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Why the world – and India – needs to care about the attacks on American universities

The detention of Mahmoud Khalil, a student at Columbia University who was prominent in leading protests against Israeli actions in Gaza, marks an inflexion point. At stake is the very existence of a free society, of which free universities are a part



Police guard the entrance to Columbia University as protesters rally in support of detained Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil, Friday, March 14, 2025, in New York. (AP Photo)

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Last week, US universities came in for a shock. Why is this global news? Seven of the 10 highest-ranked universities in the world and 23 of the top fifty are in the US, according to the Times Higher Education Supplement. This is not new. US prominence in higher education has been longstanding and has underpinned its economic success. The US has grown even richer in comparison to other developed countries over the last two decades and much of its increase in wealth has arisen, directly or indirectly, through spillovers from university towns to “tech industries”.

Places like Palo Alto, California and Cambridge, Massachusetts are bywords for higher education, economic prosperity and technological innovation. But the US is also a centre of the social sciences and humanities. In these fields, true excellence and proximity to the organs which legitimate and disseminate ideas have always been hard to tell apart. However, it is clear that the concepts, ideas and themes which emerge from the country are still central to global discussions. US universities play a prominent role in the production of not merely governing but also critical perspectives, most recently concerning US policy on Israel and Palestine.

The intellectual prominence of US universities in science and technology on the one hand, and the social sciences and humanities on the other, cannot be teased apart. The atmosphere of formally free and open enquiry that has allowed for governing ideas and critical currents to be present has also (admittedly, alongside plentiful financial resources and dense networks of expertise) underpinned their success in these diverse areas. It is for this reason that academics at US universities have reacted with alarm to the detention of Mahmoud Khalil, a student at Columbia University who was prominent in leading protests against Israeli actions in Gaza and the role of US universities and Israel. What has deeply concerned many, even those with differing views, is that Khalil has not been charged with a crime nor prosecuted but summarily detained and threatened with deportation due to purported harms that he has caused to US foreign policy interests.

Despite the suggestions of some that he has acted criminally (as opposed to spoken improperly) during the protests, there has been no public test of this assertion. As a result, there is the unmistakable impression that he is being targeted mainly for his outspoken views, on the basis of a particularly narrow interpretation of what US foreign

policy interests are. Moreover, this has occurred despite his being a Legal Permanent Resident, or Green Card holder, which in the past, was thought to provide both procedural and substantive assurances, including the freedom of speech claimed by US citizens, short of having been charged with a serious crime.

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US Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that Khalil's detention was no error, characterising him, without providing evidence, as a supporter of terrorism. A judge has temporarily halted Khalil's removal, but the consequence has been to generate large protests. Columbia University itself has been weak in its response, seemingly seeking to avoid further attacks. It has already been met with the removal by the Trump administration of more than \$400 million of federal funds as a sanction for its supposed failure to address anti-Semitism on its campus, apparently based largely on a conflation of anti-Semitism with protests (in which many Jewish students and faculty have been involved) against Israel's actions in Gaza.

Subsequent communications from the US government have underlined an unprecedented range of demands from the university, entering into areas usually

considered to be domains of academic and curricular sovereignty, such as the administration of the department concerned with Middle Eastern, African and South Asian Studies. Columbia University's is a test case, but the government has indicated its intention to undertake similar scrutiny of, and actions against, a large number of other institutions. Although done in the name of policing improprieties and restoring order, taken together these actions might be said to be an attack on the institutional independence of American universities and, indirectly, on the freedom of thought and speech of its members, through the chilling effect that they are sure to generate.

Understanding the underlying reasons behind why the Trump administration is acting this way now requires comprehending the attitude toward universities of populist nationalist movements everywhere. In their picture of the world, universities are valuable insofar as they produce useful knowledge which can be harnessed, especially in technological and managerial applications. The idea of a university as a free space in which knowledge is furthered for the sake of humankind or as an end in itself and contrary ideas are tolerated and even nurtured as a condition of freedom and a route to enlightenment is denied or repudiated. This expansive vision is viewed as a pointless indulgence if not a danger to society. Universities are viewed as coddled and subsidised entities and their protesting students as ungrateful parasites.

In this view, the sooner that order is brought back to them, the better, so that they can focus on what really matters, and their proper purpose. It also views universities as the limit case of freedom in society. Freedoms are seen as being excessive and necessary to reign in everywhere, beginning with those places where they are most visibly experienced. These freedoms are also seen as properly the inheritance of insiders – citizens – with the circle of inclusion being increasingly tightly drawn, now excluding

even long-term permanent residents and others who are legally present in the country, however integral they may be to particular institutions of society such as the university.

The difficulty with this perspective is two-fold. First, it misunderstands what a university is, and what is the basis of its ultimate success. By attacking the aspects of universities that it dislikes, it threatens to undermine the ultimate basis of their intellectual vitality. While it is right to be concerned about the consequences of universities becoming political battlegrounds, it is wrong to think that there is an alternative, given that society itself is deeply polarised. The clear and present danger is that the US becomes less attractive to students and scholars from elsewhere who form a substantial part of its great universities and that the spirit of free enquiry that makes their greatness possible is dampened. The links with tangible consequences are elusive but real.

Second, it threatens to sacrifice all of the fruits of a free society in the process, including the ability to question that makes possible course corrections, even and especially when there are entrenched policies and dominant perspectives. The protestors in American universities have, after all, not merely been undertaking a *cri de couer* about murderous excesses (which makes it not a surprise that the protestors at Columbia named a building they took over as Hind's Hall after Hind Rajab, the five-year-old girl killed by Israeli fire) but are also implicitly raising a question about what a proper view of the interests that guide US policy should be.

The issue that is now central is not that of whether protestors who broke laws can be tolerated – if so, they could be charged and prosecuted. It is rather that of whether views

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that the US government judges to be at odds with its current domestic or foreign policy goals can be a reason for summary action, with little restraint of procedure or law. At stake is the very existence of a free society, of which free universities are a part. Whether this threatened descent can be held at bay will offer crucial lessons for India, and every other democratic society.

The writer is Professor of Economics at The New School for Social Research. He has also taught at Barnard College and Columbia University

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