relating to a range of educational issues—university infrastructure, student elections, the curriculum, pedagogical practices, corruption within the administration—as well as the wider political and social context. The MEU would also hold general assemblies in UNAH’s main plaza in the capital. Ulloa describes how these assemblies worked:

What happened was that we established this flat structure. It was just called the University Student Movement. Every degree had one vote [in an MEU decision]. And for you to have that vote, you needed to have the backing of the students in your degree. And you only got it if you had a public assembly and it was ratified in that public assembly: ‘yeah, you can represent us there.’ So, every decision, we would take it back to that public assembly. And we would call, let’s say, we need to decide if we’re continuing on strike. Tomorrow at 8am, law school students, you need to be in the plaza, and we’ll make a decision.

**MOREOVER, STUDENT ACTIVISM WAS** strategic and disruptive. They regularly blocked and occupied the main boulevard in front of UNAH and went on strike, shutting down UNAH campuses, including for an entire semester during 2016.13 Ulloa describes this period:

So at first, we drafted legal requests to the University Council, saying these are our rights—it was law students that led this—this is a formal request. According to the law, you have 72 hours to reply. We waited for a reply, and all these things were never answered. After we finished with all of those requests, we shared [that information] with all the representatives [of the different colleges and degrees. We wanted to] show people that we are taking the legal route first. And then when that didn’t work, we said to everyone, ‘okay, there’s nothing we can do. We tried everything. The next step is shutting this place down. And that means no academic activities will happen until we have an answer from the university authorities.’ And then what happened was a strike. We took control of the campuses; teachers were not allowed to give classes. We shut down the gates … we would just pile chairs and desks and stuff and make sure that no one could enter. And you had people literally living in these buildings. So, you would take turns and people will be going there and sleeping and doing shifts. And then someone else would come in the morning. We would be taking food for these people. We had a system where people would check that everyone had water, food, and what they needed. We had a security team

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12 Fúnez-Flores (2020).

as well that will be in charge of checking—it’s a big campus—that no thieves or other people were getting in and exploiting the situation. So basically, for those three months, students were responsible for the campus. And I think it was pretty interesting because some of these degrees organized themselves with having workshops by themselves. They would advertise, ‘okay, next Monday, we’ll have a full day workshop on solidarity, yeah.’ And students would go there to receive that workshop … like we’re having our academic activity. But also in other places, you would just have students with TVs and playing video games all day. And then you had people that were actually part of the leadership—the representatives—we would have twelve-hour long meetings to discuss where are we going, what is the next step. So, it was a lot of activity happening on the campus. But no academic activity. We would not let teachers give classes because that was the strike. 14

ULLOA POINTS OUT THAT not all students agreed with the strike. However, the MEU had substantial support.

The strike eventually ended in negotiations with the university administration. Among the main demands raised by the students were an end to the criminalization of social protest and the immediate resignation of the rector Julieta Castellanos, under whom the students believed there would be no progress in democratizing UNAH. 15 The MEU’s Political Committee, a body organized to represent UNAH students in negotiations with the university administration, signed an agreement with the administration. The agreement suspended the academic regulations that had instigated the wave of student activism until they could be revised by a university council that included democratically elected student representatives. The agreement also said that students would participate in a negotiation process to agree on a new electoral framework. However, as Ulloa describes, this negotiation process essentially stalled: “There [were] student groups that entered the negotiation table that [were] allies with the university. And they’re always saying no.” 16

Following the failed negotiations, university students continued to push for democratization, including by occupying administrative buildings and engaging in hunger strikes, leading to confrontations with private security companies and national police, resulting in violence and arrests. 17 The MEU eventually decided to approach congress with a bill that would result in student elections. In 2017, around 9,000–10,000 students marched from the UNAH campus to congress. Their bill was initially rejected but taken up by congress after MEU engaged in additional direct actions, including road closures and a four-month strike (but with less participation than the first). In 2017, Congress voted in favor of a bill allowing student elections. 18

Nevertheless, the elections that were supposed to take place were postponed because of COVID-19, eventually taking place in April 2022. 19 Recently, at the end of 2022, student demonstrations have resumed over the
Repression of Honduran Student Activism: Lawfare, Co-option, and Delegitimization

**HONDURAS’ STUDENT MOVEMENT HAS** been less active in recent years. Factors that may have contributed to this decline include: the graduation of student leaders, a perception that the political agenda is less “urgent” because students now have formal representation in the University Council, a shift to a democratic government in 2021, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is likely one reason that we identified no discrete cases of repression. However, with limited progress in student’s demands since 2018 and the new state of emergency put into effect in December 2022, the student movement again faces risks of repression. The state of emergency, which targets specific areas of the country, suspends freedom of movement and the right of association and assembly in the places where it applies. This makes it worth reviewing the forms of repression that student activists have faced in the past. This includes various forms—legal, discursive, institutional, and physical—not all of which are easily quantifiable or visible.

Intimidation and threats are perhaps the most significant form of attack that student activists face in Honduras. In particular, the police have reportedly infiltrated the student movement, and followed, spied on, and taken pictures of student leaders and sent threatening messages. The government and university administration have also used inflammatory rhetoric in the media in an attempt to turn the public against student activists, justify their criminalization, intensify pressure on them, and discredit them. An official narrative distinguishes between “model” students, who work within institutional channels, and other “lazy” students who are “vandals” and “terrorists” and create a risky educational environment. Media stations also use this rhetoric. Ulloa describes an instance when UNAH’s rector posted pictures of himself and other student leaders in the newspapers, calling them responsible for shutting roads in Tegucigalpa and estimating the economic losses. Ulloa explains: “It was throwing you out there and saying, ‘if someone attacks you, it’s not my fault. I’m not doing it.’ But she’s basically calling on public opinion to just … I don’t know … it’s a very violent country.”

This rhetoric is effective in intimidating student activists. According to Ulloa, he and other student activists received threats, including death threats, from fake Facebook profiles and threatening phone calls. At other times, he was explicitly threatened with physical violence. Ulloa describes an incident that occurred when he was going to be interviewed on a TV station: “This motorbike came by. I was late that day … because I wanted to eat first. A motorbike with masked men came by and saw the TV host waiting outside. And they just showed

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20 Contracorriente (2022, December 12).
21 WOLA (2022).
24 CLADE and SAIH (2020).
25 Interview with Héctor Ulloa, November 11, 2022.
him a gun and said ‘death to the student movement.’ Another time, a private security company was policing an on-campus protest when they “grabbed some students.” Ulloa explains. “There was this one student they placed into a car … he’s crying and they’re telling him to shut up. And then when they’re exiting the university, apparently, they ask him his name and they realize it wasn’t me. They were asking for me. And they threw him out. He comes back crying, ‘this just happened. I need to speak with Hector.’”

Delegitimizing rhetoric and intimidation are closely linked to the criminalization of student activists. Ulloa describes how students participating in MEU’s strikes were persecuted, with what seemed like indiscriminate arrests of students:

“When the movement [started] growing, there [was] a lot of criminalization. It was the rector [Julieta Castellanos] of the university presenting criminal charges against students striking … because we closed the campus … It is very clear that the police and the justice system [was] working with the rector in the university. There [was] clear collaboration to stop the student movement. I would suppose the pitch from her was like, ‘if this gets out of control, this will get outside of the university. So, I need your help in criminalizing students and making sure we can control this inside the university before it becomes a bigger issue [for the government].’”

STUDENT ACTIVISTS WERE CHARGED with a variety of crimes, including sedition, kidnapping (for barring access to buildings with people inside), arson, and theft. For example, on May 25, 2017, students took over a UNAH administration building with the goal of pressuring the university administration. Police arrested 20 people (including a journalist), charging them with damaging UNAH facilities. Students arrested and accused of crimes had their right to due process denied and have been intimidated in the process. For example, the Public Prosecutor’s Office assigned prosecutors linked to death squads to the cases of some student activists, with the apparent intention of intimidating the students and their witnesses.

In other instances, student activists have faced physical violence. In a few cases, police have entered UNAH’s campus—a violation of UNAH’s autonomy. For example, on June 24, 2016, military police entered UNAH’s campus and fired live ammunition at student protestors, seriously injuring some student activists. Moreover, in his study of Honduran student activism, Fúnez-Flores describes a case in November 2019 when a student activist who was arrested by the police was later found dead in a ditch. This case is reminiscent of a pattern of student and social activists being disappeared that began in 2004.

The university administration and professors have also taken action to quell student activism. This includes putting pressure on student activists by expelling them, restricting food scholarships, and presenting complaints against them. In some cases, university authorities and professors have informed on students to the police and government.

Suppression of student activism and dissent has also been institutionalized into university structures, with
students being co-opted by or “selling out” to political and university authorities.34 Fúnez-Flores describes this process in detail. Since 1982, university authorities have “worked to create an authoritarian political culture that could effectively control and manage student activism and organization by eliminating opposition to traditional student political fronts.”35 He goes on to describe how students who belong to “traditional political fronts” have been handpicked by UNAH’s rector to serve in the university council, making “selecting members of the Board of Trustees a unilateral decision, for the role of handpicked students is precisely to vote according to the rector’s vote. Co-opting student representation, in addition, allowed the rector to select loyal Board of Trustees members who would, in turn, help the rector stay in power.”36 In addition, the university has sought to neutralize students by offering them scholarships and work.37

Thus, student activism in Honduras has been repressed and suppressed through diverse means: through an attempt by university authorities to coerce students into silence, through lawfare and the criminalization of students, and through delegitimizing and incendiary rhetoric. In the past few years, students have achieved increased representation at the university, and the shift to the democratic government led by President Xiomara Castro seemed to indicate a transition to a more open civil society. However, the current state of emergency makes these gains seem tentative and fragile, and the end of 2022 saw the resumption of student protests at UNAH.
Student demonstrators in Trafalgar Square. Students demonstrate against higher tuition fees and cuts in University funding, London, Britain - 24 Nov 2010. (Photo by Jonathan Hordle/Ray Tang/REX)
THE UNITED KINGDOM RANKS as having a high degree of academic freedom, and our research identified no cases of physical repression carried out against student activists in the last two years. There is also a strong tradition of student unionism, with most student unions affiliated with the National Union of Students (NUS), a confederation of over 600 student unions across the UK. Nevertheless, over the past decades, student activism has been increasingly constrained by lawfare. A variety of laws effectively constrain students’ and student unions’ involvement in politics in ways that dampen contentious activism, such as large-scale protest. During the past decades, there have been some instances, where students have engaged in political contention, for example by occupying university campuses, and report that this has been met with police surveillance and violence.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for the UK: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
A Brief History of UK Student Activism

IN THE UK, STUDENT unions are the primary forum for university student activism. The country has a deep history of student representation in the university, dating as far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the first student unions emerged in Scotland. Several centuries later, after the first World War, the National Union of Students (NUS) was formed as an umbrella for student unions across the UK. Today, students at most universities are automatically members of their Student Union, and it is their decision whether to affiliate their union with NUS.

NUS initially focused on education and service-related activities, including organizing travel, student exchanges, and debating tours. However, from the 1930s through the 1950s, NUS evolved into an “educational pressure group,” focusing on improving students’ lives and advocating for a student voice in university administration. Nevertheless, student representation was limited to an extent. While students were involved in university committees related to aspects of living conditions such as food and housing, they were not permitted on committees related to curriculum or overall governance.

As in many places across the world, student unrest spread across the UK in the 1960s, with students occupying their campuses. Among the protests that received the most media attention were those that occurred at the London School of Economics (LSE) between 1966 and 1969. Among the primary reasons for student contestation were university reforms to modernize the British system of higher education, along with support for nuclear disarmament and left-wing politics more broadly. Among the reforms that came out of the contention of the 1960s was a formal agreement regarding student representation, albeit to a limited degree. The agreement placed the “right to independent judgment” of academics above that of students and developed a concept of “reserved business” whereby students would need to refrain from participating in decisions related to “sensitive business.”

The past decade has seen a significant escalation in protest among UK students, largely fueled by neoliberal reforms within the university linked to a broader austerity agenda. These protests began in 2009 as the government began discussing reductions to universities’ teaching grants and increases in student fees (higher education had largely been provided for free since the 1960s). The Liberal Democrats responded to this advocacy by signing a pledge with NUS not to raise tuition fees. However, following the 2010 election and during negotiations with the Conservatives for a coalition government, the party reneged on its promise. This resulted in a UK government decision that in effect cut 70 percent of university teaching grants and tripled tuition fees. Protests peaked in late 2010 and early 2011 as the Education Activist Network and National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) called for national demonstrations.

While these protests failed to shift national education policy and protests on a national scale declined after January 2011, they led to what Rios-Jara calls a new “culture of resistance” that took place on a more localized scale. For instance, the Free Education Campaign remained very...
Active until 2017 and saw another escalation of national protests from 2015 to 2017 in the face of a series of new education reforms through which the government sought to deregulate the higher education system and facilitate the establishment of new, for-profit universities. These reforms also led to a Teaching Excellence Framework that linked the outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS), aimed at evaluating the teaching performance of academic staff, to university funding and tuition fees. The new Framework therefore functioned as a mechanism to allow universities to increase tuition fees. NUS, NCAFC, and the University College Union (UCU) organized a three-year boycott of the NSS, with the goal of highlighting the illogic of linking fees and policies to that kind of assessment.

Since then student activism has been largely decentralized, with most attention going to rent strikes and demands to decolonize the curriculum. In addition, NUS has engaged in actions of solidarity with UCU pension strikes, including by showing support for the occupation of universities by independent activists and by joining UCU’s picket line. Other recent NUS campaigns have included Students Not Suspects in protest of the governments’ Prevent strategy that asks students and university staff to report on those suspected of terrorism, and Students Deserve Better demanding better treatment for students have received during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relevant Trends in British Higher Education

In recent decades, the major trends in British higher education have been towards increasing commercialization and privatization. In the 1960s, in an effort to expand access to higher education, Britain began to provide university grants that heavily subsidized student tuition. However, the first wave of neoliberal reforms began only two decades later, in the early 1980s, under the government of Margaret Thatcher. These included the “privatization of the channels of public funding, the implementation of managerial principles into the system of university governance, and the precarization of the academic workforce,” as well as the introduction of tuition fees for international students. As described above, the 2010 and 2015 reforms have reinforced these trends that effectively reduced “the state’s responsibility in the provision and funding of higher education and [liberalized] the higher education system.”

In addition, while UK universities have a significant degree of autonomy and the UK has signed the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Personnel, there is currently not a constitutional right to academic or scientific freedom, and some observers have criticized the country for insufficient protections for academic freedom, particularly for that of students. In effect, in the UK, the concept of academic freedom has been conflated with the freedom of expression in a way that excludes protections for non-academic employees and students to protest within the law.

10 Rios-Jara (2021, January 6).
13 National Union of Students website: https://www.nus.org.uk/campaigns (accessed January 28, 2023). Rios-Jara (2021, January 6) writes that the pandemic “exposed the vulnerabilities of financialized higher education” resulting in an educational deficit and prompting university managers to reopen university dormitories against public health advice in order to “balance the books.”
15 Hoefferle (2012).
Repression of UK Student Activism: Lawfare, Delegitimization, and Co-option

**LAWFARE—LAWS AND POLICIES** that neutralize student unions and student activists by making it more challenging for them to engage in politics—is perhaps the most severe threat to student activism in the UK. However, in some cases, student activism is also quelled through physical violence and delegitimization.

The relationship between student unions, politics, and political parties became a matter of debate as early as the mid-twentieth century, when there was a “no politics” clause in NUS-UK’s charter, largely due to fears over students’ interest in communist ideologies. This provision was removed in 1969 because of pressure from radical left groups.19

In the past three decades, lawfare against student unions and student activism has occurred in a number of ways: through limiting the financing of student unions, laws restricting student union involvement in politics, and through more recent laws making certain forms of protest illegal. Since the 1990s, the British government has enacted policies that have served to reduce the power of student unions. For example, in 1980, the government changed the way student unions were funded by incorporating such funding into the per capita fee that universities and colleges received for student tuition “with the hope that institutions themselves would restrict [student union] finances.”20 Since then, student unions have had to negotiate with university administrations for grants to support their activities. In addition, the extent to which student unions can engage in politics is defined by the Education Act 1994.21 The act defines student unions as charities, requiring them to operate under charity law, representing “students as students” rather than political actors. Because charities are restricted in their ability to engage in political activity, the 1994 Education Act restricts the ability of student unions to devote resources to political activism and “depoliticizes the [student] movement.”22 The Charities Act 2006 reinforces this, requiring student unions in England and Wales to register with the Charity Commission as organizations that work for “the advancement of education.”23

Moreover, student unions’ participation in politics has been weakened through university pressures. For instance, universities have invested in student union facilities as a means of placating students angry about increased tuition fees or to reward students for supporting university policies.24 University managers have also developed closer relationships with student unions to improve student life and the student experience, leading student unions to “to focus more on representation than on campaigning, advocacy and protest.”25

Several recent policies threaten to undermine student activism. For instance, the UK government’s anti-terrorism policy Prevent includes measures that makes it riskier for Muslim and international students to engage in activism.26 In particular, the Counter-Ter-

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26 McKnight (2019).
rorism and Security Act 2015 created a statutory duty for British universities as “special authorities” to train staff on counter-terrorism measures and to conduct risk assessments on students considered vulnerable to extremism. University students have been warned against indoctrination when reading Marxist works, and certain “radical” works of writing have been flagged under Prevent as “sensitive.”

Likewise, a new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act in effect as of April 2022 is also likely to constrain student activism. For example, the Act makes it illegal to engage in acts considered a public nuisance, such as occupying a public space. Occupation of university campuses has long been a primary tactic for student activists. A new Higher Education Bill (The Freedom of Speech Bill) being pushed through the House of Lords may also make students less willing to speak up. The government has framed the Bill as necessary to protect speakers invited to campus from financial or physical risk. However, the Bill would make it more difficult for students to protest against speakers, including by making it possible for speakers to sue both universities and student unions and imposing significant bureaucratic hurdles.

While our effort to collect events data did not identify public reports of physical repression at student protests in either 2021 or 2022, activists indicate that police surveillance and violence targeting student activists does occur in the UK, including at student occupations and particularly for black students. The response to the 2010/11 protests, for instance, included violence, legal actions, and sanctions against student activists. Moreover, police and private security firms reportedly surveil activists’ plans on Facebook and it is not uncommon to see a greater security presence around campuses when a protest or campus occupation is planned.

Finally, student activists have, in some cases, been undermined through delegitimization. In recent years, most political parties have not supported student demands against neoliberal education reforms. Students report that they do not feel they are taken seriously by other political actors and are instead infantilized. Likewise, while some student activists saw a political opportunity to work with the Labour Party after its leader Jeremy Corbyn announced support for free education as part of the party’s platform in 2015, they also reported feeling dismissed by other members of the movement.

For instance, members of Momentum, the largest grassroots organizations affiliated with Corbyn, dismissed many of the students’ demands, calling them “privileged kids” and “teenagers” and diminishing students’ critiques of government policy as “individual expression of discontent or ‘teen radicalism’”.

British student unions remain among the most significant forums for student activism today. A variety of pressures have weakened the student movement, including the commercialization of education. In addition to this, the biggest threats to student activism in the UK are growing constraints on civic space as enacted through policies like Prevent, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, and the potential Free Speech Bill.

35 There were significant debates with NUS about whether or not to ally with Corbyn and Labour. See Rios-Jara (20220.
Thousands of young people from all across Ghana took to the streets on August 4, 2021, to demand political and economic reforms amid economic hardship. What started as a Twitter hashtag “#fixthecountry” has grown to become one of the largest youth movements for change in Ghana.

(Photo by Muntaka Chasant/Shutterstock)
Ghana rates as having a relatively high degree of academic freedom. However, the government has made recent moves to limit university autonomy and has sought to neutralize student activism. Since the mid-1900s, Ghana’s university students have been a critical force for independence, democratization, and anti-authoritarianism. The National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) has been the leading voice in these fights. However, this activism has waned in the past thirty years, since the establishment of Ghana’s democratic Fourth Republic in 1992. Since that time, while physical repression has been limited, the government and the universities have effectively curtailed student activism through a variety of incentives and regulations that engenders non-confrontational politics.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Ghana: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/
A Brief History of Student Activism in Ghana

BEGINNING IN THE LATE 1950s and early 1960s, Ghanaian university students formed a critical mass of the anti-colonial struggle and morphed to be among the voices of opposition to the military dictatorship of Kwame Nkrumah that emerged in control of the first republic. In 1961, for example, students organized themselves in opposition to the new Universities Act, which transformed the University College of Ghana into the University of Ghana. They challenged key provisions in the legislation, which made the Head of State the Chancellor of the universities and endowed him with wide powers that made him in charge of the appointment of the Vice Chancellor and Chairman of the University Council. In 1964, students again criticized Nkrumah’s government for amending the Constitution by turning Ghana into a one-party State and further granting the President wide powers, including bringing the judiciary and parliament under the control of the President. In the lead-up to a referendum on making Ghana a single-party state, the government closed the universities. While the government explained the closure as a measure to enable students and university staff to go home and vote, it was rather viewed as a measure to prevent students from engaging in organized opposition to the vote. Student politics were not entirely uniform, and some did support the Nkrumah government, but the contention of the early 1960s did nevertheless result in political radicalization among students.

These acts of opposition gave students credibility, giving them a foothold in Ghanaian politics. This is because by the mid-1960s Nkrumah’s government had effectively weakened most formal political opposition to his government, and the universities became one of the primary sites for anti-authoritarian protest, with NUGS playing a particularly important role in challenging the government and the growing restrictions on dissent. University campuses proved important spaces for organizing; the residence hall system supported the formation of friendships and networks among students, helping them to build a community and their own national ethos in opposition to the dictatorship. Students were also able to engage in democratic participation on campus. Student leaders were elected in residence halls and engaged students in participatory decision-making, and student publications were a forum for criticizing the government. These modes of organizing provided a sharp contrast to the authoritarian character of the state.

In 1963, the government sought to quell opposition from the universities by arresting student leaders and academics, deporting expatriate academics, and threatening new legislation that would bring the universities even more fully under the control of the government. By 1964, the Nkrumah government clearly viewed students as a threat. Also in early 1965, the government sought to bring student politics more fully under its control by launching the Ghana National Students Organization as an alternative to NUGS. These efforts did little to curb student opposition to the authoritarian state, but rather reinvigorated it, resulting in greater coordination and organization.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, students continued to play a significant role in oppositional politics. Under the military regime of Jerry Rawlings in the 1980s, students were again one of the few voices challenging government policies and actions. This resulted in student leaders being arrested and tortured, confrontations between students and the military, and temporary closures of the universities.
During the 1990s, Ghanaian higher education underwent a significant transformation. A rapid expansion in access to higher education coincided with the widespread implementation of neoliberal reforms, including trade liberalization, privatization, and cost recovery of social services. Ghana is “widely considered the epitome of the neoliberal agenda in the African region.” Prior to 1998, higher education was largely free. However, these changes—the increase in university enrollment and neoliberal policies—led to increased cost-sharing for higher education, with students and their families taking on much of the burden. In addition, by the end of the 1990s, neoliberalism had not had a particularly positive impact on Ghana’s economy, with high inflation, a small private sector, low domestic savings, and limited growth, resulting in few jobs for those graduating from college. Throughout the 1990s, students protested this situation, engaging in street protests, boycotts, and negotiations with university administration and the government.

Since 1992, when Ghana transitioned to a democratic government, student activism has waned. The general trend since the 1990s has been towards acquiescence and non-confrontational politics. However, this may be changing. Over the last few years, Ghanaian youth have taken to the streets decrying bad governance and demanding that political leaders #fixthecountry. Such activism “is unusual for Ghana and hasn’t been witnessed in recent times.” While characterized as a youth movement, it was founded by a Ghanaian doctoral student studying at the University of Cambridge, Oliver Barker-Vormawor, who was arrested and reportedly beaten and placed in solitary confinement after returning to Ghana in February 2022.

Moreover, in recent years Ghanaian student activists have coordinated with other members of civil society to bolster their ability to mobilize. For instance, NUGS joined the Coalition Against the Commercialization and Privatization of Education (CAPCOE) in 2020. NUGS has also engaged in recent advocacy demanding that universities refrain from increasing fees beyond the fifteen percent approved by parliament. In its activism, the union relies heavily on social media platforms like Facebook to raise public awareness and support for their causes.

17 National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS). (2012, December 29). Excerpts of Press Conference. Retrieved from NUGS Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/nugs.org.gh?__cft__[0]=AZXNxL68EIdza0owKkthHgHqOgR5xUWqCA011A7x5yJuDmo2DHIwew2xLyhBcS5L9TB1Fn0AerKvOHJW0U4idz2JN_oFEpqq-GG6-TkxWj_1AvQdWyjZj6XqZdNSHyk1Jz80UUnKxSaEULExWjWlwj_leg7fiiL36q_KHh8bPNSnnNh0GLJu4TJU6__tc__UC%2CP-R
Relevant Trends in Ghanaian Higher Education

GHANA’S CURRENT FOURTH REPUBLICAN Constitution, passed in 1992, explicitly provides for academic freedom and legalizes university autonomy by preventing the president from becoming chancellor. Each university is governed by a council that appoints its own chancellor and vice-chancellor, minimizing the extent to which the government can interfere in day-to-day university affairs. Despite this, student representation on university councils is limited to just two out of eighteen seats, one each for the Students Representative Council (SRC) and the Graduate Students Association of Ghana (GRASAG). This participation gives the veneer of student participation in governance, but that representation is largely tokenistic, and students are unable to actually influence university decision-making.

Moreover, the government has taken several actions recently that threaten academic freedom and university autonomy. First is the Public University Bill 2020, which was ostensibly created with the goal of preventing the misuse of funds for higher education. The bill would give Ghana’s president the authority to appoint the chancellors of all public universities and chairs of university councils. It would also make the university councils smaller, with the majority of seats appointed by the president. In addition, the president would have the power to dissolve the university council under emergency circumstances. The bill further reduces student representation on University Councils from two seats to just one. While the bill was shelved, it is still possible that Ghana’s government will revisit it, and parts of the bill have already found their way into other documents and legislation.

In the meantime, a parliamentary act in July 2022 merged three universities—the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GII), the Ghana Institute of Languages (GIL), and the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI)—into the University of Media, Arts and Communications (UMAC). The new university has a seven-member interim council that has been criticized for reasons that mirror concerns about the Public University Bill 2020, including for having too much control over university governance and for excluding stakeholders like faculty sitting on the council.

24 Public University Bill, 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dKsJbX62g7YBD7nOTW0na41Q6XhboV/preview.
Repression of Ghanaian Student Activism: Co-option and Neutralization

IN RECENT DECADES, STUDENT activism has been subtly suppressed and neutralized on Ghana’s university campuses. In addition to occasional physical violence, in Ghana’s post-independence era, both military and civilian governments have sought to weaken student activism by infiltrating it and incentivizing students to engage in cooperation rather than contention.27 Youth wings of political parties have proliferated on campus and have exerted significant influence in student politics. Politicians seek to help ensure that members of the youth wings of their own political parties win leadership in NUGS28 and SRC elections. For example, the October 20, 2021 SRC elections held on the University of Ghana campus was “marred by the presence of national security personnel who invaded the campus of the University of Ghana without the knowledge, consent and authorization of university management.”29 Politicians have also used incentives to encourage NUGS to support their policies. These include financial incentives, study abroad scholarships, and the promise of government positions after graduation.

A quote from Samuel Binfoh, former president of NUGS, published in an article in 2016 describes how these policies neutralize student activism:

“The politicisation of NUGS has affected the student representatives’ ability to criticise the government on issues that border on student welfare. What has exacerbated the problem is that the executive members of NUGS are polarised along partisan lines … The excessive conflict among the student leaders has dissipated their energies, integrity and objectivity to initiate actions on students’ concerns.”30

NON-COMFRONTATION THEREFORE BRINGS student leaders political benefits, making student activism much less likely. While non-confrontation does bring some academic advantages, including a more stable and predictable academic calendar, there is a “general perception that NUGS has been captured by the government in order to suppress the expression of student demands.”31

Universities themselves too have tried to curtail student activism against their administrations. It is common for university administrations to campaign for preferred candidates in student elections. Students are not allowed to demonstrate on or off campus without authorization from the Dean of Student Affairs, although the Public Order Act, 1994 (Act 491) dispenses with this requirement.32 Additionally, many universities have developed stringent requirements—such as high GPAs—restricting who can be a student leader. This policy, which bars students who have a GPA lower than 3.0 from running for student leadership positions, makes it harder for some students to participate in the student movement in officially recognized capacities.

Student leaders are also likely to give in to “bullying” from university officials for fear of negative repercussions if they stand up to them. Moreover, many students

interviewed by Ghanaian scholar Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atui argue that it is not possible to confront either lecturers, who wield significant power in the classroom, or university management, who can dismiss students. Therefore, it is better to adopt the path of least confrontation and instead complete one’s studies in peace.33

In the past few years, university and high school students engaging in #FixtheCountry protests have faced violent repression multiple times. The movement contends that police brutality has become habitual. For example, in early October 2019, Ghanaian law students took to the streets in protest of new regulations reducing the number of law school graduates admitted to a professional law program that is a prerequisite for the bar. Police met the peaceful demonstration with rubber bullets, water cannons, and tear gas. Thirteen students were arrested and others injured.34 In March 2019, students at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) protested for several days against the dismissal of three university lecturers. The students reportedly destroyed school property, while police opened fire with warning bullets and dispersed the students with tear gas, and students threw stones at police officers in response.35 While these events did not occur during the period of our research, they potentially represent the beginning of a shift towards physical repression.

Palestinian students supporting the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) movement take part in a rally during an election campaign rally for the student council at the Birzeit University, near the West Bank city of Ramallah on April 16, 2019. (Photo by Ahmad Talat/Zuma Press)
PALESTINE’S RANKING FOR ACADEMIC freedom is differentiated between the West Bank, which has a moderate level of academic freedom, and the Gaza Strip, which is rated as more repressed. Nevertheless, student activism has been repressed in both locales, as well as historically within the Palestinian diaspora. Palestinian students have been at the forefront of the movement for Palestinian liberation since the 1950s. They played a leading role in helping cultivate Palestinian national identity and in fighting against the Israeli occupation during the first and second Intifadas (uprisings). Since the Oslo Accords and establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the 1990s, they have also increasingly engaged in activism directed at university reforms. In each of these efforts, they have faced significant physical repression, including arrests, violence, and surveillance, primarily by Israeli forces, but also along factional lines by Palestinian authorities.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for the West Bank and for the Gaza Strip: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/Variable-Graph/. 
A Brief History of Palestinian Student Activism

THE PALESTINIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT developed in direct response to the Israeli settlement of colonized Palestine. Students living in the Palestinian diaspora first organized in the aftermath of the 1948 war (or nakba, “catastrophe,” as Palestinians refer to it) that triggered the mass displacement of Palestinians at the hands of the Zionist military forces. Palestinian students studying in cities like Cairo, Damascus, and Beirut established student associations with the goal of raising awareness of the Palestinian situation and mobilizing their peers for liberation.

Among these groups, the first significant forum for Palestinian student activism was the Palestinian Student Association at the University of Cairo, founded shortly before the nakba in 1944. The group achieved international recognition in 1955 when it was admitted as a member of the International Union of Students. In 1959, the Palestinian Student Association launched an initiative to unite all Palestinian student associations throughout Egypt, the Arab states, and Europe. This led to the foundation of the General Union of Palestinian Students (al-Itihad al'Amm lil-Talabat Filastin, GUPS), also launched in 1959.

The Palestinian Student Association and GUPS were significant players within the broader Palestinian political struggle. GUPS became one organization, among a group of others, that was part of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Several of GUPS’s leaders went on to become leaders of various Palestinian movements. For example, Yasser Arafat, who would go on to co-found Fatah and later lead the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian National Council (PNC), was elected as head of the Palestinian Student Association in 1952. Khalid Mashal, who would later lead Hamas, was also a leader in the GUPS Palestinian Islamic Bloc.

GUPS activists supported Palestinian students studying in the Diaspora, but the nature of its activism was primarily political and militant. Like other Palestinian groups, GUPS advocated for an armed Palestinian liberation struggle. For instance, in the 1960s, the Jordanian student community had a large Palestinian population that advocated for a Palestinian revolution. Likewise, GUPS members rallied its members to fight the Israeli invasion in Lebanon in 1982.

From its origins, the Palestinian student movement was riven by factionalism. Student organizations were mostly aligned with the different political blocs that comprised the PLO, such as Fatah’s al-Shabiba, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine’ (PFLP) jabhat al amal altulabi altakadumi, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine’ (DFLP) kutlat al wihda. While this factionalism helped mobilize students, it also intensified student rivalry within Palestinian universities. The communist groups, including the PFLP and DFLP, dominated student unions in the 1970s. In the 1980s, al-Shabiba gained control over the majority of student councils at Palestinian universities. The 1980s also saw increasing Islamification, with the Islamic Bloc becoming a significant player in the student arena.

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3 Meari & Duhou (2020).
5 Ibid.
6 Meari & Duhou (2020).
7 Zeikovitz (2015).
8 Meari & Duhou (2020).
11 Meari & Duhou (2020).
With the creation of the first Palestinian universities in 1970, the student movement transferred its center to occupied Palestine. As the student movement developed within Palestinian universities, it took on a more diverse and popular character; whereas previously student activists had come from the socioeconomic elite, it now became more diverse in terms of the student’s backgrounds. During the 1970s and 1980s, student activism focused primarily on national liberation and resistance to the Israeli occupation—both in militant and nonviolent forms. In the context of military occupation, even student-led activities like planting trees and cleaning and renovating sites such as cemeteries and mosques were acts of nonviolent civil resistance. However, students also engaged in union activism and promoted student interests within the university, around issues such as overcrowding, curriculum, and freedom of speech. For instance, in the late 1970s, Birzeit University students advocated to have cafeteria management transferred to student control.

Palestinian students in the occupied territories were leaders in the Intifada (uprising) that began in December 1987. Campuses served as centers for students to start public demonstrations and for “tactical instruction for upcoming clashes” with Israeli military forces. In addition to being at the forefront of violent resistance, Palestinian student leaders also took leadership roles in the local Popular Committees that were developed to provide basic social services, such as education, food delivery, and garbage collection, in the face of closures imposed by the Israeli military.

The aftermath of the first Intifada dealt a blow to the Palestinian student movement, and GUPS “fell into stagnation” due to several reasons. First, Israel imprisoned or exiled many student leaders. Second, the Oslo Accords, signed by the PLO leadership and the Israeli government, meant that the national liberation project transformed into a state development project. Universities moved from being centers of resistance to institutions intended to help develop an infrastructure for political, social, and economic development. These came along with neoliberal reforms that led to the decline of the popular democratic mobilization that had fueled the student movement. Factionalism also intensified. Amidst these changes, the focus of student activism shifted to students’ daily needs.

In recent years, the Palestinian student movement has continued to organize to fight both against the Israeli occupation and for reforms within the university. For example, in 2016, students from different backgrounds shut down Birzeit University’s gates and occupied its campus in protest of an increase in student fees. At the same time, students continued to engage in activism in support of Palestinian political prisoners on hunger strike. Likewise, in 2021–22, Birzeit University students protested against their university administration accusing it of harassing student political unions and for failing to defend students detained by Israeli forces.

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16 Meari & Duhou (2020).
19 Zelkovitz (2015), p. 92. GUPS still exists today but is significantly less influential.
22 Meari & Duhou (2020).
23 Meari & Duhou (2020).
24 Meari & Duhou (2020).
Relevant Trends in Palestinian Higher Education

The origins of the present-day system of higher education in Palestine date back to the 1970s, with Birzeit University being the first institution to receive formal status in 1972. The institution viewed itself as playing an important role in providing access to higher education for Palestinian students who were unable to study abroad due to Israeli military restrictions.26 Also, in 1972, the Palestinian Council for Higher Education was formed. Its academic mandate included coordinating between different academic institutions, the founding of new academic institutions, and the establishment of libraries and research centers.27 Under the Council for Higher Education, the Palestinian university system was essentially nationalized, as universities were supported through public national funds.28 However, the Council for Higher Education was also a political body, part of the state building project.29 With the establishment of universities in Palestine, access to higher education expanded beyond socioeconomically elite Palestinians who were able to travel abroad, providing new opportunities for youth from rural areas and refugee camps to access university education.

From 1967 to the 1990s, higher education in Palestine was regulated by external authorities, with the West Bank education system under Jordanian authority and the Gazan system under Egyptian authority. For example, in 1979, the Jordanian government instituted a policy requiring West Bank matriculation certificates to be certified in Jordan.30

Since the 1970s, Israel, as the occupying authority, has sought to maintain control over Palestinian universities to the greatest extent possible. For example, military regulation No. 854, signed in 1980, essentially denied academic freedom to Palestinian universities. Amongst other measures, this regulation allowed the Israeli military to disallow admission to individual students and to expel students for “security” related reasons, as well as restrict books and the employment of foreign academics. In the mid-1980s, Israeli forces banned Gazan students from studying in West Bank universities.31

With the signing of the Oslo Accords, which was intended to pave the way for Palestinian statehood, Palestinian universities played a significant role in the state building process, and the universities came under the supervision of the new Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education.32 In addition, the signing of the Oslo Accords brought significant attention to Palestine from the international development and humanitarian communities. This played a role in shaping the privatization of Palestinian universities in the 1990s after the neoliberal model also spreading across the rest of the world.33

Today, with no formal Palestinian state, there is essentially no legal protection for academic freedom or university autonomy despite an emphasis on self-determination and university autonomy in Palestine’s governing documents. Instead, such rights are decentralized, governed by university by-laws and policies. In reality, the extent of academic freedom and university autonomy are severely limited, both by Israeli forces and by Fatah and Hamas, the ruling authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.34 The Israeli government in partic-

33 Meari & Duhou (2020).
ular has passed recent regulations making it difficult for international students and lecturers to access Palestinian institutions. In May 2022, for instance, the “Procedure for Entry and Residency of Foreigners in Judea and Samaria Region” granted the Israeli military authority to limit the number of international students and lecturers at Palestinian universities.\(^\text{35}\) The law was greeted with international condemnation.

### Repression of Palestinian Student Activism: Lawfare, Surveillance, and Factionalism

**Palestinian Student Activists Are** at severe risk of physical repression, including violence, arrests, detention, and torture, as well as being subject to surveillance at the hands of Israeli and Palestinian authorities. In addition, factionalism within the Palestinian movement itself has a disruptive effect on student activism, resulting in power struggles that impede the formation of a unified student movement.\(^\text{36}\)

The Palestinian student movement has faced repression since the 1970s. After GUPS activists carried out a series of terror attacks, European states arrested and deported several students. In Lebanon, Palestinian student activists were involved in a May 1974 strike at the American University in Beirut that led to violent clashes with Lebanese security forces and ultimately the expulsion and deportation of 80 Palestinian students. The GUPS viewed the response by the Lebanese authorities as a first step in a campaign to wipe out the Palestinian national movement in Lebanon. In Egypt, as the Egyptian authorities engaged in negotiations with Israel following the 1973 war, Palestinian students were viewed as a threat. A series of measures, including restrictions on enrolling Palestinian students and the dissolution of scholarships for Palestinian students, eventually led to Palestinian students being effectively barred from higher education in Egypt. In both Syria and Greece, Palestinian students were expelled in the 1970s because of those countries’ disagreements with the PLO, and while there had been an active Palestinian student movement in Jordan, their activism declined following Black September in 1970.\(^\text{37}\)

Likewise, the Israeli military administration has long viewed Palestinian universities as a threat because of their role in developing Palestinian national consciousness. As such, even activities like the celebration of folklore can be considered activism.\(^\text{38}\) Characterizing this understanding, a former spokesperson for the Israeli Civil Administration in the West Bank, Captain Ellis Shazar, called Palestinian universities “not so much universities as they are institutes of political activism.”

In the 1980s, Palestinian students clashed with Israeli forces on university campuses. During the first Intifada, Israeli forces surveilled Palestinian students extensively, arresting and sentencing them in Israeli military courts to house arrest, administrative detention, and outright deportation.\(^\text{39}\) A year into the first Intifada, 80 percent of Palestinian youths arrested were members of the student movement.\(^\text{40}\) The Israeli military closed

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38 Zelkovitz (2015).
Palestinian universities indefinitely during the Intifada.\(^\text{41}\)

For example, Birzeit University was closed for four and a half years, from 1988 to 1992, one of fifteen times the university has been forcibly closed by Israeli authorities.\(^\text{42}\)

Israeli laws facilitate its repression of Palestinian student activists. For instance, Article 84 of Israel’s domestic law “Emergency Regulations and the 1948 Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance”\(^\text{43}\) is the main means through which it represses Palestinian student unions and activists. The law targets individuals suspected to be affiliated with or a member of an “unlawful association”.\(^\text{44}\)

One of the many recent instances of this legislation being wielded to persecute student activists was seen on September 16, 2022, when 23 students affiliated with the Democratic Progressive Student Pole (DPSP) were detained and eleven later jailed. The DPSP was declared an “unlawful association” by the Israeli Occupying Forces only two years prior, on October 21, 2020,\(^\text{45}\) one of many student groups subjected to this scrutiny and designation.

Though eight of these students were released, the student group’s coordinator and secretary, Muath Botmeh and Zaid Qaddoumi, were placed under administrative detention and jailed without trial.\(^\text{46}\)

After the Oslo Accords, Palestinian authorities became more actively involved in repressing student activism. For example, on March 20, 1996 Palestinian Authority security forces raided the campus of Al-Najah University, resulting in student riots across Palestine.\(^\text{47}\)

Repression by Palestinian authorities has intensified since Hamas took over control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. In the West Bank, Fatah cracked down on Hamas, including its affiliated student activism. In addition to surveillance and arrests, Fatah has poured resources into student elections, resulting in its student wing al-Shabiba regaining control over most student councils.\(^\text{48}\)

More recently, this balance of power has shifted. In 2022, for instance, Hamas’ student arm, the Islamic Wafa bloc, won student elections at Birzeit University.\(^\text{50}\) To an extent, Israeli forces and Fatah have been complicit in repression of Hamas affiliated student activists in the West Bank. For instance, Israeli forces arrested several student members of the Islamic Wafa bloc the day before student elections in 2022.\(^\text{51}\)

In Gaza, there have been no free student elections since the 2007 takeover by Hamas, and members of al-Shabiba are under tight scrutiny, with their activities severely restricted. For example, the Shabiba branch at al-Azhar University cannot hold public ceremonies commemorating Yasser Arafat. Hamas gunmen frequently disrupt the Shabiba activities on campus, and Hamas security forces ultimately decide which Shabiba activities will be allowed on campus.\(^\text{52}\) Moreover, student activism in the Gaza Strip is impeded by frequent bombings by Israeli forces, resulting in repeated closures of the universities.\(^\text{53}\)
In collecting data on repression of student activism in Palestine, we identified 27 events in 2021 and 2022, including arrests, detention, and the use of violent force against student protesters. At least 88 students were arrested, 1 killed, and 158 injured. Among these events, 28 involved Israeli forces, most in the form of clashes between Palestinian students and Israeli forces. One event involved an assault on students by Hamas police forces in the Gaza Strip. Five events involved Palestinian Authority security forces using force against student protesters in the West Bank or detaining students affiliated with Hamas. These data illustrate the limitations of events-based reporting, making it appear as though Gazan students face less repression than those in the West Bank. In reality, however, it is more likely that Gazan student activism is constrained in ways that are more subtle, such as through Hamas’s tight control of the education system.
Young activists at the COP22 UN climate conference take part in a flashmob dance protest in Jemaa el-Fnaa, the central market plaza in Marrakech, Morocco on November 10, 2016. (Ryan Rodrick Beiler/Alamy Stock Photo)
Morocco has seen a slow increase in academic freedom over the past thirty years. Today, academic communities are moderately free.¹ Moroccan university students were important anti-monarchy activists in the 1960s and 1970s, with the General Union of Moroccan Students (Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc, UNEM) playing a leading role. Since that time, however, the student movement has been riven by factional divisions along cultural and ideological lines. Clashes between student groups are among the greatest threats to student activism in Morocco, but the government also neutralizes dissent through co-option.

¹ See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Morocco: https://v-dem.net/data-analysis/VariableGraph/.
A Brief History of Student Activism in Morocco

HISTORICALLY, MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS have played a significant political role, including in agitating against the monarchy during the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this activism was channeled through UNEM, which was established in 1956. In 1965, students engaged in a series of strikes, sit-ins, and broader unrest, agitating against new educational regulations that would limit access to a Baccalaureate degree. While the UNEM continues to be an important political actor, it has been weakened considerably in recent decades due to ideological disagreements between leftist and Islamist members.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a coalition of unemployed university graduates who have been important political actors demonstrating for socio-economic demands, including against the high cost of living. In the past decade, students were among the leading participants in the February 20 Movement of 2011, which occurred in the context of the Arab Spring. The February 20 Movement called for political and economic changes, including constitutional revisions, a new Council of Ministers, the dissolution of parliament, judiciary independence, the incorporation of Tamazight as a national language, reductions in the cost of living, higher salaries, and a solution to the housing crisis. Significantly, while the Movement was youth-led, students “participated not as a student movement with specific demands for university students, but rather they joined as part of their own ideological movements, mainly Islamists and Leftists.” In contrast to the protests that occurred in other Arab Spring countries, those in Morocco were more localized and guided by political and ideological affiliations.

Much of the student activism in Morocco today occurs within the bounds of political and identity-based affiliations. UNEM remains an important political actor, but much of the activism that UNEM members engage in appears factional. For instance, the Armed Conflict Local and Event Data Project (ACLED) typically names partisan groups, such as the Cultural Amazigh Movement or the Marxist Democratic Path Grassroots Movement with affiliation to the UNEM, as responsible for protests. Moreover, much of this contention focuses on issues of identity or ideology, for example student protests over violence or persecution against members of the groups they are affiliated to. Likewise, student contention over education-related issues—such as postponing exams, COVID-19 related policies, or Ministry of Education decisions—also often occur, although not always, within ideological or identity-based lines.

7 Based on data download from ACLED for the years 2021-22.
Relevant Trends in Moroccan Higher Education

The Moroccan System of higher education is modeled off of the French system, with access guaranteed to all who graduate from secondary school. Moreover, students pay no fees in most programs. While a 2000 law allowed for the creation of private universities, the sector was not officially regulated until 2011. This slowed the emergence of private institutions because investors lacked an understanding of the policies governing the sector. Since the private education sector has begun to expand, it has tended to have a more elite character than the rest of the higher education system. Most private universities have followed the model of a residential liberal arts college, with a full campus and dorms for both male and female students. State support for private higher education is designed to attract Moroccan expatriates and elites.8

With the higher education system thus dominated by public institutions, the Moroccan government maintains significant jurisdiction over tertiary institutions and higher education policies. The higher education system has undergone a series of reforms since the mid-1990s. In 2000, Moroccan political parties approved a new university law allowing for faculties to suggest candidates for university presidents and faculty deans. However, the Moroccan monarchy has the final say in the selection process.9 More recently, the Moroccan government has sought to extend its control over higher education. Moroccan university teachers have been demanding reforms regulating their relationships with their universities for several years. In April 2021, a draft law was proposed that would give the Ministry of Higher Education unprecedented power. The law was not passed but would have allowed the government to control university lecturers’ wages, benefits, and privileges as well as teaching and research.10

Repression of Moroccan Student Activism: Conciliation, Co-option, and Factionalization

In Morocco, there is significant space for university students to engage in activism, and they often do so peacefully. To some extent, the greatest threat to student organizing comes from other students—a consequence of the factionalization of student politics along identity-based and ideological lines. Clashes between student groups, such as between Amazigh, Sahrawi students from Morocco-occupied Western Sahara, Marxist, or Islamist activists, occur with regularity.11 Furthermore, Moroccan news outlets have noted a growing trend of human rights violations against Sahrawi student activists, underscored by the historical crimes against the Sahrawi peoples by the Moroccan government.12 For instance, on July 31, 2022 Moroccan police beat up a Saharawi student while forcibly removing him from his

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campus in Rabat, allegedly for his political activities. He was hospitalized following the incident. 13

However, the government also plays a role in quelling oppositional student politics, neutralizing dissent by making concessions within limits that it sets. For example, as occurred with education reforms following the February 20 Movement, the government often establishes commissions to address social and political grievances. These royal initiatives engage acceptable experts to determine reforms, creating a veneer of conciliation that is in reality limited. Kohstall (2015) describes the ways that this approach limits dissent: “Another factor that limited the scale of the [February 20, 2011] protests that emerged out of the universities was the fact that many former student activists and professors critical of the regime had been co-opted through ... ‘commission politics.’” 14 The government has previously hand-picked education leaders, including students, in education reform processes, successfully “building a buffer against protest.” 15

Moroccan student activists therefore do not face substantial physical repression. Yet the space for activism is constrained in more subtle ways. That is perhaps one reason why student participation in the most significant recent social protests (e.g. the February 20 Movement) have not occurred through the universities.
A student holds a sign that reads in Portuguese “To Educate is Freedom” during a protest against the budget cuts by President Jair Bolsonaro’s government of public schools and universities, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022. (AP Photo by Silvia Izquierdo)
Brazil is ranked by V-Dem as having a limited level of academic freedom, and in recent years it has seen a political climate of growing anti-intellectualism. Brazil’s far right views universities as centers for left-wing indoctrination and “gender ideology.” Within this climate, Brazilian university students have continued a long tradition of political and social activism. While students have not been subject to significant physical repression in the past few years, the government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) defunded higher education and sought to rhetorically delegitimize student protestors. These trends may be shifting. Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was re-elected in 2022 and assumed office in January 2023. His cabinet has already started to reallocate funding towards education and research and plans to assess funding for graduate scholarships.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Brazil: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
A Brief History of Student Activism in Brazil

University students have been an active political and social force in Brazil since the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Federation of Brazilian Students was founded in 1901. The student movement was consolidated with the creation of the União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE, National Union of Students) in the late 1930s, which was officially recognized as the national student union in 1942. Since that time, UNE has been the primary vehicle for student activism in Brazil. UNE has been a progressive movement throughout its history, advocating against fascism in the 1930s and 40s. In the 1950s, the group took on more radical political positions. It advocated against the extraction of natural resources by foreign companies as well as for university reform in the face of rapidly growing numbers of students seeking to enter a higher education system that was overcrowded and under-resourced. Influenced by Paolo Freire, students saw a key role for the university in “awakening in them [the working masses] the consciousness of their rights, the consciousness of the breadth and width of their collective and individual possibilities, developing them and stimulating them” and argued that “students must be the principal agents of the time.”

During Brazil’s military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, UNE and Brazilian students were actively persecuted, arrested, tortured, and murdered, prompting some to flee the country. Yet, UNE continued to operate covertly. Similar to many other places around the world, 1968 was a significant year for student demonstrations in Brazil. University students held massive political demonstrations, protesting university conditions and police brutality, among other issues, and becoming the primary source of opposition to the military dictatorship. The government arrested thousands of university students at UNE’s annual congress that year, and issued Ato Institucional Número 5, which gave the President widespread power that made student demonstrations essentially impossible, and UNE temporarily disintegrated. Yet, in the aftermath of 1968 and throughout the 1970s, students managed to rebuild their movement, organizing clandestinely, and re-established UNE by 1979 when the dictatorship again began to allow the formation of opposition parties under strict guidelines.

From the 1980s through 2000s, students were important political and social actors in the struggle for democracy. During the 1980s, UNE was an influential actor in the mass “Diretas Já” protests calling for direct elections and ultimately leading to a new democratic constitution passed in 1988 and the first popular presidential elections in 1989. In 1992, Brazilian university students rose up demanding that President Fernando Collor de Mello be impeached and that corruption end. Students marched with their faces painted in the national colors or in black (in mourning), calling for the President’s ouster. Observers viewed the protests as...
a moment of revival for the student movement. The President was impeached on September 30, 1992. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Brazilian university students criticized neo-liberalism and the privatization and commodification of education. University students were also active supporters of the first presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010).

From 2019 through 2022, university students, along with academics and civil society members, organized in the face of government actions designed to impede higher education. In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, far-right politician and leader of the Social Liberal Party with strong links to the military and police, was elected president. Bolsonaro’s policies combined social conservatism, including opposition to abortion, transgender rights, legalized drugs, and restrictions on the freedom of religion and speech, with economic policies that supported an open market, businesses, and privatization. Bolsonaro’s government severely cut public funding for higher education, prompting mass protests in 2019, when thousands of students, faculty, and staff marched in more than two hundred cities across Brazil to protest budget cuts in education.

### Relevant Trends in Brazilian Higher Education

**WHILE UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY AND** academic freedom are enshrined in Brazil’s constitution, Brazil has seen some of the most drastic decline in academic freedom globally over the past ten years. Trends towards privatization and the dependence of public institutions on government funding have placed a financial strain on both graduate and undergraduate students, triggering activism. Moreover, former President Bolsonaro engaged in a concerted attack on university autonomy and academic freedom.

Brazil’s higher education sector is comprised of both public and private institutions. Public institutions, which tend to be more highly ranked, are entirely dependent on federal, state, and municipal governments. While undergraduate students tend to study at private universities, graduate students tend to study at pub-

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14 “História da UNE.”


20 Kaiser (2019, May 15).


22 Dos Santos Paula (2019, June 5).
lic universities. Private higher education expanded significantly in the 1990s, with enrollment increasing rapidly and the number of higher education institutions doubling. In the 2000s, under former (and current) president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his successor Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s state and federal universities expanded significantly, offering free tuition, food, and transportation subsidies as well as developing affirmative action programs.

Brazil’s constitution gives the leader of the executive, the president, the authority to appoint the rector of federal universities. In 1999, Brazil’s Supreme Court underscored the right of the president to appoint rectors by saying that federal universities could not hold direct elections or appoint the heads of faculty or rectors. In 2019, Bolsonaro attempted a Provisional Measure (PM 914/2019) that eliminated the participation of university councils in selecting university rectors by enabling a temporary rector who could appoint university deans without holding elections or consultations at the respective university. Congress refused to convert the measure into law. In 2020, Bolsonaro used the COVID-19 pandemic as a justification for another Provisional Measure (M 979/2020) that gave the Ministry of Education the power to appoint temporary deans not appointed by the academic communities. Protests by academics, civil society, and political parties led the President of the Senate to reject the Measure, and Bolsonaro was forced to rescind it.

While historically the president has appointed the first name on a list of names chosen by committees at each university, former President Bolsonaro veered away from this practice, issuing provisional measures to increase his authority over the appointment of rectors by changing how they were chosen and assigned to positions. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro was able to use his constitutional authority to appoint at least 18 rectors.

Moreover, while the Brazilian constitution gives public universities patrimonial and financial self-governance, this is limited by the fact that they are dependent on the government for much of their budget. At the beginning of 2019, Bolsonaro’s Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub cut the education budget drastically. He initially proposed that these cuts be targeted at three universities most responsible for “disorder,” but subsequently expanded these cuts to all federal universities.

26 Mendes et al. (2020).
28 Scholars at Risk (2022, April 20).
29 Rectors are typically appointed based on direct elections within academic communities. These elections result in lists of three candidates developed by university councils, which are forwarded to the President for appointment. From the time of the government of Lula da Silva, the norm was for the president to nominate the first candidate on the list. However, Bolsonaro has refused to nominate candidates aligned with the political left and instead appointed candidates ranked second or third, or in some cases candidates not on the lists at all. See Ao Menos 18 Das (2021, September 19).
30 Mendes et al. (2020).
31 Green (2019).
Repression of Brazilian Student Activism: The Role of Anti-Intellectualism

We identified five cases of physical repression that occurred within the climate of ideological and rhetorical repression during the past two years. Each of these involved student protests over cuts to higher education spending or against government figures. For example, on May 12, 2021 students at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul protested an appearance by Minister of Education Milton Ribeiro at the headquarters of Rádio Guaíba following cuts to higher education. Local security forces fired ammunition and pepper spray into the crowd to disperse protestors and arrested three students, Júlio Câmara, Daniel Oliveira, and Gustavo Cirello. The students were investigated for “minor bodily harm” and released later that evening.\(^{32}\)

However, repression of student activism has been primarily rhetorical rather than physical. Recent acts impinging on academic freedom, university autonomy, and student activism in Brazil are bolstered by a growing ideology of anti-leftism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-science. In recent years, Brazil’s far right has engaged in concerted attacks against Brazil’s system of higher education.\(^{33}\) Former Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub was accusing universities of being responsible for left-wing indoctrination, calling them centers of “cultural Marxism” and “gender ideology.”\(^{34}\) Within his tenure, both sociology and philosophy was cut, because of their perceived threat to traditional morals and values within the nation.\(^{35}\) Moreover, former President Bolsonaro explicitly sought to delegitimize student activists. In a 2019 interview, after tens of thousands of students and teachers protested against budget cuts to education, the former president stated that student protestors were “useful idiots ... being used as a maneuver by a smart minority that makes up the core of federal universities in Brazil.”\(^{36}\)

Among the attacks that the far right has leveled against Brazil’s universities is the accusation that they promote “gender ideology.” This includes support for women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights, sex and gender rights, and reproductive rights.\(^{37}\) This discourse has directly led to attacks on student advocates of LGBTQIA+ rights, with acts against the LGBTQIA+ community or people of color being viewed as acts in support of former President Bolsonaro and the far right. For example, according to Scholars at Risk, in 2019 a student at the University of Fortaleza was raped for being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. The student had also received racist threats.\(^{38}\)

This rhetoric has led to threats against students and helps to justify physical repression of student activism when it occurs. For example, on October 31, 2018, a letter slipped into the office of student representatives at the Federal University of Pará threatened to “exterminate” marginalized students, including LGBTQIA+ students, students of color, and student activists. The letter mentioned two elected student representatives by name. A letter found on the campus of the State University of Pernambuco on November 8, 2018 threatened to purge the university of “all communists.”\(^{39}\) During the 2018 presidential elections in which former President Bolsonaro came to power, a series of judicial orders enabled

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\(^{33}\) Mendes et al. (2020).

\(^{34}\) Green (2019).

\(^{35}\) Green (2019).


\(^{37}\) Kaiser (2019, May 15).

\(^{38}\) Mendes et al. (2020).


\(^{39}\) Scholar at Risk (2022).
police to raid university campuses, interrupt events and classes, interrogate students and professors, and remove material they said contained “illegal political content.”

Particularly since former President Bolsonaro’s election, Brazilian student activists have faced an extremely difficult climate that has undermined intellectualism and suppressed mobilization for social justice. Time will tell to what extent the election of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva means that the tide may be turning for student activists.

Istanbul, Saturday, March 27, 2021 - Students and faculty at Istanbul’s prestigious Boğaziçi University have been demonstrating since January against Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s appointment of Melih Bulu, an academic who once ran for parliament as a candidate for Erdogan’s party, as the new rector. (AP Photo/Emrah Gurel)
TURKEY IS RATED AS having extremely limited academic freedom,¹ and the Turkish government has severely repressed activism in the past several years. Historically, university students have played a significant role in pushing for political and social change. While student activism was relatively limited during the 1990s, the Turkish student movement has become increasingly active over the past 15 years. Since January 2021, student activists have pushed for university autonomy and affordable housing for students. The Turkish government has brutally and violently repressed this activism, with Turkish police arresting hundreds of student protestors. Moreover, the government has rhetorically justified this repression by labeling student activists as “terrorists” and “perverts,” and by mobilizing homophobic sentiment by linking student groups to LGBTQIA+ agendas. This has resulted in a risky and threatening environment particularly for LGBTQIA+ students.

¹ See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Turkey: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
Students have been a significant political force in Turkey since the 1960s and 1970s, engaging in both violent and nonviolent activism. Turkey’s 1961 constitution, created following the 1960 military coup, allowed civil and political freedoms to a significant extent, enabling the growth of student clubs. During this decade, left-wing activism and socialist, anti-imperialist, anti-Western ideologies dominated the universities. The prominent right-wing populist Justice Party (Adalet Partisi—AP) was hostile to student movements. When it began to advocate for stronger relationships with the West, student groups began using violence in an effort to bring about a socialist revolution.

Student mobilization during the 1970s was characterized by the rise of conservative nationalist and religious groups. During the decade, the Turkish government viewed the left-wing ideology that had previously characterized the student movement as a threat to national security. The government supported Islamist and nationalist groups in an effort to fight against communism. A March 1971 coup in Turkey and the declaration of martial law severely impeded the expansion of socialist groups, with most left-wing student activists either arrested or executed. During this period, nationalist, religious student groups became widely popular, but also clashed with left-wing student groups and others who engaged in “libertine behavior,” using violence as a form of political activism. During the 1970s, these groups also began to advocate for more radical political and social transformations in accordance with Islam.

The Turkish military retook control of the state in a coup on September 12, 1980, legitimizing its actions by pointing to social polarization and to the violence used by student groups. The military characterized young people as “rebels” and threats to the nation. Student organizations were banned and student leaders arrested and imprisoned. When creating the new 1982 constitution, the military declared that a major goal was depoliticizing Turkish society, blaming the instability and political violence that occurred under the previous government on over-politicization. Thus, in the wake of the coup and in the face of significant repression, student mobilization slowed down during the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1990s saw limited student activism, mostly focused on rising tuition costs. In the mid-1990s, after the government proposed a tuition increase that would double university fees, students organized, demanding the abolition of tuition costs. Students used a mix of violent and nonviolent tactics, including occupying university campuses, protesting at the National Parliament in Ankara, and violently clashing with police. While these protests were not successful in abolishing university fees, they highlighted human rights issues, such as the freedom of assembly and right to protest, and aligned the student movement with a broader democratization movement.

In the mid-2000s, students began to mobilize again—
this time more successfully. In 2008, students again protested tuition increases. Student groups also began to emerge. In 2006, Öğrenci Kolektifleri (Student Collectives—ÖK) was founded without legal status as an “independent, legitimate, militant democratic mass organization of all university students.” ÖK is inherently confrontational and activistic in its approach, focusing on “street politics” rather than organized politics. In 2013, the Fikir Kulüpleri Federasyonu (Federation of Debating Societies—FKF) and the Asistan Dayanışması (Assistant Solidarity), a group of mostly PhD research assistants, were established, both intending to stand up against government control of higher education. All three of these groups were significant actors in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, originally organized in opposition to plans to develop a mall where Istanbul’s Gezi Park is located. The protests evolved into a movement with more diverse demands, including environmentalism and anti-authoritarianism.

The last couple of years, since the beginning of 2021, have seen some of the most widespread student protests since the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Protests have intensified over several issues, including the government’s appointment of several university rectors and a lack of affordable student housing.

On January 1, 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed new rectors to five public universities, a power granted to him by the Higher Education Act of 1981 (see below for more detail). Among these, the appointment of Melih Bulu as trustee rector of Boğaziçi University, the top public university in Istanbul, triggered a particularly strong backlash among students and some faculty. Previously, the University had been viewed as having avoided the most severe government influence and having maintained itself as an island of dissent and debate. Students viewed the appointment of Bulu, a member of President Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and an outsider to Boğaziçi University, as an act infringing on academic freedom, university autonomy, and democracy. The appointment sparked a wave of protests that lasted through the spring at Boğaziçi University and universities across the country. In the late summer, President Erdoğan replaced Bulu with Mehmet Naci İnci, a move that prompted renewed student protests across the country.

Another wave of the student movement emerged in September 2021. Calling their movement Barnamyoruz Hareket (“We Can’t Shelter”), university students from across the country began sleeping outdoors protesting high dormitory costs, limited dormitory accommodations, and rising rents. These protests evolved into more general contention over worsening economic conditions, including the cost of living, gas, and electricity, and continued into 2022.
Relevant Trends in Turkish Higher Education

IN THE PAST TWO decades, Turkey has seen a significant growth in higher education. In 2005, the government announced a policy to expand higher education by ensuring that every province would have at least one public university. As a result, between 2006 and 2008, the government established 41 new public universities, increasing the number of public universities from 53 in 2005 to 104 in 2014. The number of private universities saw a similar increase, growing from 25 institutions in 2005 to 72 in 2014.\(^{22}\)

The higher education system has been governed by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), established after the 1980 military coup. The Higher Education Act (#2547) of November 6, 1981 established the YÖK as a mechanism for regulating higher education. Prior to 1980, within Turkey’s system of higher education, universities and other institutions of higher education were governed under different laws. This was viewed as contributing to inequity and inefficiency within the education system. The YÖK was established as a mechanism for addressing this problem and was granted the authority to regulate enrollments and organization and academic affairs.\(^{23}\)

However, the YÖK significantly reduced university autonomy. Prior to 1981, important university positions, such as rector and dean, had been filled through elections. The new Higher Education Act made the YÖK in charge of appointing these positions. Moreover, this proved a vehicle for government interference in university administration since all members of the YÖK were subject to presidential approval. The Higher Education Act of 1981 also expressly limited academic freedom by stating that the principle did not include the freedom to operate against the existence of the state and integrity of the nation.\(^{24}\)

The precise nature of the relationship between the YÖK, government, and universities has varied over the past forty years. For instance, in 1992, the universities revolted against YÖK authority and began appointing their own rectors.\(^{25}\) However, the 2016 coup attempt against the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan resulted in a significant crackdown on universities. A state of emergency was enacted from 2016 to 2018. During this time, professors were purged from the universities en masse, some universities were shut down, and other universities were split up. An October 2016 decree amended Article 13 of the Higher Education Law (#2547) by revoking the right of universities to elect their rectors and giving the president the authority to select the rectors from a list of three candidates proposed by the YÖK.\(^{26}\) In addition, in recent years, university rectors have indicated that local authorities intervene in university administration processes, including staff recruitment.\(^{27}\)
Repression of Turkish Student Activism: Lawfare and Delegitimization

SINCE 2021, POLITICAL REPRESsION in Turkey has been both physical and discursive. In total we identified 59 events of repression. Police have responded brutally to student protests, including by arresting, detaining, and assaulting student demonstrators.28 For instance, on February 1, 2021, students, faculty, and other activists gathered at Boğaziçi University campus to peacefully protest Bulu’s installment as rector, police prevented the demonstrators from entering campus and students and faculty already on campus from leaving. They detained 108 people during the day as they tried to enter the campus. Students and faculty on campus demonstrated in front of the rector’s office and police detained 51 of those demonstrators in the evening.29 Similar events continued throughout 2021. Likewise, on September 28, 2021, police arrested 80 students protesting in Izmir and Ankara as part of the Barınamıyoruz Hareketi movement.30

The Turkish government has bolstered police brutality by using demeaning and delegitimizing rhetoric.31 Government officials and right-wing groups have called student protestors “LGBT perverts” and “terrorists.”32 The government specifically linked protests over Bulu’s appointment as Boğaziçi University rector to the LGBTQIA+ movement after a student art collective organized an exhibition protesting the government. One of the exhibition pieces replaced the Kaaba in Mecca with a Turkish folklore figure and the LGBTQIA+ rainbow flag and the trans pride flag.33 These rhetorical attacks paint LGBTQIA+ individuals as “instigators of unrest and deviants who violate Turkish and Islamic values.”34

Rhetoric is matched with targeted physical violence against LGBTQIA+ activists,35 including the detention of students for carrying LGBTQIA+ flags36 and repression of Pride marches. For example, on June 10, 2022, police arrested students marching in an LGBTQIA+ Pride parade at Middle East Technical University, assaulting students and detaining 38 student protestors.37

Moreover, the government rhetoric has emboldened other groups. On June 17, 2022, right-wing nationalist and religious groups threatened members of Istanbul University’s LGBTQIA+ community, forcing them to cancel a picnic scheduled for Pride week. Some students went ahead with the picnic anyway, and police detained 26 of them.38 The case of Turkey illustrates the ways that rhetoric can intensify repression, legitimize government violence, and trigger violence against other groups within society.

35 Bahar (2022).

(AP Photo by Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi)
ZIMBABWE RATES AS HAVING relatively low levels of academic freedom.¹ The country illustrates the ways in which student activism is repressed through threat, coercion, and lawfare, including the criminalization of students who engage in protests. University students have been important political activists in Zimbabwe since the struggle for independence, and recent student activism has focused on improving access to education and the creation of a safe learning environment for all students. This activism has been severely curtailed through surveillance and criminalization, with the law being used to prevent public demonstrations and actions.

¹ See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Zimbabwe: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
ZIMBABWEAN STUDENT ACTIVISTS HAVE been important political actors since the anti-colonial struggle beginning in the mid-1960s. In the decades since independence, students have played a significant role as activists both in support of the ruling party and among the political opposition. For instance, student activism played a significant role in helping form the political elite that would become members of the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU—later ZANU-PF), the ruling party of Zimbabwe in the post-independence period.\(^2\)

In the initial post-independence period in Zimbabwe, student activists were largely supportive of the government, continuing to celebrate student involvement in the fight for national liberation. This changed in 1988 as students began to protest government corruption in alliance with labor activists and nascent opposition parties. This anti-government activism intensified in the mid-1990s as ZANU-PF began implementing structural adjustment programs and privatization. Combined with a significant expansion of students attending university, these reforms profoundly strengthened hardships for students, for example through increased education costs.\(^3\)

Since that time, Zimbabwean student activism has been a significant vehicle for anti-government opposition. In the mid- to late 1990s, student activism began to converge with broader urban struggles, the political opposition, and the movement for democracy and social change. In 1997, the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) was formed, becoming a forum for students to articulate political demands. ZINASU argued that only through political reform would the government fulfill the right to free education.\(^4\)

In recent years, in addition to organizing around broader governance issues, student activists have engaged in contention primarily around access to education, including the question of school fees. One Zimbabwean human rights advocate explains: “What we have seen recently have been arrests because of the economic situation that is happening. There’s been some increase of fees across the universities. So, you have seen that students have reacted to this.”

Moreover, students have organized to demand a greater say in decisions about school fees. One former student activist—now a students’ rights advocate—explains:

> They were not involving students in the decision-making process. I was the Secretary-General … In the code of conduct of the institutions, they stipulate that whenever there are reviews of fees, a member of the Student Representative Council is supposed to be there. And it is necessary to give time for the member of the Student Representative Council to go back to the students and reflect, ‘this is the proposed structure of the fees that we have’ and to discuss with the students, ‘what do you think? How best do you think we can pay these fees?’ And, yeah, it was not done in that way. So that process was guiding us to say, ‘you are saying something in the constitution, but you are practicing something which is different.’\(^6\)
COVID-19 AND THE ADVENT of e-learning also deeply affected student activism. Zimbabwe is a relatively rural country, and not all areas of the country have strong internet access. Therefore, in the past few years, student activists have focused on extending the access to data. Significantly, these efforts were relatively successful. A former student activist explains:

This is a developing country, and we don’t have the necessary infrastructure to support e-learning … and our point, of course, was that it’s impossible to say that e-learning is going to benefit every student because some of these students, they are coming from villages. They are coming from places where the network is very difficult to access ….

So, we started to advocate for access to data. We managed to do that. I still remember because I was managing this campaign. It's one of the things that I'm proud of because we also saw network providers provide an e-learning bundle, a subsidized bandwidth.… It was a good step. But it was not enough for us because we also felt like, 'Okay, we have students who are in villages with no electricity. Even if you have a laptop, how are you going to have access?'

A FOURTH ISSUE THAT has received the attention of both student activists and human rights advocates in recent years is the issue of sexual harassment and abuse. Student activists have focused on protecting female and LGBTQIA+ students from harassment by professors, lecturers, and other students.⁸

Finally, cross-cutting other issues, student activists have organized against police brutality and, more generally, around the safety and protection of student activists. For example, student activists have protested the detention and maltreatment of their peers, such as on February 26, 2021 when students held a press conference in front of Harare’s Magistrate court demanding that opposition activist and student leader Makomborero Haruzivishe be released. Haruzivishe had been held in detention after being detained for incitement nine days earlier.⁹ Six students were arrested following the press conference.

To achieve their demands, Zimbabwean student activists often slowly escalate their activism, beginning with going through the Student Representative Council within the university to write letters or petitions to the university administration or to the political parties or relevant parliamentary portfolio committees. If there is no response, they then may reach out to journalists and issue a press statement. After that, they may engage in strikes, refuse to attend lectures, or organize public demonstrations.¹⁰ Each subsequent form of activism comes with additional risks.

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Interview with Zimbabwean human rights advocates, September 29, 2022, October 6, 2022, October 13, 2022, and January 5, 2023.
⁹ Haruzivishe was arrested during a protest at the Impala car rental premises. The protest alleged that rental cars were being used to abduct civil society and opposition activists. See:
¹⁰ Interview with Zimbabwean human rights and students advocate, January 5, 2023.
Relevant Trends in Zimbabwean Higher Education

Shortly following Zimbabwe’s independence, then Prime Minister Mugabe stated that “Higher education is too important a business, to be left entirely to the deans, professors, lecturers, and the university administrators.” In 1982, the government passed the University of Zimbabwe Act, making the President the Chancellor of the university. While Zimbabwe’s government generally respected academic freedom, confrontations between students and academics and the government began to increase in the late 1980s. In November 1990, the University of Zimbabwe Amendment Act, passed after a rushed debate, expanded the government’s powers to discipline university staff and students.

Today, there are 24 registered universities in Zimbabwe, including 14 public institutions and 10 private institutions. The higher education system is state controlled through the Ministry of Higher Education, Innovation, Science, and Technology, with the government in charge of university policies, appointments of university leadership positions, and remuneration. Public universities are governed by an Act of Parliament which names Zimbabwe’s state president as the chancellor of all public universities. Private universities are governed by charters and can appoint a chancellor of their choice. At public universities, the president appoints vice chancellors. The Vice Chancellor, Ministry of Higher Education, and University Councils make other top university appointments. These officials have absolute power to both suspend and expel students.

Repression of Zimbabwean Student Activism: Lawfare, Surveillance, and Self-Censorship

The most overt form of repression that student activists face in Zimbabwe is criminalization through lawfare. More subtle, yet perhaps even more widespread than criminalization, are penalties within the university setting, such as threats of or actual disciplinary actions taken by university administrations against student activists.

Among the more overt forms of repression, laws, such as the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (2019), are used to restrict activism, with students who engage in public demonstrations being charged with disrupting the public order. Public health restrictions enacted because of the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily reduced the...
civic space in which students could organize even more.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, policies such as the National Youth Policy, which provides for the holistic development of young people, excludes “un-patriotic students.” Some parties argue that the policy has been used to quiet students who are vocal about social and political issues.\textsuperscript{18}

In the same vein, a newly gazetted bill, the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act Amendment, popularly known as the “Patriotic Bill,” could further shrink civic space. The bill is modeled off of the United States Logan Act, which forbids unauthorized American citizens from negotiating with foreign governments that are involved in conflicts with the U.S. However, observers fear that the Bill could be used to punish people, including students, who engage in “un-patriotic” acts while abroad by speaking ill of Zimbabwe or its government.\textsuperscript{19}

In our research, we identified eighteen cases in which Zimbabwean student activists were detained, arrested, and charged with crimes in 2021 and 2022, with a total of 88 student activists affected. One person explains: “The trend has been to arrest the student leaders, or even ordinary students, who are involved in these petitions and demonstrations, to try to put out a clear message that you cannot oppose these.”\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, at least 16 students were forced to leave Zimbabwe in 2021 and 2022 because of fear of persecution. These students fled to countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom in order to pursue higher education.\textsuperscript{21} The Zimbabwe Human Rights Monitors Platform (ZHRMP) and ZINASU reported that arrests, beatings, threats, and expulsions of student activists increased from 2018 to 2021, after Mugabe was replaced as president by Emmerson Mnangagwa in 2017.\textsuperscript{22}

Student activists who are considered a threat to Zimbabwe’s government are subject to forced disappearances, abductions, and arrests. As one human rights advocate explains: “In our context, the law is being used as the tool or the weapon to silence the voice of the students ... they normally use arrest on flimsy grounds, on frivolous charges, to try to suppress and silence the voice of the student.” He continues: “In most cases, they will charge you for disorderly conduct, charge you for convening a gathering without notifying the regulatory authorities, charge you for inciting public violence.”\textsuperscript{23}

During protests, the government often deploys anti-riot police, who physically repress demonstrations using teargas and beatings. Students affiliated with ZINASU or the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) are particularly at risk of facing repression.\textsuperscript{24} For instance, in June 2021, ZINASU’s education and research secretary, Kudzaishe Mavhumashava, told journalists that the government had apparently told police to arrest anyone wearing ZINASU apparel.\textsuperscript{25}

These reported forms of repression are likely only the tip of the iceberg. Reporting abuses requires a significant amount of trust and can be difficult psychologically. As one human and students rights advocate puts it, intimidation and torture, as well as threats to one’s family are particularly difficult details to share: “If you’re not strong enough, you cannot share with anyone.”\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, the abuses faced by female student activists are likely severely under-reported.\textsuperscript{27}

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\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Zimbabwean human rights advocate, October 17, 2022.

\textsuperscript{21} ZHRMP (2022).

\textsuperscript{22} ZHRMP and ZINASU (2021).

\textsuperscript{23} Interview conducted with Zimbabwean human rights advocate, October 17, 2022.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{26} Interview conducted with Zimbabwean human and students rights advocate, January 5, 2023.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Furthermore, a variety of policies targeting universities constrain student activism. A 2022 amendment to the State Universities Statutes Bill that aims, among other things, to make disciplinary procedures consistent among public universities, standardizes fines placed on “errant” students. Since it does not define what “errant” means, this amendment is likely to be used to quell student activism.

Additionally, beyond the threat of arrest, criminalization, torture, abduction, and abuse, student activists in Zimbabwe face an environment of pervasive surveillance—forms of repression that are particularly difficult to track or quantify. State security forces are deployed publicly and covertly on campus. One interviewee describes the presence of individuals on campus who had been “students” (in reality state security agents or informants) for decades. Another interviewee elaborates:

There is no freedom of speech. It’s actively curtailed and there’s heavy censorship of who is saying what. Even in the Student Council—which is meant to represent the students or to carry or amplify the voices of student activists—is a highly polarized structure. You’ll find maybe that the president of the Student Council is probably an infiltration of State Security... So it makes it quite difficult and unsafe for any activism because you’re not sure whether everyone is genuinely a student or they’re just an extension of the State Security.

The same person explains that the government of Zimbabwe provides a course on political administration each year. Many of the students who attend that course end up being absorbed into the Student Council within the different universities, where “they play the role of feeding information to State Security.” The person goes on:

So, for instance, when students are planning—it could even be a silent demonstration—or they’re planning a petition or whatever that they want to present to the university Vice Chancellor, they are thinking that they are planning with a student board. But before they know it, there might be riot police or soldiers or army that are then deployed on the university campus to thwart any of those efforts.

According to interviewees and researchers, this surveillance extends even into personal space on campus. Phone conversations and social media accounts are surveilled. Gukurume (2019) writes:

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29 Conversation with students rights advocate, December 20, 2022.
30 Ibid.
31 Interview conducted with human rights advocate, November 22, 2022.
32 Interview conducted with human rights advocate, September 29, 2022.
33 Ibid.
What struck me was that students could not even trust their own rooms as spaces where they freely discuss political matters. For them, the state security had eyes and ears, which seem to be everywhere at any time and space. Their thoughts were that the government had installed listening devices in the walls. Such was the habituated nature of surveillance on campus that most students feared the walls between which they lived and conducted lectures.  

IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, SELF-CENSORSHIP is pervasive and the space for engaging in public activism is severely limited. Students are afraid to speak out. Human rights advocates modify the language they use: “You do not have a context where you say ‘I’m a student activist.’ No, you might call yourself a student champion or a champion for this cause. Using words like activism, change, human rights seems antagonistic to the government of this day.”

According to those interviewed, public and collective student activism has been severely curtailed in recent years. One human rights advocate describes it as follows: “In previous years, students conducted demonstrations when they needed a collective response to something. They would do petitions. They would actually hold meetings with responsible people within the learning institutions. We’ve been seeing less and less of this over the years.” In this climate the arrests and lengthy incarcerations of high-profile student activists may be quelling student activism. Examples include the cases of Haruzivishe, described above, who was imprisoned for nearly a year, and Takudzwa Ngadziore, the former ZINASU president, who was one of the six detained while protesting Haruzivishe’s arrest and who has been arrested multiple times.

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36 Interview conducted with Zimbabwean human and students rights advocate, January 5, 2023.
37 Interview conducted with Zimbabwean human rights advocate, September 29, 2022.
A protester stands with a Myanmar Student Union flag during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon on February 7, 2021.

(Photo by STR / AFP)
MYANMAR IS RATED AS having an extremely limited degree of academic freedom. Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has seen a dramatic decline in all freedoms, including academic freedom and severe repression directed at student activists. University students in Myanmar are revising the role that they played in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s as leading actors in the fight against authoritarianism and military dictatorship. For this, they have been systematically arrested and persecuted. Of all countries analyzed in this report, Myanmar overwhelmingly illustrates the severe brutality of physical repression against student activists.

1 See, for example, V-Dem’s variable graph for the Academic Freedom Index for Myanmar: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
A Brief History of Student Activism in Myanmar

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS HAVE BEEN leaders of political activism in Myanmar for much of the past hundred years. They played a significant role in the country’s struggles against British rule, with Rangoon University serving as the locus of Burmese nationalism. During British colonial rule, students engaged in a boycott (1920) and strikes (1936 and 1938), protesting against university reforms implemented by the British colonial administration in the form of the University of Rangoon Act. Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s, the student movement became increasingly well organized. In 1923, the Rangoon University Students’ Union (RUSU) was established, providing a forum for students and political leaders to discuss the more pressing political and social issues. The 1936 strike, which started in protest after several Rangoon University students were expelled for criticizing university authorities, led to the establishment of the All Burma Students’ Union (ABSU), which remains an important political actor today.

In the post-independence period, university students became the country’s primary pro-democracy advocates and opponents to the military junta that took control of the country, beginning in the 1960s. This activism has peaked and waned over the last 60 years as the character of the government and its approach towards university student organizing has shifted.

In 1962, General Ne Win took control of Burma in a military coup, initiating decades of military rule. For the first twenty-five years of the military dictatorship, university students were the most important activists in Burmese society. For example, they engaged in large-scale protests in 1962 against the dictatorship’s annulment of the Rangoon University Act, which had previously preserved university autonomy. In 1974, they again led society-wide protests against the dictatorship, triggered by the government’s refusal to hold a state funeral for the third United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, who was Burmese. Koon-Hong (2014) argues that students were particularly important activists during the period from 1962 to 1988 because they were the only group to engage in opposition to the military government. While the dictatorship suppressed political parties, opposition groups, and civil society in general, students were able to use their university campuses as spaces to organize opposition to educational policies and authoritarianism. Forming secret political study groups, they established an informal network maintained by personal connections that enabled them to mobilize against the government.

In 1988, a popular pro-democracy uprising led to the resignation of General Ne Win and resulted in the establishment of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) through a military coup. Students were the driving force behind the 1988 Uprising. It was, in part, triggered by two incidents that took place in March 1988, about five months before the Uprising, in which dozens of university students were killed and hundreds injured or arrested. These events prompted students to mobilize and form a general strike committee in June 1988, prompting a general strike on August 8, 1988 (8/8/88) in which thousands of people marched around the country. After the military fired on demon-
strators that evening, demonstrations continued to grow or weeks into a nation-wide uprising. With even some soldiers joining the protests. Thousands of civilians were killed or injured. Even some soldiers joined the protests.7

The 1988 Uprising led to a degree of democratic opening, including the establishment of a new opposition party (Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy) and elections that took place for the first time in decades.8 However, it also resulted in tightened political control over university campuses and the full-scale repression of student activism. Almost all student leaders were arrested following the 1988 coup and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) was dissolved.9 In his analysis of student activism in Myanmar, Koon-Hong (2014) writes that the imprisonment of student leaders in 1988 led to a “lost generation” of student activists because there were few leaders left to recruit new members to the student movement after 1988. In addition, as described below, the military government closed universities for years to prevent students from organizing. The 1990s saw a handful of student demonstrations led by student political prisoners who had been released from jail.10 For instance, the biggest protest since 1988 occurred between October and December 1996 when over 1,000 students demonstrated after police beat three Rangoon Institute of Technology students.11 However, once civil society began to open up after 2000, the student movement had been weakened. During the Saffron Revolution, only 10% of demonstrators were students,12 despite the fact that leaders of the 88 Generation Students’ Group led the demonstrations against fuel prices that set off the uprising.

Political control over student organizing began to ease up around 2013, with the ABFSU re-establishing itself in 2012. However, student unions continued to operate somewhat independently, with varying approaches towards criticizing the government. Accordingly, during the 2010s, university student movements across different institutions focused on advocating for educational rather than political reform.13 For example, in 2015, student groups called for four concurrent marches across the country meeting in Yangon.14 Among their demands were political freedom, educational autonomy, an increased national budget for education, Burmese to be the main teaching language, and mother tongue-based multilingual education.15 Most of these marches were suspended after student representatives entered into negotiations with government officials and parliamentarians. However, students in Letpadan in the Bago Region chose to march anyway, leading to a standoff with police that lasted eight days.16 Police met the students with excessive force, arrests of student leaders and protestors, and lengthy detentions.17

In 2020, student protests again turned political, with students protesting the Burmese military assault

8 The 1988 Uprising also spurred a period of slow democratization under military rule culminating in a democratic transition in 2016
12 Hong & Kim (2019).
13 Koon-Hong (2019).
16 Amnesty International (2016, March 10)
and repression in Rakhine state. Moreover, since 2021, students have been at the forefront of the political opposition to the most recent military coup, which took place in February of that year. After refusing to accept the results of the 2020 election, in which the National League for Democracy won more than 80% of parliamentary seats, the Myanmar military declared a national emergency and seized control of the government in a military coup. Demonstrations that took place immediately following the 2021 coup were violently repressed, and multiple fronts of resistance have developed into the ongoing Spring Revolution: a peaceful Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and a National Unity Government (NUG), formed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which is led by deposed president Aung San Suu Kyi and lawmakers who had been elected as part of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). While the resistance forces remain divided, the NUG represents one among a variety of efforts to bring greater cohesion to the pro-democracy opposition. The NUG controls some territory in Myanmar, and provides some services, including online education, as described below. In addition, more than 300 new armed groups have been formed since the coup, including People’s Defense Forces.

Students and other young people have been among the most prominent leaders in the civil defense movement and are also involved in the armed resistance. Since the beginning of the coup, university student unions have helped organize popular street protests, and student unions participated in the CDM by leading campaigns to boycott classes after the military junta tried to reopen schools and universities in May 2021. In this context, attending school or university has become a political choice, with the military government pressuring students to return to school to give the appearance of normality. Yet, even a year later, attendance remained low.

Students have also been part of the armed resistance. For example, the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF), founded in 1988 in opposition to the military government, includes an armed wing that has fought in alliance with the People’s Defence Force since early 2022. Some students are fighting alongside armed ethnic groups, and young people, including students, have also trained in guerrilla warfare with ethnic armed groups and returned to cities to engage in urban struggle.
Relevant Trends in Myanmar Higher Education

Since the Burmese government annulled the Rangoon University Act in 1962, there has been no university autonomy in Myanmar. The government finances education and determines curriculae, assessment and staffing. During the country’s decades of military control, the government in essence nationalized all universities and colleges and enacted laws severely limiting academic freedom. Such measures included prohibiting the freedom of association, English language teaching, and the use of international textbooks. While as of 2019 there were some private institutions providing higher education, these institutions are not accredited and cannot grant degrees. Instead, the Ministry of Education directly controls 134 out of the 175 institutions of higher education in the country, with the other 41 controlled by the Ministry of Defense (6), Ministry of Border Affairs (3), Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture (4), Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (7), Ministry of Transportation and Communication (2), Ministry of Health and Sports (16), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (1), and the Union Civil Services Board.

Moreover, the government has repeatedly closed universities in order to suppress activism. For instance, universities were closed from 1975 to 1976 in response to student protests over U Thant’s funeral. After the 1988 uprising, the government tightened its grip on universities in a targeted effort to prevent students from organizing. Universities in Yangon were shut from the end of 1988 until July 1991 and repeatedly closed during the 1990s, including for four years from 1996 to 2000. Between 1988 and 2000, universities only operated a total of 36–40 months. Moreover, some of the major universities, including Yangon University, Yangon Technological University, and Mandalay University stopped admitting undergraduate students after 1996.

In recognition of the role that the physical space of the university campus played in enabling students to organize from 1962 to 1988, the military government split universities into multiple institutions over the course of the next two decades. The act was widely seen as an attempt to disperse university students and make it more difficult for them to organize. For example, Yangon University was split into Dagon University (established in 1993), the University of East Yangon (established in 2002), among several other institutions. Urban campuses were relocated to more remote and rural areas, where student hostels were not established. Students were then forced to spend an average of three to four hours commuting to school every day, giving them less time and energy to spend on activities outside of class.

Higher Education reforms initiated after 2010 concentrated primarily on setting new standards for education and upgrading educational facilities, and did little to address the lack of autonomy. The National Education Law drafted before the end of the previous military government remained in effect and lacked provisions to support the democratization of education. As of 2019, the Ministry of Education continued to employ all faculty.
and staff of universities and to transfer them regularly between institutions. While the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–2021 made university autonomy a priority, only 16 universities in the Yangon and Mandalay Regions were taking part in a pilot project for institutional autonomy as of September 1, 2016.

The February 2021 coup again had a significant impact on higher education. In the wake of the coup, universities were closed and the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, took over university campuses to use as barracks. Moreover, since the coup, as described above, student unions have urged students not to return to classes, arguing that doing so normalizes the military’s rule.

The quality of higher education has also suffered since the military coup. Higher education staff have resigned and the Tatmadaw reportedly exerts pressure on education, viewing academic freedom and critical thinking as a threat to its rule, according to some academics.

On the other hand, students supportive of the coup have sought to ensure that education continues through alternative means. For instance, in May 2021, approximately 150 students founded Spring University of Myanmar (SUM), aligned with the NUG. By August of the same year, there were approximately 1,600 “active members” of the university. The university provides certificate and vocational courses and community education, and it supports virtual campus life. SUM has also partnered with foreign universities, such as Columbia University in the United States, to offer diploma courses. Interim University Councils, including many associated with schools of medicine, are also working with the NUG to provide virtual education and to help build a federal system of higher education for a future democratic Myanmar.

Repression of Myanmar Student Activism: Lawfare, Intimidation, and Abuse

SINCE THE FEBRUARY 2021 coup, university student activists have faced significant repression by the military government. This includes primarily arbitrary arrest and detention, ill treatment and torture under detention, physical violence, and intimidation and threats. Significantly, arrest often involves other abuses. As one person interviewed explains: “Our understanding or definition of

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46 See, for example, Spring University Myanmar Programs: https://www.springuniversitymm.com/programmes (accessed February 7, 2023).
47 Interim University Councils, including many associated with schools of medicine, are also working with the NUG to provide virtual education and to help build a federal system of higher education for a future democratic Myanmar.
being arrested is arrested, torture, harassment, and humiliation, and all the things that you can imagine.”

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), 1,155 students of all ages have been arrested since the coup and 118 killed. Students engaged in demonstrations to which police violently responded with water cannons, sound grenades, and rubber bullets. In some cases, soldiers used live ammunition. Each night, the names of people, including students, who are wanted by the military government were read aloud on television.

Arrested students have been killed in custody and also given death sentences. For example, Ko Aung Bone Kyaw died under unknown circumstances after being interrogated in prison after he was detained on December 26, 2021. Kyaw was a third-year geology student at Yangon University. His family members were not allowed to see his body before he was cremated. Student activists reported that they believed that he died from injuries sustained during his interrogation. In December 2022, Myanmar’s military government sentenced seven Dagon University students to death: Khant Zin Win, Thura, Maung Maung, Zaw Lin Naing, Thiha, Htet Zaw, Hein Htet, Thet Paing Oo, and Khant Linn Maung Maung.

Moreover, repression does not just affect activists themselves. As the person interviewed explains: “Their families left in the city are being put at risk by the people who are pro-military and the military personnel. So, they also have to worry about their family members … And the military authorities control the local administration, they control the university. They have all the addresses, and they come to your house. And if you are not there, your parents will be taken. Your father, your mother, your brother, your sister. You will be arrested. They will be arrested because you are anti-military.”

Consequently, Myanmar’s university student activists face significant threats from the current military junta. The most significant of these are arrests, imprisonment, and torture. In the face of these, students and student unions remain active members of the nonviolent and violent resistance, including by working with the NUG to put in place infrastructure for a democratic education system.

50 Interview with human rights advocate conducted October 17, 2022.
52 Retrieved from https://airtable.com/shrYUbzQe1hKXQ68x/tblswChRJGSzJWr7k (accessed December 14, 2022).
53 Lall (2021).
57 Interview with human rights advocate conducted October 17, 2022.
58 Frontier (2022, May 18).
59 Interview with human rights advocate conducted October 17, 2022.
ACTIVISM UNDER ATTACK — CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IN MANY COUNTRIES THE world over, university student activists have long been important members of civil society and defenders of human rights. They have not only sought to create more inclusive, equitable, and democratic higher education institutions, but have also been at the forefront of broader movements for human rights, social justice, and political change. As some of our case studies have shown, university students have often been the primary source of opposition to authoritarian and oppressive regimes. Moreover, a diverse, engaged, and free student movement on campus contributes to a lively academic environment and is important for the protection and promotion of academic freedom.

Still, despite the important role university student activists play, they are too often protected only incidentally—for instance when they are considered part of a broader category of human rights defenders—and to what extent their right to engage in activism is protected under the framework of academic freedom is ambiguous. This report has sought to make a case for strengthening efforts to both track the repression that student activists face and to ensure that they are protected along with their right to engage in activism. In order to do so, we have sought to better understand the mechanisms by which student activists are repressed as a first step towards a future indicator, monitoring, and reporting framework.

In this report, we drew on a variety of illustrative and qualitative information that reveal how physical violence and more subtle forms of repression interact to create an oppressive environment that quells student activism. While physical violence, arrests, and forced disappearances are more common in the most repressed societies, subtle forms of repression are prevalent across contexts, regardless of how open or free they are deemed.

Lawfare is perhaps the most common mechanism of repression that we identified—and the one that is most closely related to physical repression since it involves the threat of arrest. The cases of Honduras, Palestine, Myanmar, Turkey, the UK, and Zimbabwe illustrate the way that lawfare is used in varying ways to shut down dissent.

In addition, the cases of Brazil, Honduras, Turkey, and the UK illustrate the ways that authorities weaken student activism by using delegitimizing rhetoric. In some cases, like in the UK, student activists have been infantilized and dismissed as immature. In other instances, like in Honduras, student activists have been villainized—called “terrorists,” “hoodlums,” or “criminals.” Still, other forms of rhetoric serve to delegitimize student activists, such as homophobic dog whistles.

The cases of Ghana, Honduras, Morocco, and the United Kingdom illustrate how authorities can neutralize student activism by using incentives to “buy” their support or funnelling them into state-sponsored or state-sanctioned institutions. Finally, the cases of Morocco and Palestine show how factionalization can impede student activism. In such cases, authorities can fan the flames of social tensions, making student-on-student violence more likely.

This report is just a first step in understanding these different means of repression. Each mechanism of repression needs additional research and our understanding of them needs to be further developed and nuanced. We intend to do this through interviews with student activists themselves in the next edition. Moreover, this report leaves several important facets of repression unexplored. For example, how does technology facilitate repression through digital spying such as the Pegasus software? To what extent does repression extend
beyond national boundaries, as our brief discussion of Chinese surveillance illustrates? What measures do student activists take to protect themselves from repression? What is the role of diaspora communities in either protecting student activists or facilitating repression?

To better protect and promote student activism, there is a need to advance the documentation and analysis of student activism, enhance the visibility of rights violations faced by student activists and movements, and strengthen their protection. We conclude with the following recommendations for stakeholders:

**STATES**

- Acknowledge student activists and movements as key stakeholders in civil society.

- Actively engage in direct dialogue with student activists and movements and implement mechanisms for student participation in policy discussions concerning the right to education, academic freedom, and other human rights issues.

- Raise awareness and publicly acknowledge attacks on student activists and movements when reporting on human rights issues, for example, in the UN’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and regional/national equivalent processes.

- Refrain from, condemn and counter violence, hate speech and stigma against student activists and movements.

- Revise and develop laws and policies in line with international human rights norms and frameworks to prevent attacks on student activists and to protect the freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association and other human rights.

- Guarantee the full exercise of the right of access to justice refraining from criminalizing legitimate activities, and ensuring that investigations and legal proceedings are carried out with full respect for due process.

- Refrain from influencing, co-opting or polarizing student movements and their agendas for political self-interests.

- Uphold the legal autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions.
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
(Diplomatic missions, international non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental bodies)

- Engage and build a relationship of mutual trust with student activists and movements at the national and regional levels to understand their situation and gain useful insights into the political context of the country.

- Raise the issue of protection and promotion of student activism in bilateral and multilateral meetings, at the state level.

- Publicly acknowledge student activists and movements as key stakeholders in civil society, such as by visiting their headquarters, participating in their events, etc.

- Openly condemn attacks on student activists and movements, through actions such as written statements, observation of court hearings and visits to detained students, among others.

- Express concern about attacks on student activists and movements and their protection in inquiries to other states by contributing to the UN’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) processes and other regional human rights reviews, forums, and mechanisms.

- Establish and promote necessary support mechanisms such as scholarships, grants, and emergency funds, including legal assistance, at the national, regional and international levels, for at-risk student activists.

- Provide direct financial support to student movements’ work to mobilize, educate and fight for reforms.

- Raise the situation for student activism and activists with relevant national, regional and international rapporteurs, for example, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

- Develop more systematic and comprehensive methodologies and indicators as part of human rights monitoring to document violations faced by student activists and movements, as well as their needs for protection.
• Coordinate advocacy efforts and initiatives to promote and protect student activism by engaging with relevant stakeholders such as the Global Student Forum.

• Facilitate and support the representation and engagement of student movements in relevant international, regional, and national forums, to ensure their voice and participation without intermediaries.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

• Recognize and promote the role of student movements and their activism as key to protecting academic freedom and the right to education.

• Publicly express concern and condemn attacks on student activists and movements.

• Facilitate and support the representation and engagement of student movements in all levels of decision-making processes in higher education institutions.

• Promote academic research to deepen knowledge about the overt and subtle ways student activism is repressed.

• Institutionalize Student Advocacy Seminars, an initiative by Scholars at Risk, as a credited module in curriculums to increase knowledge of violations of academic freedom and how to counter them.

• Encourage initiatives such as volunteering and credit-based internships with human rights actors and civil society, to strengthen students’ political and civic identities.

• Establish and facilitate scholarships and grants for at-risk student activists from diverse backgrounds. The Norwegian Students at Risk program is an existing initiative that can serve as an example.

• Share examples of best practices so that other higher education institutions and relevant stakeholders can learn and develop similar initiatives.
MEDIA

• Cover rights violations faced by student activists and movements, as well as their demands.

• Refrain from giving a platform to stigmatizing language, statements and narratives of students and student protest, as well as justifying to public opinion the behaviour of public security forces and the disproportionate use of force and criminalization.

• Engage with student groups and relevant civil society organizations in background research when covering student protests and demands.

STUDENT MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVES

• Build knowledge and seek out capacity-building on international, regional and national human rights mechanisms and frameworks and other topics.

• Engage with other student activists and movements, relevant civil society organizations and higher education institutions and contribute to national, regional and international initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of student activism.

• Ally and strengthen existing regional and global student representation bodies like the Global Student Forum.

INDIVIDUALS

• Use your voice to show solidarity with student activists and movements where possible, such as social media, by joining protests, signing petitions, writing letters of solidarity, etc.