

Michigan drops charges against pro-Palestine U.S. student protesters



Protesters walk throughout campus to express support for Palestinians in Gaza on November 21, 2024 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan

[File: Emily Elconin/Reuters]

U.S. state's attorney general says her office will no longer pursue the case due to delays and a

‘circus-like atmosphere’.

Ann Arbor, May 6 (RHC)-- Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel has dropped charges against seven student protesters from the University of Michigan, citing legal delays and controversies surrounding the U.S. case, which she said has become a “lightning rod of contention.”

The decision on Monday puts an end to the case that started in May 2024 when the students, who pleaded not guilty, were charged with trespassing and resisting a police officer while attending a pro-Palestinian campus protest.

“We feel vindicated that the case was dismissed,” said Jamil Khuja, a member of the defence team for the students. “These individuals committed no crime whatsoever. They were exercising their right to protest and engage in political speech on public property.”

Despite dropping the charges and growing criticism of the case, Nessel on Monday defended her decision to pursue felony charges against the students, saying “a reasonable jury would find the defendants guilty of the crimes alleged”.

However, Nessel added in a statement that she dropped the charges nearly a year later because she did not believe “these cases to be a prudent use of my department’s resources.”

While hundreds of students were arrested during the wave of pro-Palestine campus encampments that swept the United States last year amid Israel’s war on Gaza, most were immediately released.

The case in Michigan gained national attention and became symbolic of the nationwide crackdown on pro-Palestine demonstrations, with Palestinian rights advocates arguing that the Nessel case was an attack on freedom of speech and assembly.

Defense lawyers for the accused had filed motions for Nessel to recuse herself from the case, citing accusations of bias – assertions that the attorney general dismissed as “baseless and absurd”.

“These distractions and ongoing delays have created a circus-like atmosphere to these proceedings,” the attorney general said in her statement.

Khuja, the defence lawyer, said the team was “absolutely confident” of winning the case, either by judicial dismissal or not-guilty jury verdict, and criticised Nessel’s characterisation of the pretrial proceedings as “circus-like” as untrue.

He said requesting Nessel’s removal from the case was warranted, adding that the charges should have been brought by the county and not the state’s attorney general, according to Michigan’s prosecution procedures.

To underscore the alleged bias, the defence lawyer also noted that weeks before filing the charges last year, Nessel had clashed with Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, “the only Palestinian in Congress”, for defending the chant “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” which has been used by student protesters.

Soon after Nessel charged the students, Tlaib accused the attorney general of “possible biases” within her agency, underscoring that other protest movements did not face a similar legal crackdown.

The attorney general responded by accusing Tlaib of anti-Semitism, although the congresswoman made no mention of the attorney general’s religion or Jewish identity.

“Rashida should not use my religion to imply I cannot perform my job fairly as Attorney General. It’s anti-Semitic and wrong,” Nessel wrote in a social media post in September.

The controversy stretched for weeks, with CNN and pro-Israel outlets echoing Nessel’s anti-Semitism allegations against Tlaib without evidence. Khuja said the attorney general ultimately wanted to “make an example out of those protesting for Palestine.”

He added that the case was larger than the students and politicians involved. “The First Amendment applies to all speech, but it’s been under attack in order to shield Israel from criticism lately,” Khuja told Al Jazeera.

“And this case proved that those who believe in Palestinian rights, their views are just as legitimate as anybody else’s, and the First Amendment protects those views and your right to express them.”

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