



PROJECT MUSE®

Endangered Scholars Worldwide

Dolunay Bulut

Social Research: An International Quarterly, Volume 90, Number 4,
Winter 2023, pp. v-viii (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2023.a916346>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/916346>

Endangered Scholars Worldwide

Attacks on higher education communities continue 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 as part of 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 <https://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

Amidst a troubling global surge in violent and antidemocratic political movements, scholars, researchers, and students worldwide are finding themselves increasingly vulnerable. In 2023, from Ukraine to India and

from the United States to Afghanistan, academic freedom and the autonomy of higher education institutions have come under attack through various means—discursive, legal-institutional, and fiscal policy tools, alongside militarization, censorship, and oppression. According to the 2023 Academic Freedom Index (AFI), this concerning trend of encroachment on intellectual freedom and autonomy in academic pursuits continues to impact over 4 billion people, half of the world’s population, while only five small countries—Gambia, Uzbekistan, Seychelles, Montenegro, and Kazakhstan, collectively home to less than 1 percent of the world population—have shown improvement.

As democratic backsliding and attacks on academic freedom spread globally, choosing a single case for this ESW special delivery becomes increasingly challenging. Given the widespread nature of the problem, it is crucial to identify both similarities and differences in antidemocratic practices against academic freedom worldwide, beyond single case evaluations. The latest AFI report outlines four primary patterns of autocratization and democratic backsliding, revealing their diverse impact on academic freedom across the world, affecting advanced democracies of the Global North as much as the developing or hybrid regimes of the Global South. India, China, the United States, and Mexico are spotlighted in the report as the most populous countries witnessing regressive, antidemocratic trends against academic freedom and the right to education. They epitomize the major practices, discourses, and strategies targeting academic freedom over the past decade.


Since 2014, India, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, has been undergoing a rapid shift toward autocratization. This transformation has had an immediate impact on the key pillars of academic freedom monitored by AFI, such as campus integrity, institutional autonomy, the freedom of academic and cultural expression, the freedom to research and teach, and the right to democratic production and dissemination of scholarly knowledge. The government’s attacks on academic freedom and the subsequent restructuring of institutional

frameworks are, in part, a consequence of the absence of a robust legal framework specifically defining and safeguarding academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and integrity within higher education.

China presents a starkly different narrative, intensifying pressure on the individual dimensions of academic freedom and scientific knowledge production. The Xi Jinping government has asserted an ideological agenda that not only erodes institutional autonomy but also meticulously manages the scientific research and academic expression of scholars, researchers, and students. Unlike in India, in China the party-state operates within the confines of a closed state, prescribing acceptable research, the boundaries of academic speech and scientific exchange, and the permissible identity of the scholar, student, or researcher.

In Mexico, the assault on academic freedom has predominantly taken a political-economic institutional stance, compromising the autonomy of higher education institutions under the guise of austerity measures and fiscal policies implemented by the central government, led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The Obrador administration has not only posed a significant fiscal challenge to these institutions but also exerted influence through direct appointments of university rectors and the nationalization of the research agenda. The combination of budget cuts and a top-down approach to shaping the academic research agenda has had a profound impact on the country's academic freedom scores since 2018.

In the United States academic freedom has experienced a concerning regression since 2021. This decline has left its imprint on campus integrity, the freedom to conduct research and teach, institutional autonomy, and the liberty of academic exchange and dissemination. Unlike the other three patterns of backsliding, which hinge on centralized power wielded by authoritative figures with strongman-rule tendencies, the United States witnesses attacks on academic freedom and institutional autonomy predominantly at the state and local political levels. A recent report by PEN America on educational censorship



revealed a staggering 3,362 instances of book bans in US public schools and libraries between June 2022 and July 2023. These bans predominantly targeted works by racial and religious minority authors, as well as subjects related to the history of colonialism, slavery, critical race theory, and gender and sexuality. Despite escalating political polarization and mounting institutional pressure, the 2023 AFI suggests that democratic backsliding and attacks on academic freedom in the US have not yet encroached on scholars' freedom of expression and their right to share scientific expertise with the public. This resilience is evident even in addressing highly sensitive political, sociocultural, and economic issues, highlighting the enduring commitment to intellectual freedom within the academic community.

While many places experience rapid political evolution threatening education and academic freedom, Azerbaijan presents a contrasting scenario. The political inertia maintained by the Aliyev family's decades-long rule poses a significant challenge to academic freedom and the right to express oneself. Recent developments in Azerbaijan, such as the unjust arrest in July 2023 and continued detention of Gubad Ibadoghlu, an esteemed Azerbaijani economist and opposition figure, underscore the indispensable significance of freedom of speech, institutional autonomy, and job security within higher education.

Endangered Scholars Worldwide (ESW) condemns the rising global tendency to deploy institutional, individual, legal, and fiscal tools to intimidate, control, and reconstruct education systems in order to consolidate the power of governing regimes. ESW stands in solidarity with those advocating for their rights and freedom and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Gubad Ibadoghlu and other unjustly detained scholars and students imprisoned for political reasons. This collective plea underscores ESW's unwavering commitment to upholding academic freedom, safeguarding human rights, and promoting the unobstructed pursuit of knowledge and expression.

Visit www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net for more information.

—By *Dolunay Bulut*