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What Iran gained from the Columbia University crackdowns

Amid recent pro-Palestine campus protests in the US, Iran has emerged as an unlikely cheerleader in a bid to divert attention from its own regime

It was the afternoon of 18 April. The New York Police Department officers descended on the Columbia University campus to dismantle the solidarity encampment set up by students opposing the ongoing war in Gaza. The encampment and sweeping pro-Palestine protests preceding it had remained a sticking point as the embattled administration was on a quest for solutions.

Now, the new academic year has begun, and intermittent protests have been gestating around campus. On the first day of classes, protesters splashed red paint on the iconic Alma Mater sculpture overseeing the Morningside campus, accusing the administration of ignoring the ordeal of the Palestinian citizens.

Columbia wasn't the only major academic institution where the relentless military campaign by the Israeli army with numerous civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip had prompted moral outrage. Like other schools, Columbia students were unwilling to give up unless their demands were heeded, including institutional divestment from Israel. But the Ivy League college soon became a blueprint for other universities to similarly leverage policing to extinguish their students' revolt.

A crackdown on student protests

The unfolding scenes didn't even remotely resemble the typically buoyant life on an elite American university campus. From some protesting students' belongings being dumped into alleyways to others being evicted from their accommodations, Minouche Shafik, the Egyptian-British economist serving her first year as Columbia president, rolled out austerity measures that she was herself unprepared to unveil. For one thing, the police raid on 18 April, resulting in rare scenes of students being arrested and occasionally beaten, was authorised by the

president.

Expulsions, suspensions, the denial of dorm and dining hall access and a 10-day campus shutdown only scratched the surface of the Orwellian conditions of a university known as a beacon of debate and academic freedom. Brandishing iron fist was uncharted territory for Shafik, and it didn't work in her favour. She resigned on 14 August.

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As dramas were playing out in succession, Lee Bollinger was the name many in the community invoked. The First Amendment scholar and former university president is reputed as an advocate of free speech. One of his landmark gestures was the introductory remarks he gave before the invited speech of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who addressed the university in 2007. Bollinger called Ahmadinejad a 'cruel and petty dictator' and 'astonishingly uneducated' as the Holocaust-denying leader watched.

In administrative terms, a crackdown on campus protests could be an effective short-term remedy, a sedative prescribed for a highly-agitated patient. Then, with some damage control, things would get back to normal. But the adversaries of free speech didn't frame that response as the isolated overreach of a group of executives. They had the chance to mischaracterise the idea of democracy.

An unlikely cheerleader

An unlikely cheerleader was incredibly happy: the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Shortly after the shocking footage of police violence across US universities was transmitted to TV sets worldwide, the Iranian government reacted with *schadenfreude*. As if something had happened that they were looking forward to for years, authorities in Tehran mounted a PR campaign to coopt the unrest and distract the jaundiced Iranians from their woes.

Former President Ebrahim Raisi had prepared a unique recipe for disaster in governance, mixing social strangulation with economic malpractice impoverishing the citizens of the world's fifth most resource-rich country.
For a kleptocracy obsessed with a messianic rivalry with the United

States, time was ripe to showcase evidence that the opponent was collapsing, its values misfiring. Unusual statements from government officials became the butt of jokes on social media. Former Minister of Science Ali Zolfigol claimed what wasn't meant to be satirical: 'In Iran, one can find the universities with the highest degrees of freedom in the world.'

At least 13 Iranian universities offered to provide scholarships to students who had faced disciplinary action because of their pro-Palestine activism. The clerical leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the bravery of the American students in a controversial letter, saying they stood on the right side of history.

Iran's brutal crushing of its own student protests in 2022 and 2023 after the morality police killing of Mahsa Amini, culminating in the siege of the nation's most celebrated STEM university, seemed to have become a relic of the past. Campus crackdowns in America, precipitated by Columbia, had created a rare gotcha moment to score political points.

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The announcement of scholarships for Columbia students was not only absurd for the gamut of differences making the educational systems of the two countries dissimilar. As is often the case with such stunts, they are meant for agitprop with lifespans not exceeding a few days. If a former Columbia student decided to apply for one of the scholarships now, they'll find that there are no admission forms available to be filled out.

The inflated chutzpah smacked of hypocrisy for other reasons. Iranian colleges were not telling their potential applicants that, as part of the admission process, they'd be committing to bringing their sartorial choices in line with the government-mandated dress codes.

Similarly, they didn't tell the American students that in Iranian schools, there are no classrooms without the omnipresent portraits of the senior clerical leaders of the Islamic Republic. And identifying those leaders in written assignments follows specific rules — naming them without proper honorifics is a disciplinary issue. They didn't reveal that in dining halls, it's people's gender that dictates where they can be seated, not their network of friends and peers.

In a country where some of the most distinguished professors are behind

bars for expressing their viewpoints contradicting the official narrative, students dissenting is still an alien concept. If there are policies around protests on campus in US institutions, students protesting on a university campus in Iran and being safe while doing so is a sight that's only fantasised about. It has of course happened sporadically, but with fatalities.

The most notable student movement in Iran took wing in July 1999 when *Salam*, a popular pro-reform newspaper was banned, followed by the judiciary abruptly pledging further restrictive measures against the press. When the University of Tehran students rebelled, the security apparatus responded with brute force and at least four students were killed. The events of that day remained a stain on the Iranian government's reputation that has never been scrubbed.

Columbia and other US universities stifling their students challenging Israel's actions is anomalous in the timeline of campus protests that are both constitutionally protected and supported by society. A movement with the same magnitude denouncing the Russian invasion of Ukraine would never be so vehemently suppressed.

Still, there is a salient message in what has happened. Authoritarian regimes feel emboldened whenever democracies or their iconic microcosms betray their own principles.

Columbia's foregoing administration doesn't speak for the entirety of the reality of America and its cannons. But as a bastion of academic excellence, it went down a path that autocrats benefitted from a lot.

Totalitarian regimes don't ever cite the success stories of democracies as examples to build on and boost the fortunes of their people. But they are quick in swooping in to weaponise excesses and backslidings to soft-pedal their own repression.

The Islamic Republic won't ever tell its constituents that the Fisk University students initiated a movement in 1924 that unseated their own president and enabled the appointment of Howard University's first black president, too. Of course, the clerical establishment refuses to mention that nonviolent protests by a handful of students in North Carolina in 1960 resulted in one of the most successful American retailers, F. W. Woolworth Company, abolishing racial segregation in the South.

Democracies are being constantly watched, not just by friends but by

actors thriving on insularity. Double standards strike at the very heart of what democratic institutions, including their enviable academic centres, are supposed to stand for. What democracies get wrong can soon become ammunition for rationalising repression elsewhere. At a time when freedom and ethics pitted against patriarchy and disingenuity has evolved into an existential battle, democracies cannot afford to lose sight of the ripple effects of how they conduct themselves.

Columbia's foregoing administration doesn't speak for the entirety of the reality of America and its cannons. But as a bastion of academic excellence, it went down a path that autocrats benefitted from a lot. Much of it was Iran's gains.



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