

# Higher Education in Crisis Again: Encroached by Authoritarianism, Unfreedom and Violence

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## Abstract

Higher education globally is once again at a crossroads, increasingly threatened by authoritarianism, repression, and violence. In this article, I examine how universities – historically sites of critical inquiry, deliberation, and democratic engagement – are being targeted by authoritarian regimes and subjected to escalating constraints on academic freedom. Drawing on global examples from Hungary, Turkey, India, Brazil, and the United States, I accentuate a disturbing pattern: governments seeking to silence dissent view universities as threats, attacking scholars, students, and institutional autonomy. These intrusions are not limited to authoritarian states; even established democracies have shown intolerance toward critical scholarship and campus activism.

In the African context, the struggle for academic freedom is deeply rooted in histories of colonial repression and postcolonial authoritarianism. South Africa, despite its constitutional protection of academic freedom, has experienced violent state responses to student movements like #FeesMustFall, revealing ongoing tensions between democratic ideals and coercive state practices. Across the continent, universities remain both symbols of resistance and vulnerable sites of state control. I posit that the university's core values – freedom, deliberation, and justice – are indispensable for democratic life. My contention is that higher education must foster critical, ethical citizens committed to the public good. Drawing on the African philosophical tradition of *ubuntu*, I once again advocate for an education that promotes human dignity, interconnectedness, and justice. In the main, the article is a call to resist authoritarian encroachment and reaffirm the university's democratic mission. By defending academic freedom and creating spaces for inclusive deliberation, universities can buttress tyrannical action and contribute more plausibly to a more just society.

## Introduction: Authoritarianism Threatens Academic Freedom

Higher education is once again facing a profound crisis. Across the world, universities and colleges find themselves under assault by growing authoritarianism, restrictions on

freedom, and even outright violence. Attacks on academics and students are occurring with escalating frequency in so many places that it amounts to a global crisis. Authoritarian leaders and intolerant groups increasingly view universities with trepidation and enmity. It seems as if anti-democratic sentiments pervade university campuses which brings freedom of thought and expression into question. In other words, opposition to openness and transparency that ought to be associated with the university's very mission – to pursue truth[s] through deliberation and critique – poses a real threat to the university world-wide. Such opposition has turned campuses into focal points for coercion, censorship, and violence by regimes intent on silencing authentic inquiry. As a corollary of this, a renewed global struggle to defend academic freedom and the peaceable pursuit of knowledge should be called upon. Higher education's communities are being encroached upon by forces of unfreedom that threaten to undermine the university's democratic purpose. Once again, academia stands at a crossroads where it must resist these encroachments or risk surrendering its core values of freedom, rationality, and justice.

### **A Global Wave of Unfreedom on Campus**

Authoritarian encroachment on universities is a worldwide phenomenon, taking many forms in different countries. In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, Hungary's increasingly illiberal government targeted the internationally renowned Central European University (CEU) – passing a law seemingly designed to force CEU out of the country (Redden, 2018a). The Hungarian regime's attack on CEU, founded by a pro-democracy philanthropist, sent a chilling message about state control over academic activity. Ultimately, CEU announced it had been forced out of Hungary after the government refused to allow it to continue operating in Budapest. This deliberate interference with university autonomy was one of the earliest signals of a global trend. Shortly thereafter in Turkey – another context of democratic backsliding – thousands of scholars and educators were purged from universities under emergency decrees, ostensibly for their political views or associations (Abbott, 2018). The Turkish example showed how quickly a state can move to dismiss or even jail academics en masse when authoritarian rule takes hold.

Similar patterns have emerged in Asia. In India, opposition to dissent has raised alarms about academic freedom under a rising nationalist authoritarianism. One high-profile incident was the resignation of Pratap Bhanu Mehta, one of India's foremost public intellectuals, from Ashoka University. Mehta, an outspoken critic of the government, felt his presence had become a political liability for the university – a resignation that sparked public debate about the climate

of intimidation and self-censorship under Prime Minister Modi's rule (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). His departure signaled how scholars critical of the government are being pressured out, reflecting a broader crackdown on dissenting voices in academia. In recent years, academics, journalists, activists – even students – in India have faced sedition charges. Latin America has also seen universities become battlegrounds in the struggle against escalating authoritarianism. In Brazil, during the tenure of a far-right government, campuses were literally invaded by force. After the election of Jair Bolsonaro, military police stormed university campuses and even arrested faculty members for their political views (Redden, 2018b). Academic leaders reported with alarm that teaching materials were confiscated by police as leftist propaganda, and teachers were threatened simply for discussing topics like historical facts that the regime's supporters deemed unfavourable. This scenario illustrates how quickly a university's autonomy and spirit of inquiry can be undermined by those in power who label knowledge itself as the enemy.

Established democracies have not been immune to such authoritarian impulses in higher education. Recently, in the United States, populist and nationalist rhetoric portrayed universities as elitist or subversive, which emboldened efforts to curb campus dissent and critical scholarship. During the Trump era, for instance, scholars observed a surge in authoritarian societies do more than censor by punishing those who engage in what might be called dangerous thinking (Giroux, 2018). Around the globe, from Europe to Asia, Africa to the Americas, the message is disturbingly consistent. When authoritarianism rises, universities are often among the first institutions to be targeted. Regimes that fear dissent seek to control or silence inquiry and discourse on campus, either through direct state repression or by fomenting an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship.

### **African and South African Struggles for Freedom**

African universities have a long history of grappling with authoritarianism and violence, making the current global struggle a familiar challenge in local contexts. During the colonial and apartheid eras, institutions of higher learning in Africa were often tightly controlled, and dissenting scholars or students faced harassment, banning, or worse. South Africa's own past is instructive: under apartheid, academic freedom was severely curtailed, with university appointments and curricula subjected to racial ideologies, and activists on campus treated as enemies of the state. That era vividly demonstrated how a repressive regime can undermine universities, turning them into instruments of

propaganda or silencing critical voices. Even post-independence, several African countries saw authoritarian rulers interfere in university governance and punish academic critics. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Robert Mugabe's government enacted laws to reduce university autonomy and reportedly forced out academics who were critical of the regime (Broken Chalk, 2023). Such examples underscore that the struggle for academic freedom in Africa is longstanding, tied to broader fights against dictatorship, censorship and human rights violations on the continent. Today, African and South African higher education continue to face these challenges, albeit in evolving forms. Notably, South Africa's 1996 Constitution explicitly guarantees academic freedom and freedom of scholarly research. This constitutional commitment reflects the hard-won lessons of apartheid and is a point of pride for the nation's democratic framework. Yet, in practice, there are troubling signs that South African academics and students are not entirely free from authoritarian tendencies. Recent incidents have raised concern. During the #FeesMustFall student protests of 2015–2016, which demanded greater access and justice in higher education, the state's response was often heavy-handed. Police and private security units were deployed on campuses; scenes of students running from tear gas and rubber bullets became common. While the protests themselves sometimes turned unruly or violent, the aggressive crackdowns reflected a reflex to impose order through force rather than dialogue. The use of violence to settle campus disputes only deepened the sense of crisis, showing how quickly freedom of expression and safety in the university could be eroded even under a democratically elected government. Elsewhere, from Egypt to Uganda, governments have clamped down on student activists and faculty critics under the pretext of national security or stability. These realities underscore that Africa's struggle for academic freedom and justice is deeply entwined with its broader quest for democracy, peace, and human rights. South Africa stands as both a beacon of hope – with its strong legal protections and activist legacy – and a cautionary narrative that constant vigilance is needed to ensure those protections are upheld. Universities must not lapse into complacency. Apartheid-era unfreedom, as well as new specters of authoritarianism, must be actively resisted through reaffirming the university's commitment to openness and justice.

## **The Imperative to Protect Freedom, Deliberation and Justice**

Why must higher education zealously safeguard freedom, encourage deliberation, and advance justice? In resonance with many philosophers of education these qualities are

foundational to the very purpose of the university and to the flourishing of society at large. A free and open university is not a luxury; it is essential for cultivating the kind of critical, informed citizenry that democracy requires. As Henry Giroux (2018) notes, at the core of thinking dangerously is the recognition that education is central to politics and that a democracy cannot survive without informed citizens. A democratic society depends on institutions of higher learning to be arenas of debate, critique, and creation of knowledge. Suppressing academic freedom thus strikes at the heart of democracy itself. Protecting the university's freedom to inquire and to dissent is ultimately about protecting the conditions for an open, just political community. Deliberation – the practice of reasoned, inclusive argumentation and discussion – is a seedbed of both higher education and justice (Waghid & Smeyers, 2014). Universities must serve as models of addressing disagreements through deliberation rather than through force or coercion. This is especially crucial in societies emerging from conflict or marked by deep divisions (as many in Africa are). When disagreements on campus (be it over fees, curriculum, or political allegiances) descend into violence, they betray the educational mission. Resorting to violence, whether by the state or by students, is inimical to the project of education. Violence breeds only more violence and shuts down the possibilities of learning (Waghid, 2009b). For universities in Africa and elsewhere, seeking justice means ensuring inclusive access, recognizing diverse knowledges, and addressing historical and social inequalities. Authoritarian encroachment often goes hand in hand with injustice: it is marginalized groups, dissenters, and the vulnerable who suffer most when freedoms are curtailed. Conversely, a university committed to justice will actively resist policies or practices that exclude or oppress. This could involve curriculum changes (as seen in calls to decolonize education), outreach to disadvantaged communities, or brave scholarship that speaks truth to power. Here, *ubuntu*, the African philosophy of human interconnectedness, in arguing for an education oriented toward our shared humanity and dignity seems to be most pertinent (Waghid, 2009a). An authoritarian regime that tramples the rights of students or scholars violates this principle of *ubuntu*. By contrast, if a university nurtures *ubuntu* as a lived experience, it would actively promote compassion, mutual respect, and the courage to stand up against injustice – that is, it can contribute to eradicating human rights violations and gross inhumanities that have become too common (Waghid, 2009b). Higher education, in this view, should cultivate not only critical intellectuals but also moral citizens who are committed to social justice. This means that defending academic freedom directly serves the cause of justice. When scholars and students are free to investigate corruption, critique bad policies, or propose solutions to inequality, they are performing a public service that authoritarianism would deny.

In sum, freedom, deliberation, and justice are mutually reinforcing in the context of higher education. Freedom of thought allows for genuine deliberation; open deliberation helps the pursuit of truth and fairness; and a commitment to justice ensures that the benefits of academic freedom and reasoned inquiry extend to all, not just a privileged few. If any of these pillars is weakened – for instance, if fear stifles honest debate, or if systemic injustices silence certain voices – the entire educational project is compromised. That is why universities must hold fast to these ideals, even (and especially) when they are under assault. The purpose of higher education is not simply to impart credentials, but to serve as a guardian of our capacity to think freely, deliberate openly, and act ethically. In the face of authoritarianism, unfreedom, and violence, the university's role becomes even more critical: it must be an oasis of reason and humanity, demonstrating by example how a community can organize itself around respect for truth[s] and a shared search for a common good.

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