

U.S. arrests second student, imposes receivership on Columbia University for allowing pro-Palestinian protests



New York, March 14 (RHC)-- The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has arrested a second student protester and set a deadline for Columbia University, one of the most prestigious campuses in the United States, to cede control of one of its academic departments.

In a news release on Friday, the Department of Homeland Security accused Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian student at Columbia, of overstaying her F-1 student visa.

The statement explained that agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained her for deportation. Another foreign student, Ranjani Srinivasan of India, had her student visa revoked for participating “in activities supporting Hamas”, a misspelling of the Palestinian armed group Hamas.

The Trump administration has repeatedly conflated participation in protests against Israel’s war in Gaza with support for Hamas. It has also accused demonstrators of supporting “terrorists.”

Kordia’s arrest marks the second time in less than a week that a Palestinian student at Columbia University has been taken into ICE custody for deportation. On Saturday, protest spokesperson Mahmoud Khalil likewise was arrested and placed in immigration detention, first in New Jersey and later in Louisiana.

Civil liberty advocates say the arrests are meant to stifle free speech rights, and Khalil’s lawyer this week argued he has not been able to contact his client privately, in violation of his right to legal counsel.

Khalil is a permanent resident of the U.S., with a green card, and his American wife is eight months pregnant. The Trump administration, however, says it plans to strip him of his green card.

“It is a privilege to be granted a visa to live and study in the United States of America. When you advocate for violence and terrorism that privilege should be revoked, and you should not be in this country,” Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said in the news release.

But the arrests and student visa revocation were not the only strong-armed actions the Trump administration took against Columbia in the last 24 hours.

In a letter issued late on Thursday night, the administration demanded that Columbia’s Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) be placed in an “academic receivership” wherein an outside authority takes control, often as punishment for mismanagement.

The letter specified that the university must come up with a plan to create the academic receivership role no later than March 20th. Failure to comply, the letter warned, would negatively affect “Columbia University’s continued financial relationship with the United States government”.

Setting up a receivership was just one in a list of demands, which included abolishing the university’s judicial board for hearing disciplinary matters, banning masks on campus and adopting a controversial definition of anti-Semitism that some fear could limit legitimate criticisms of Israel.

Columbia University is a private school, one of eight campuses that makes up the much-vaunted Ivy League in the northeast region. But Trump and other Republicans have repeatedly attacked the university since it became the epicentre of pro-Palestinian protests in 2023 and 2024 as students rallied against the devastation wrought by Israel’s war, which United Nations experts compared to a genocide.

The protests hit a peak last April, after a contentious hearing on Capitol Hill. The university president at the time, Minouche Shafik, appeared before a congressional panel to face scrutiny over allegations that Columbia and other schools had failed to address anti-Semitism on campus.

The very next day, Shafik authorised New York City police to enter an encampment that student protesters had set up on Columbia’s East Lawn, leading to mass arrests.

Tensions escalated from there. Student protesters argued that their free speech rights were being curtailed, and that officials were conflating criticisms of Israel’s war with anti-Semitism. Some occupied a school building, Hamilton Hall, to show defiance against attempts to dismantle the protest movement.

But what happened at Columbia kicked off a series of similar measures across the country, as police were called onto campuses to arrest peaceful protesters. More than 3,000 protesters are estimated to have

been arrested between April and July.

Trump campaigned for re-election on the platform that he would seek out and deport foreign students who participated in the protests. His allies even codified the threats into last year's Republican Party platform, making it one of 20 pledges: to "deport pro-Hamas radicals and make our college campuses safe and patriotic again".

Upon taking office for a second term on January 20, Trump immediately issued an executive order calling for the removal of foreigners who bear "hostile attitudes" to US "citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles" or who support "threats to our national security".

The U.S. has long been an ally of Israel and has supported its campaign in Gaza, which has killed at least 48,524 Palestinians.

In the months since taking office, Trump has directed the Justice Department to "investigate and punish anti-Jewish racism in leftist, anti-American colleges and universities."

And on social media this month, he warned he would take heavy-handed action against any campus that hosts what he called "illegal protests" — although he failed to define what that category might entail.

"All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School, or University that allows illegal protests," Trump wrote. "Agitators will be imprisoned/or permanently sent back to the country from which they came. American students will be permanently expelled or, depending on on [sic] the crime, arrested."

Already, on March 7, the Trump administration announced the immediate cancellation of \$400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University, in what was considered a warning shot against all institutions of higher education to conform with the president's demands.

Secretary of Education Linda McMahon pointed to increases in reported acts of anti-Semitism after the Hamas-led attacks on southern Israel in October 2023 as a reason for the cancellation.

"Since October 7, Jewish students have faced relentless violence, intimidation, and anti-Semitic harassment on their campuses — only to be ignored by those who are supposed to protect them," McMahon said in an accompanying news release. "Universities must comply with all federal antidiscrimination laws if they are going to receive federal funding."

According to the Department of Education, Columbia currently receives approximately \$5 billion in federal grants and contracts. Earlier this week, the school moved to expel or suspend students involved in the antiwar protests.

But some activists have questioned whether the Trump administration is truly motivated to combat hate crimes — or whether anti-Semitism is being used as a smokescreen to further other political aims.

On Thursday, activists with Jewish Voice for Peace and other groups gathered in Trump Tower in New York City to protest Khalil's arrest, wearing red T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Not in our name".

As reports emerge of Homeland Security officials searching Columbia University dorm rooms, critics fear students' civil rights may be violated. "We do believe that if you are here, you shouldn't get arrested, dragged away, and deported for engaging in protests that all of your classmates were perfectly within their rights to engage in," Greg Lukianoff, the CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), wrote on social media on Friday.

The Trump administration has cited a little-used section of the Immigration and Nationality Act as justification for the planned deportations. It says the secretary of state has the right to exclude, "under certain circumstances", foreign nationals whose entry into the US "would have potentially serious adverse

foreign policy consequences for the United States”.

But lawyers and advocates point out that the Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the constitutional right to free speech for immigrants in the US.

“What happened to Mahmoud is nothing short of extraordinary, shocking, and outrageous,” Khalil’s lawyer Ramzi Kassem said in a recent statement with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). “It should outrage anyone who believes that speech should be free in the United States of America.”

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