

Trump's Campus Protest Crackdown Faces Trial Over Free Speech

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— Categories: Human Rights



A high-stakes federal trial has begun in Boston over allegations that the Trump administration used immigration enforcement to silence pro-Palestinian activism on college campuses across the United States.

The lawsuit, filed by several university associations against former President Donald Trump and members of his administration, argues that targeting students and faculty for their political beliefs violates both the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the Administrative Procedure Act, a law that sets the rules for how federal agencies operate.

According to the plaintiffs, the government's actions created an atmosphere of fear among noncitizen scholars and students. Many began avoiding protests, deleting social media posts, and withdrawing from public discussions about Palestinian human rights. Some even stopped writing or speaking about their views in the classroom, worried it could lead to arrest or deportation.

"Students and faculty are terrified into silence," the plaintiffs wrote in their pretrial brief.

The case highlights the stories of several individuals caught in the crackdown. One is Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian activist and Columbia University graduate, who spent 104 days in federal immigration detention before being released. He has become a symbol of what many see as an attempt to intimidate campus protesters.

Another is Rumeysa Ozturk, a Tufts University student who was arrested while walking in a Boston suburb. She spent six weeks in detention, which she believes was retaliation for an opinion piece she co-authored criticizing her school's response to Israel's military actions in Gaza.

The Trump administration defended its actions by saying no formal policy to target pro-Palestinian activism exists. In court filings, government lawyers argued that the plaintiffs could not point to any written rule, directive, or regulation proving there was such a program. They also maintained that First Amendment protections work differently in the context of immigration.

However, the plaintiffs insist that evidence presented at trial will show the government did use various tools such as visa revocations, surveillance, and public statements to punish dissent.

As the trial unfolds before U.S. District Judge William Young, it could set a major precedent on how far an administration can go to monitor and deter political speech, especially among noncitizens living and studying in the country.

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