ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The pursuit and dissemination of knowledge remained disproportionately dangerous activities as educators and their students were frequent targets of violence and repression sponsored or countenanced by regimes bent on stifling critical analysis and dissent. In the worst cases, these governments used intimidation, physical abuse, and imprisonment to punish campus-based critics, and, by example, to repress civil society. More commonly, governments pursued the same ends by silencing academics and censoring their teaching, research, and publication on important subjects. Many countries also continued to deny equal access to educational institutions to women and members of disfavored minority groups. Ten years after the landmark World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, a similar gathering held in April in Dakar, Senegal, found that despite some improvements in literacy rates and access to education, in many countries buffeted by political instability or financial downturns, education remained out of reach of significant portions of the population.

Repression of Academics

Due to their role in addressing controversial questions and shaping public debate, educators and researchers in many countries faced imprisonment, torture, and even murder. These attacks were more broadly aimed at discouraging other academics from pursuing politically sensitive lines of inquiry and ultimately at blocking social debate and dissent.

Separatist violence in Aceh, Indonesia, was the context for the murder of Afwan Idris, rector of the Ar Raniry State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN), who was shot on September 16 at his home in Banda Aceh, Aceh’s capital. Idris was considered a strong candidate for the province’s governorship and served as a member of the independent commission set up by former Indonesian president Habibie to investigate past grave human rights abuses in Aceh. Under Idris’ tenure, IAIN became a center for debate and discussion on Aceh’s political status for a number of nongovernmental groups. Although at the time of writing no arrests had been made in connection with the murder, Acehnese NGOs reported that the motorcycle used by the gunmen was seen shortly after the shooting on the grounds of the Mobile Brigade (Brimob) police complex.

The Egyptian government conducted a campaign of intimidation against academics, apparently alarmed by the possibility of critical analysis of the country’s October parliamentary elections. Authorities closed the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, a leading political science research center, on June 30, and detained sixteen of its staff, including Saad El-Din Ibrahim, chair of the Sociology Department at the American University in Cairo, for over five weeks without bringing any charges. The detainees were released on bail in mid-August, but several were rearrested on September 25 pursuant to various charges, ranging from...
accepting foreign funding without government approval (related to the Ibn Khaldun Center’s financing by the European Union) to issuing negative statements about Egypt’s internal situation. Ibrahim blamed the arrests on the Ibn Khaldun Center’s documentation of widespread fraud during the previous Egyptian parliamentary elections.

As part of its broad pattern of attacks on academics, in March, the Egyptian Education Ministry docked the pay of thirty-six teachers and a headmaster, all from Qena in Upper Egypt, for having attended a training program aimed at promoting civic education. The teachers were fined amounts ranging from nineteen days’ to two months’ salary. At least one teacher was transferred to an administrative post. The training sessions were organized by the Group for Democratic Development, a leading Egyptian NGO, whose earlier academic seminar on transforming Islamist groups into legitimate political groups was cancelled by government order in January. This harassment placed Egyptian academics and NGOs in a defensive position prior to the elections and prompted several NGOs to return grants from foreign funders, thus scaling back or altogether stopping their support of critical academic research.

The Chinese government also continued to control academic life and in some areas increased pressure on educators whose work touched on sensitive issues of religious and ethnic identity, for instance in Tibet and in Xinjiang, a western province with a predominantly Moslem Uighur population. On May 25, the head of a part-time Uighur school was detained in Urumqi and, because he conducted classes in Arabic that drew Moslem students, accused of opening a religious school, although the bulk of the school’s activity consisted of literacy classes and courses in Chinese, English, Russian, and Japanese.

Censorship and Ideological Controls

The freedom of academics to research and teach was constrained in various countries either directly, through government control of faculty appointments, or indirectly, under stifling censorship laws. Events in 2000 demonstrated that regardless of the means used, constriction of scholarship drove away qualified academics and coarsened the quality of public debate.

Academics in Serbia chafed under government limits on their work. The University Act of 1998, imposed under pressure from former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, subjected faculty members to political oversight and deprived them of the right to select their administrators. At the time of writing, the act was still in force despite student demonstrations demanding its rescission. As a result of this law Belgrade University alone lost some 180 instructors and professors. One prominent example was Obrad Savic, a professor for twenty-two years and a leading proponent of democratic reform and academic freedom. On May 16, the university terminated his contract after not paying his salary since May 1998. The decision to terminate Savic came shortly after he had published and distributed a publication entitled “In Defense of the University,” in which he criticized the Milosevic government’s efforts to strangle free inquiry on university campuses. He postponed his most recent project, a series of international seminars on democracy organized in conjunction with the New School University in New York, fearing government retaliation against seminar participants. Savic told Human Rights Watch that he was given no opportunity to contest the university’s decision to terminate his employment.
Tunisian authorities also sought to stifle political dissent when they dismissed prominent human rights activist Dr. Moncef Marzouki on July 29 from his post as professor of medicine at the University of Sousse. Marzouki, a former president of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH), was the spokesperson for the National Council on Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT). Marzouki received a notice of dismissal from the Ministry of Health one day after President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali denounced critics of his government as “mercenaries” and “traitors.” Marzouki’s dismissal followed years of persecution: In 1993, the Tunisian government prohibited him from carrying out any medical research and closed down the Center for Community Medicine, which he had founded; in June 1999, he was abducted by plainclothes security officials and held incommunicado for several days.

Kuwaiti academics faced legal attacks against their exercise of freedom of expression instigated by religious conservative groups using vaguely worded articles in Kuwait’s Penal Code and Press Law. These laws allow for sentences of up to one year in prison and a fine of up to 1,000 KD (U.S. $3,260) for disseminating “opinions that include sarcasm, contempt, or belittling of a religion or a religious school of thought, whether by defamation of its belief system or its traditions or its rituals or its instructions.” Using these laws, on October 4, 1999, Kuwait’s Misdemeanor Appeals Court sentenced Ahmad al-Baghdadi, then chair of Kuwait University’s Political Science Department and an expert in Islamic law and history, to one month in jail for a 1996 article in a Kuwait University student newspaper (*al-Sho’ula*). The article discussed popular acceptance of some religious notions in the context of a wider social debate regarding gender segregation in Kuwaiti universities. One day after being imprisoned, Baghdadi went on a hunger strike and had to be hospitalized four days later due to heart problems. On October 18, Amir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, Kuwait’s ruler, pardoned Baghdadi, who has since returned to teaching. Another instructor at Kuwait University, philosophy professor ‘Aliya Shu’ayb, had her two-month prison sentence reduced to a 100 KD (U.S. $326) fine after she was found guilty of defaming religion in her collection of poetry, although the book had been in circulation since 1993. Shu’ayb contended that the charges against her stemmed from her studies of sexuality among students at Kuwait University.

A controversy in Hong Kong highlighted the precarious position of universities there as they faced the encroachment of central control by the territory’s Beijing-appointed administration. Chung Ting-you, a prominent pollster and director of the Public Opinion Program at Hong Kong University (HKU), claimed on July 7 that HKU Vice-Chancellor Cheng Yiu-chung had pressured him on behalf of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa to cease polling popular support for the chief executive. Chung’s surveys, which had revealed deteriorating popular support for Tung, had been attacked by pro-Beijing administrators and media as suffering from a “pro-democracy” bias. In a welcome move, HKU responded to intense student and public demands for an inquiry by convening an independent panel of three prominent jurists and academics to investigate the matter. The panel found on August 29 that Vice-Chancellor Cheng and Pro-Vice-Chancellor Wong Siu-lun had indeed pressured Chung. The two resigned as a result of the findings. Despite these resignations and the panel’s inquiry, several professors stated that the incident had signalled the academic community to avoid politically sensitive research.

India, too, witnessed a deterioration in its academic freedom as Muslim and Christian educational facilities came under attack in states governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. At the institutional level, the BJP and its allies continued to implement their program of “Hinduizing” education by mandating
Hindu prayers in certain state schools and revising text books to include anti-Islamic and anti-Christian propaganda. On April 9, police searching for two suspects attacked the Jamia Millia Islamia, a Muslim institution of higher education in Delhi, and ransacked the dormitories and vandalized the campus mosque.

Muslim educational facilities also remained under pressure in Turkmenistan, where the government of Saparmurad Niazov banned all private Muslim religious education unless provided by the officially sanctioned Muftiat. Niazov’s educational plan also called for three-generation background checks of potential students’ moral character and the abolition of the teaching of foreign languages in the country.

**Suppression of Student Activism**

Student groups constituted an important element of political life in many countries. While at times their actions took them far outside of academic concerns, more often students were subjected to scrutiny and repression because of their exposure to critical ideas and their ability to mobilize in the relative shelter of university campuses.

In Yugoslavia, students played a critical role in the electoral defeat of Slobodan Milosevic, whose government had increasingly targeted students in response to the development of a loosely-structured, student-led opposition movement known as Otpor (Resistance). Numerous university professors, human rights activists, artists, church representatives, and members of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts publicly supported or joined the group. On May 16, Ivan Markovic, the former Yugoslav minister of telecommunications and a high official of the Yugoslav Left (JUL), one of the parties in Milosevic’s ruling coalition, accused Otpor of being a “terrorist organization.” Authorities soon dropped this charge after it proved untenable, but continued to harass Otpor. In May and June, the police detained and interrogated some 500 Otpor activists. Authorities stepped up their attacks in August as the September national elections approached and Otpor launched a campaign calling for a high turnout of young voters. Otpor claimed that police detained hundreds of its members in August alone and beat at least ten who were in custody. Furthermore, police refused to investigate attacks on Otpor activists by plainclothes thugs believed to have worked for the Milosevic government.

Iranian students also remained active in the ongoing struggle between reformists and conservatives. Repeated calls for self-restraint under the doctrine of “active calm” by students prevented a reprise of the bloody riots that engulfed several campuses in July 1999, although attacks on student activists by mobs reportedly connected to government security forces continued. In the worst such incident, on August 26 a mob attacked the seventh annual gathering of the largest student pro-reform organization, the Office for Consolidating Unity (Daftar Tahkim Vahdat), in the city of Khoramabad, and prevented prominent government critics Abdolkarim Soroush (a philosophy professor) and Mohsen Kadivar from addressing the group. Government forces at the scene were reportedly unable or unwilling to protect the students. Over the next several days of violence, dozens were injured and one police officer was killed.

In a troubling development, in Lebanon, which had enjoyed a relatively open academic environment in the Middle East, students demonstrating peacefully in Beirut for the withdrawal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon faced an unduly forceful reaction from Lebanese security forces. On April 17 and 18, army
and security troops forcibly broke student-led demonstrations in Beirut, injuring thirteen people, two of them seriously. Military tribunals sentenced at least ten students to prison terms ranging from ten days to six weeks for distributing leaflets.

**Access to Education**

Equal access to education is one of the most widely recognized principles of international human rights law, enshrined in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent international conventions implementing it, including the Convention against Discrimination in Education, article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The unfortunately broad catalogue of failures in achieving this ideal reflected the global prevalence of discrimination, especially when aggravated by conditions of poverty, conflict, and war.

On April 26, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched a ten-year initiative on girls’ education at the opening of the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Forum participants pledged to ensure that all children, especially girls, have access to quality basic education by 2015. Nevertheless, reports submitted by 180 countries regarding their educational systems showed that women and girls remained the most widespread victims of educational discrimination.

Information gathered by Human Rights Watch mirrored these findings on the range of obstacles blocking equal access to education by girls and women. These vary from the blatant discrimination by the Taliban in Afghanistan, which continued to bar females from all public educational institutions, to other less obvious though equally pernicious forms of discrimination around the globe. Human Rights Watch’s research in South Africa confirmed reports that sexual violence in schools against girls created a culture of violence that discouraged girls from continuing their education. Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan continued to prohibit female students from wearing religious attire, thereby effectively blocking these students’ access to educational facilities.

Discrimination on other grounds also was widespread. In the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students faced discrimination by their peers and, in some instances, public administrators. As set out more fully in the chapter on Children’s Rights, these students were part of a large number of students around the world who were denied their right to education because of discrimination based on race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or nationality.

Ethnic discrimination against Roma continued on an institutional level in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as Croatia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic failed to provide equal access to educational facilities to Romani students and, in the latter two countries, channelled them toward corrective programs designed for mentally handicapped or learning disabled children in disproportionately high numbers.

**Relevant Human Rights Watch Reports:**

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