

As protests mount, Cornell University VP of Student Life rejects Momodou Taal's appeal of suspension

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On Thursday, international student and graduate instructor Momodou Taal was informed by a Cornell University official that the appeal of his suspension had been rejected by the Vice President of Student and Campus Life and that he had one final appeal to the provost.

Taal was suspended and banned from campus on Monday—in violation of his free speech and due process rights—for his participation in a protest on campus against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza on September 18.

He participated in a demonstration against a career fair at Cornell University that included military contractors, such as Boeing and L3Harris, that profit directly from the Zionist state and its ethnic cleansing campaign against Palestinians.

Because he is a British-Gambian student, Taal's suspension means he is facing the revocation of his F-1 visa status and an imminent deportation from the US. The campaign against him is a deliberate and open attempt by Cornell University to intimidate and silence students who have been speaking out against Israeli war crimes in Gaza.

In a post on Twitter/X, Taal wrote, “The VP of student and campus life, Ryan Lombardi, rejected my appeal after one business day. This demonstrates once again that my ability to stay in this country is being hastily handled without due process in a continued attempt to silence me.

“I have until 5pm tomorrow to appeal to the provost. If the provost rejects this appeal, then I believe my withdrawal will be processed and I will promptly have to leave the country.”

His message went on, “Once again, there has been no investigation, nor have I had a chance to even respond to the allegations against me. I maintain that all my actions have been peaceful and in accordance with my First Amendment rights.

“This is a deliberate targeting of a Black Muslim student at an institution where those two identities are increasingly unwelcome. When it comes to Palestine the university will abandon all commitments to academic freedom and free speech to protect its corporate interests.”

Taal issued a public appeal published by the *Cornell Daily Sun* Thursday night calling for assistance from the university's Global Learning Center, noting:

I am asking for your help because the Global Learning Center is supposed to support me rather than fight me. The Global Learning website says the purpose of its international services is to “help students and scholars from 116 countries thrive at Cornell.” The website has an entire section titled “supporting scholars under threat” and says that “since 2016 Global Cornell has led campus and community support for international scholars, students, and human rights defenders whose work puts them at risk in their home countries.”

I am a scholar, and I am under threat here in America because I am defending the basic human rights of the people of Palestine while participating in peaceful protests on a university campus. I have a valid visa. I have a right to be at Cornell and I have a right to express myself.

The rejection of Taal's appeal by the VP of Student and Campus Life took place amid a growing movement on campus by students, faculty and staff demanding his suspension be rescinded.

On Wednesday, more than 130 students and supporters protested in front of the administration building, Day Hall, denouncing the attack on Taal and demanding, “Hands off Momodou!”

Taal was not present at the demonstration because he is banned from campus, but he sent a message thanking the demonstrators via Twitter/X, saying that his deportation status was unresolved and called on his supporters to keep up the pressure on the university.

A report in the *Cornell Daily Sun* said that university police officers monitored the demonstration, including two officers who stood guard inside Day Hall. One officer also took photographs of the speakers and concentrated on capturing their faces when they lifted or lowered their face coverings.

After the rally, a group of 35 students remained to picket the entrance of the administration building to demand a response from the university about Taal's suspension. When, after more than two hours, they received no response, the demonstrators left the area.

Other expressions of support for Taal included a press release published in the *Sun* by the Africana Graduate Students Association; an open petition organized by the Cornell Collective for Justice in Palestine, which has gathered 4,500 signatures; and a

statement by the Cornell Graduate Student United (CGSU), the graduate student union, calling on the university to reverse its decision. CGSU has scheduled a rally to protest Taal's suspension in front of Bailey Hall on October 3.

The Cornell Chapter of the American Association of University Professors released a statement Wednesday calling for the immediate rescinding of the suspension, which they noted "constitutes an extreme and disproportionate punishment imposed without just cause and without due process and violates academic freedom and freedom of expression."

Socialist Equality Party candidate for US President, Joseph Kishore, issued a statement on Thursday calling on all workers and students to oppose the suspension, which is part of a wider attack on free speech and democratic rights. Kishore explained,

Taal's treatment is an outrage. He has been denied due process, and his basic democratic rights have been trampled upon. The administration is taking actions that would lead to the revocation of his visa, effectively expelling him from the US, a tactic aimed at silencing him and intimidating others.

This case is part of a broader nationwide assault on free speech and democratic rights on college campuses. University administrations, in collaboration with the Biden-Harris administration, state governments and the police, are cracking down on protests opposing the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Across the country, students and faculty who speak out against Israel's war crimes face repression, including suspensions, expulsions and criminal charges.

At the University of California, Santa Cruz, more than 100 students and faculty were arrested last semester for protesting the war in Gaza, prompting a lawsuit by the ACLU. In Michigan, Democratic Attorney General Dana Nessel is pressing felony charges against 11 University of Michigan students for participating in pro-Palestinian protests. Earlier this month, Ann Arbor police, following the actions of a Zionist professor, barred Socialist Equality Party supporters from distributing leaflets on campus about our election campaign.

Taal's suspension follows his earlier punishment for protesting the war in Gaza. He was suspended during the spring semester for his involvement in a pro-Palestinian encampment at Cornell, part of a nationwide series of protests demanding an end to US support for Israel's crimes. For international students like Taal, these suspensions carry even more devastating consequences, as they result in the loss of their visas, forcing them to leave the country.

The crackdown on Taal and other pro-Palestinian protesters is part of a larger strategy aimed at silencing any opposition to US imperialism's wars abroad. The Biden administration, while hypocritically claiming to defend "democracy" and "human rights," has overseen an intensifying war on dissent, targeting anyone who opposes the government's foreign policy agenda. The aim is to

suppress opposition to US imperialism's wars in Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere and to prepare for broader conflicts, particularly against Iran and China.

When Joel Malina, vice president for university relations, was asked about how Taal's suspension might jeopardize his legal status, he said that the university had no enforcement powers. Malina claimed in his statement, "Any international student administratively withdrawn by Cornell pursuant to the Student Code of Conduct is urged to immediately review immigration guidelines and consult with experts. Universities can disallow enrollment and bar a student from campus, but do not have deportation powers."

Eric Lee, Taal's attorney, responded to this distortion of the facts noting, "Mr. Malina acknowledges that Cornell lacks the power to deport its students, but by rushing to suspend Mr. Taal without due process for exercising his constitutional right to free speech, Cornell is blurring the line between academic institution and enforcement arm of the Department of Homeland Security."

Lee wrote that Taal was told incorrectly on Monday he must be prepared to leave the country as soon as this weekend. The statement continued,

Federal immigration regulations, however, do not require universities report changes in a student's status until several weeks later. Moreover, Cornell's threats to report Mr. Taal would have deprived him of the right to a hearing and opportunity to respond to the allegations against him. This violates basic principles of due process and the presumption of innocence, to which all students, including foreign nationals, are entitled.

To argue, as Mr. Malina does, that Cornell "does not have deportation powers" is a cynical sleight of hand. The administration has made the decision to persecute Mr. Taal for free speech activity knowing full well that doing so will subject him to serious immigration consequences. By proceeding in this way, Cornell's administration is setting a dangerous national precedent and risks destroying its longstanding reputation as a center of free speech.

We are heartened by the overwhelming support for Mr. Taal among Cornell's faculty and student body and urge the administration to change course.



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