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Endangered Scholars Worldwide Quarterly Report

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Endangered Scholars Worldwide

Attacks on higher education communities are occurring at an alarming rate worldwide, threatening the safety and well-being of scholars, students, and academic staff, as well as the autonomy of higher education institutions. While we continue to publish regular updates in *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, in response to a global increase in threats to academic freedom, Endangered Scholars Worldwide (ESW) has expanded its presence as an online publication under the auspices of the New University in Exile Consortium (www.newuniversityinexileconsortium.org), sharing frequent updates on news and developing cases in contribution to the Consortium's efforts to create a supportive intellectual community for threatened, exiled scholars.



For the most current information and ways in which you can be involved in our efforts to defend academic freedom and free expression, we invite you to visit our website www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net or follow us at twitter.com/ESWNEWSCHOOL.

If you are aware of a scholar or student whose case you believe we should investigate, please get in touch with us at esw@newschool.edu.

Thank you for your unwavering support.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

The 2023/24 academic year has witnessed further deterioration of academic freedom around the world. According to the 2024 update of the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), published by the Varieties of

Democracy Project (V-Dem), 45.5 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is “completely restricted.” As of 2024, 23 countries are in “an episode of decline,” which means they have had at least two consecutive years of academic freedom deterioration, while only 10 countries are in episodes of growth. Countries in decline can be found all around the world and include Afghanistan, India, Mexico, Russia, Venezuela, and the United States. Across these countries, academic freedom remains under threat from repressive state policies, armed non-state groups and mob violence, right-wing political actors, and more. This report pays special attention to the latest developments in India, the world’s most populous country and largest democracy, which is facing threats of autocratization.

Since the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, in the 2014 general election, India has been witnessing an authoritarian turn, which has the potential to intensify as the country holds a series of elections in April and May 2024. This process of autocratization is captured well in some of V-Dem’s variables: India’s scores on the Liberal Democracy Index and Academic Freedom Index (both measured on the scale of 0 to 1) deteriorated dramatically between 2013 and 2023: from 0.53 to 0.28 and from 0.62 to 0.18, respectively. In its most recent report on India, Freedom House attributed pressure on and censorship of opposition students and scholars, appointments to administrative positions based on party loyalty, and mob violence by Hindu nationalists as factors in the decline in academic freedom. Scholars at Risk identified over 130 instances of restriction of academic freedom in India between 2017 and 2022, which includes physical attacks, police and state violence, and administrative sanctions and punishments.

The policies of the BJP government are the source of some of the most significant restrictions on academic freedom. Recently, the Indian government has been targeting critics of BJP’s Hindu-nationalist policies who hold the Overseas Citizens of India status (available to foreign citizens of Indian origin and spouses of Indian nationals) by revoking

this status, which takes away their visa privileges. According to Human Rights Watch, many of those whose OCI status has been revoked are academics and journalists, who now must seek permission from the government to do research and reporting in India. Additionally, the BJP government has been changing school curricula and content of textbooks to erase the history of Hindu-nationalist ethnic violence, as well as the role of Muslims in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The intervention into education also extends to higher education. As the appeal of Kerala State's Left Democratic Front government to the Supreme Court on April 1, 2024, shows, the federal government has been using state governors it appoints (who ex officio are chancellors of their state universities) to block state legislation aimed at localizing control over educational institutions and to influence who gets chosen to vice-chancellor positions at universities.

Some university administrations are also to blame for the decline of academic freedom in India. One example is from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi where on December 14, 2023, administrators introduced a new set of rules for protests on campus. The new guidelines ban all protests within a 100-meter radius of academic buildings and set penalties for a wider range of protest activities like distributing pamphlets that include "objectionable comments" on religion or caste or engaging in activities deemed "anti-national." In another example, in August 2023 two professors resigned from the economics department at Ashoka University, located in Sonapat, after the university administration tried to interfere in the process of evaluation of an academic paper on democratic backsliding in India written by one of the resigned professors. The faculty members of several departments, including the economics department, later issued statements in which they accused the university of infringing upon the academic freedom of its faculty members.

Aside from the government and the university administrations, academic freedom and educational activities in India are under the threat of mob violence, which often specifically targets Muslim



students. On March 16, 2024, around 15 international students of Muslim faith were attacked by an armed group of 25 people for praying in their on-campus housing at Gujarat University. Three weeks later, at Savitribai Phule Pune University, a 19-year-old Indian-born Muslim student was harassed and beaten up by a group that threatened to kill him if they saw him on campus again.

Endangered Scholars Worldwide is monitoring the developments around academic freedom in India with deep concern. We call upon the Indian government to immediately halt ongoing efforts to restrict the academic freedom of all members of university campuses including students and faculty and to create the conditions in which campus members can freely engage in academic activities. We further call upon the members of the international community dedicated to protecting human rights to echo our calls to the Indian government to uphold human rights within its territories, which it has guaranteed under international law.

Visit www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net for more information.

—By Özgür Kazaklı