BRIEFING NOTE: FREE TO THINK 2023

FREE TO THINK is an annual report by Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project. The report explores concerning trends in attacks on higher education communities around the world. Scholars at Risk Network (SAR) is an international network of over 650 higher education institutions and thousands of individuals in 43 countries that is leading the charge in protecting and offering sanctuary to threatened scholars and students. By doing so, SAR seeks to expand the space in society for reason and evidence-based approaches to resolving conflicts and solving problems.

Attacks on Higher Education Threaten Democracy

Scholars and university students face persistent and pervasive attacks on higher education. These attacks occur in close societies, conflict affected societies, and open societies.

Attacks on higher education threaten the foundations of democracy. They imperil the lives and livelihoods of scholars and students. They make it impossible to teach, research, or express ideas free from censorship or external interference.

Academic freedom is the human right of members of the academic community and others to develop, transmit, apply, and engage with a diversity of knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, learning, and discourse.

Academic Freedom is on the Decline

According to the Academic Freedom Index, more than half of the world's population lives in areas where academic freedom is declining. Over the last year, SAR and our partners who implement scholar support programs have sustained high volumes of requests for assistance, including from scholars in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, Sudan, Myanmar, and Yemen. *See below for the types of attacks worldwide that were reported in* Free to Think 2023:

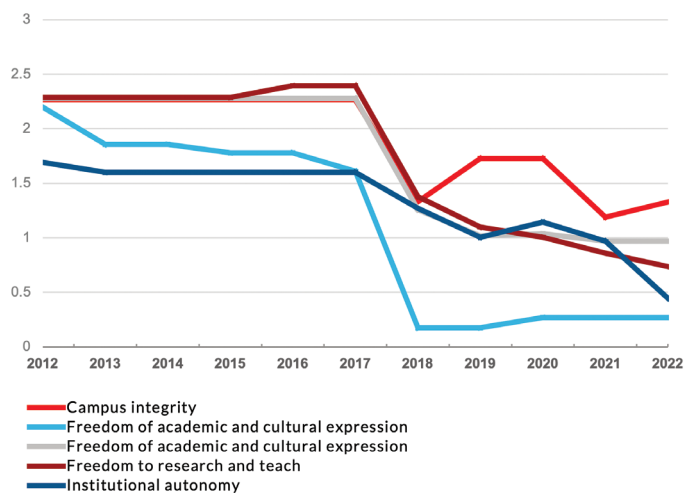|	
☠ Killings, Violence, & Disappearances	**161**
⛓ Imprisonment	**83**
⚖ Prosecution	**27**
⎘ Loss of Position	**46**
✈ Travel Restrictions	**4**
⚡ Other	**88**
TOTAL	**409**

An Assault on University Autonomy in Nicaragua

The government of President Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua continued to take control of the country's universities, a pattern that SAR began documenting in 2021. A UN-led Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua noted that the government's assault on independent institutions, including higher education, was stripping the country of its "intellectual capital and critical voices."

- **March 2023, the Nicaraguan government seized control of four universities:** the Universidad Juan Pablo II, the Universidad Cristiana Autonoma de Nicaragua, Pan-American University of Nicaragua, and the University of the Pacific of Nicaragua.

- **In February 2023, the government released from custody and deported 222 political prisoners,** including student leaders Lesther Aleman, Max Jerez, Mildred Rayo, and Miguel Flores.

Nicaragua

- Campus integrity
- Freedom of academic and cultural expression
- Freedom of academic and cultural expression
- Freedom to research and teach
- Institutional autonomy

Comprised of the five indicators shown in the chart, the AFi is a tool co-developed by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), the V-Dem Institute, and SAR.

The Threat of Illiberal Policies in the United States

In the US, lawmakers at the state level pushed forward legislation intended to limit teaching and research, particularly that related to race, diversity, equity and inclusion, and gender, universities fired or declined to renew the contracts of professors who taught disfavored subjects.

- **On May 12, 2023**, New College of Florida administrators retaliated against U.S. History professor Erik Wallenberg for remarks made in a *Teen Vogue* op-ed by declining to renew his contract.

- **On May 16, 2023**, Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed into law three measures that eroded academic freedom and university autonomy, including by banning public colleges and universities from including disfavored topics in their required courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SAR calls on states, higher education communities, and civil society around the world to do more to prevent and respond to attacks and to protect higher education communities, by:

1. Raising Awareness

We must increase our understanding of attacks on education by tracking and publicizing attacks, as well as by engaging in more extensive research on the topic.

2. Building consensus and community

We must promote normative change by explicitly stating our commitments and bolstering understanding of what academic freedom is.

3. Implementing the right of academic freedom

We must develop and use concrete and practical legal standards and toolkits that provide practical guidance for protecting higher education.

TO LEARN MORE about current threats to academic freedom, read our Free to Think report online by scanning the QR code, or by visiting **scholarsatrisk.org/free-to-think-2023/**