

Columbia University protest leader Mohsen Mahdawi released from U.S. custody



Burlington, April 30 (RHC)-- A United States judge has ordered the release of Columbia University student and pro-Palestine protester Mohsen Mahdawi as a case challenging his deportation proceeds.

In Burlington, Vermont, on Wednesday, U.S. District Judge Geoffrey Crawford ruled Mahdawi could leave the Northwest State Correctional Facility, where he had been held since immigration officials arrested him earlier this month.

Mahdawi walked out of the court with both hands in the air, flashing peace signs as supporters greeted him with cheers. As he spoke, he shared a message for President Donald Trump, whose administration has led a crackdown on student protesters who have denounced Israel's war in Gaza.

"I am not afraid of you," Mahdawi said to Trump. He also addressed the people of Palestine and sought to dispel perceptions that the student protest movement was anything but peaceful.

"We are pro-peace and antiwar," Mahdawi explained. "To my people in Palestine: I feel your pain, I see your suffering, and I see freedom, and it is very soon."

Mahdawi, a legal U.S. resident who had been a leader in the protests at Columbia University, was detained on April 14th while attending a citizenship interview. Video of him being led away in handcuffs spread widely across social media.

His arrest came as part of a wider push by the Trump administration to target visa holders and permanent residents for their pro-Palestine advocacy. Trump has also pressured top universities to crack down on pro-Palestine protests, in the name of combating anti-Semitism.

Critics, however, say that rationale is an excuse to exert greater control over academia and stifle opposing views.

While the immigration case against Mahdawi will proceed, Judge Crawford ruled the student activist posed no flight risk and could be released to attend his graduation next month in New York City.

It is possible the U.S. government may appeal Mahdawi's release, but the judge's ruling allows him to leave the state of Vermont and fight his deportation from outside a detention facility.

The Trump administration, however, had opposed his release. Its lawyers argued that Mahdawi's detention was "constitutionally valid aspect of the deportation process."

Mahdawi's lawyers have countered that his detainment treads on his constitutional rights to free speech. "Mohsen has committed no crime, and the government's only supposed justification for holding him in prison is the content of his speech," Lia Ernst, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union who is representing Mahdawi, said in a statement following his release.

The Trump administration has taken the broad position that constitutional speech protections only apply to U.S. citizens, a question that could eventually be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In court filings, government lawyers have cited the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 as the legal basis for seeking Mahdawi's deportation. A rarely used part of the law allows the U.S. to deport foreign nationals "whose presence or activities in the United States" gives the secretary of state "reasonable ground to believe [they] would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences".

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has used that provision as the basis for seeking to deport Mahdawi and other pro-Palestinian student protesters. Israel is a critical ally of the United States in the Middle East.

Mahdawi was arrested weeks after fellow Columbia University student Mahmoud Khalil, also a U.S. permanent resident. In early March, Khalil was likewise detained by immigration officials. The pair co-founded the Palestinian Student Union at the prestigious Ivy League university.

Khalil has remained in immigration custody in Louisiana since his arrest outside his apartment. Earlier this month, an immigration judge ruled Khalil was indeed deportable, siding with government lawyers.

In a two-page letter submitted to the court, Secretary of State Rubio had written that the 30-year-old should be removed from the U.S. for his role in “antisemitic protests and disruptive activities, which fosters a hostile environment for Jewish students in the United States.”

The Trump administration has broadly portrayed nearly all forms of pro-Palestine advocacy as “anti-Semitic”, in what critics have called an effort to silence freedom of speech.

Rubio provided no further evidence backing his claims against Khalil, and the student leader has been charged with no crime. Rubio’s letter nevertheless said that his department can revoke a permanent resident’s legal status even where their beliefs, associations or statements are “otherwise lawful.”

On Tuesday, a federal judge ruled that Khalil can move forward with a legal challenge to his arrest and detainment on the grounds that he was targeted for his political views.

Both Mahdawi and Khalil have parallel court cases, one seeking reprieve from deportation and the other challenging the basis for their arrests. While in detention, Mahdawi had been visited by U.S. Senator Peter Welch, a Democrat who has denounced the student’s arrest as “unjust” and antidemocratic.

“I’m staying positive by reassuring myself in the ability of justice and the deep belief of democracy,” Mahdawi said at the time, according to a video posted on Welch’s X account. “This is the reason I wanted to become a citizen of this country, because I believe in the principles of this country.”

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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