

Students under Attack: Who Represses Them, and Who Protects Them?

Héctor Ríos-Jara and Palak Rao

University student activism is facing increasing repression worldwide. This article reviews the “Activism under Attack” report published by the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund in 2024. The report shows that, while activism is becoming more diverse and digitally mediated, repression against activists is intensifying, even in countries considered democratic. Governments and universities are deploying increasingly stringent legal and institutional sanctions to constrain student political engagement. In times of democratic backlash, who defends universities’ civic and academic freedoms, and how?

In 2023, Dana Abu Qamar, a Palestinian international student at the University of Manchester, faced immigration enforcement after speaking at a pro-Palestinian demonstration at the university. The British Home Office attempted to revoke her student visa because her presence was “not conducive to the public good.” In 2025, Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian graduate associated with Columbia University, was detained for several months by US immigration authorities after participating in protest encampments in solidarity with Palestine. In both cases, government officials attempted to suspend students’ visa status and even considered expelling them from the country, while universities were threatened with disciplinary measures, including withdrawing visa sponsorship.

Dana’s and Mahmoud’s experiences are not isolated. Targeted violence; unjustified detentions and arrests; legal harassment; and different forms of surveillance, intimidation, and persecution have become increasingly common tools deployed by governments and universities to deal with student activists. Historically, these tactics have been systematically used by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent, limit political participation, and constrain the exercise of civil liberties. Unfortunately, recent evidence shows that these tactics have also become part of the toolkits used by governments and universities in countries considered democratic.

Contemporary Activism

In 2024, the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH) published its second “[Activism under Attack](#)” report. The study explores how university students engage in activism and what forms of repression they face. Our research draws on a survey, completed by 263 activists from 38 countries, and 28 in-depth interviews with student activists from 19 countries. The study gathers diverse perspectives, including countries with restricted academic freedom (32.61 percent), free academic environments (27.72 percent), and

severely restricted academic freedom (23.37 percent) according to the Academic Freedom Index.

The report reveals that activists engage with many political causes that usually complement each other. Per 2024 data, the most frequent agendas mobilizing participants were education issues (20.6 percent), women’s rights (19.5 percent), and politics (16.7 percent), followed by gender and sexual rights (12.3 percent), environmental issues (12.1 percent), and racism (10.4 percent).

Results also show that activism is evolving. In all, 26.6 percent of participants described online activism as their primary form of political engagement, with activities that include sharing information, creating digital content, and interacting with online communities. Around 21.3 percent of participants reported signing petitions and letters, 17.2 percent reported marching, and only 10.1 percent reported participating in strikes.

Rising Repression

More concerning are the patterns of repression related to how governments and universities are limiting student political expression. Around 31.8 percent and 26.5 percent of respondents described “fear of negative social repercussions” and “social delegitimization” as the main constraints to their political expression.

Activists also revealed that government laws and university policies are the most common constraints to their political engagement. Roughly half of participants (51.8 percent) declared being affected by national legislation, and 70.5 percent indicated that their university had “laws or policies that limit activism.”

Even activists operating in countries classified as having fully free or mostly free academic environments experienced these restrictions. For example, almost half of the respondents active in fully free countries stated that university policies affect their

political expression. This group includes participants from Norway, the United Kingdom, Chile, Portugal, and Canada.

Activists also note that academic sanctions are the most common threat universities use. Over one-third of respondents reported experiencing threats of academic failure, suspension, or expulsion, while others reported experiencing disciplinary procedures or academic penalties because of their political involvement. The interviews provided biographical examples of how rising institutional repression is affecting student political expression.

For example, a pro-democracy student activist from Eastern Europe who had participated in demonstrations on campus described his experience of being threatened with bad grades, explaining that educational authorities often relied on pressure rather than incentives: “At some point, they started to flatter me. They said: ‘You’re a good student, you have good grades, you’re the class representative. You should stop. You’re a clever guy.’” Similarly, a female activist from Central America describes her experience, saying, “They could refuse to give our diplomas for the actions we were taking. ... That makes us wonder whether the activism that we’re doing is really worth it or not for the future.”

Since 2024, these dynamics have intensified. The global wave of pro-Palestinian encampments triggered a new cycle of repression, particularly in Europe and North America, with governments and universities deploying repressive tactics to stop student political expression. These tactics include legal action, targeted surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of movement. According to the latest *Free to Think* report, between July 2024 and June 2025, there were 203 attacks on student expression and 113 incidents involving travel restrictions against students and academics.

The Challenge of Protection

The rise of repression against student activists seems to be the inevitable result of the global democratic backlash that defines our time. The weakening of democratic values and institutions,

and the rising popularity of illiberal ideologies and right-wing populism, are eroding the exercise of civil and political rights, leaving students increasingly exposed to institutional repression. In this context, attacks on student activism can only intensify while illiberal governments continue to weaken social and political rights, limit the exercise of academic freedom in universities, and question the scientific basis of our knowledge system. These actions represent direct attacks on the fundamental conditions for the existence of modern universities, which are essential pillars for the exercise of their public role.

However, there is little information about how student activists and academic communities can protect themselves and counterbalance democratic backlash. To fill this urgent gap, we are shifting the focus of our research to understanding how universities can protect student activists. Our preliminary findings suggest that various forms of protection exist. They are often led by emergent activist networks working in coalition with civil society and supportive academic communities. These initiatives develop preventive mechanisms to strengthen academic and civic freedoms within universities as well as responsive forms of protection designed to address the increasing attacks from governments and institutions. Yet many of these initiatives operate in the shadows of university authorities, outside institutional boundaries, or even in defiance of institutional measures.

These experiences suggest that the fundamental freedoms that make the modern university possible are being defended from the ground up and not necessarily from the official institutions that are supposed to defend them. As our report suggests, higher education institutions risk becoming part of the democratic backlash rather than spaces of protection and defense of academic and civic freedoms. These raise two fundamental questions for the sector. First, who will defend universities’ civic and academic freedoms? Second, how can we protect students and activists resisting the global backlash against democratic values?

Héctor Ríos-Jara is a postdoctoral researcher at Universidad Central de Chile. Email: hector.rios@ucentral.cl.

Palak Rao is global advocacy advisor at the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund. Email: palak.rao@saih.no.

This article is based on Kapit, A. & H. Ríos-Jara. [Activism under Attack](#). Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund, 2024.