

# University of Michigan student government president and vice president removed over pro-Palestinian views

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On December 21, the University of Michigan (UMich) Central Student Judiciary (CSJ), the judicial branch of the Central Student Government (CSG), officially removed pro-Palestinian and anti-genocide CSG president Alifa Chowdhury and vice president Elias Atkinson, each on a single charge of dereliction of duty.

In addition to removing the pair from office, the CSJ barred Chowdhury and Atkinson from ever holding CSG office in the future. Speaker of the Assembly Mario Thaqi has taken Chowdhury's place as CSG president.

After seven days of hearings spread from November 22 to December 21, totaling over 20 hours of deliberation, the only infractions the CSJ could cite against the pair were four unexcused absences from Assembly meetings by Chowdhury, and Atkinson's failure to hold CSG meetings, which the student government constitution requires that he lead twice monthly.

The CSJ found Chowdhury and Atkinson not guilty on all other charges, most significantly on the charge of inciting violence.

Chowdhury and Atkinson ran on the Shut It Down platform, opposing the US-Israel-led genocide in Gaza and its connection to the university, and won the election last spring. They were impeached on November 12 by a 30 to 7 vote on a motion presented by CSG representative Margaret Peterman.

The motion issued five articles of impeachment: two each directed against Chowdhury and Atkinson, one for "inciting violence" against the CSG and the student body, and one for "dereliction of duty," and a single charge for "cyber theft of CSG property" against

Chowdhury.

The "violence" in question is a slanderous description of a public CSG meeting held on October 8, during which students peacefully protested to support the Rebuilding Education in Gaza Act. Shut It Down organized the protest through an Instagram post calling on students to "Pack CSG" to support the act.

The Rebuilding Education in Gaza Act, which would have provided "\$440,000 to rebuilding education in Gaza," was up for a vote alongside the Wolverines' Budget Act, which provided funding for student programs and clubs. During the meeting, the CSG passed the Wolverines' Budget Act and rejected the Rebuilding Education in Gaza Act.

Student protesters denounced the vote upon its announcement. Following the meeting, Chowdhury used the official CSG Instagram account to post a video criticizing the vote's outcome.

Peterman's impeachment motion was preceded by an op-ed she and 40 co-author CSG representatives published in the *Michigan Daily* a week after the October 8 meeting. The op-ed demanded Chowdhury and Atkinson resign for their promotion of and complicity in "political violence."

In the op-ed, Peterman also cited a "bias-motivated assault," reported by the *Michigan Daily* on September 15, against a 19-year-old Jewish individual that occurred miles from the UMich Ann Arbor campus, which she claims, without evidence, was driven by the "hateful rhetoric" of the pro-Palestinian protesters.

The impeachment campaign was politically motivated and centered on intimidating students and workers opposing the genocide in Gaza.

Even as it acknowledged it had found no evidence to

back the charge of political violence, the Central Student Judiciary stated that it had “no choice but to do as the Constitution commands and as the evidence compels. We are required to convict the defendants.”

At least two other Shut It Down representatives resigned in protest following the removal of Chowdhury and Atkinson.

As the WSWS revealed in an article on the opening of impeachment proceedings against Chowdhury and Atkinson, the small group of CSG representatives leading the impeachment campaign have deep ties to the Democratic Party establishment.

Peterman has direct ties to the Democratic Party. She served as a fellow in the Democrats’ One Campaign—utilized by the Democratic Party for many of its campaigns in Michigan—and worked with the Michigan Democratic Party on Vice President Kamala Harris’ presidential election campaign. She also interned over the summer in Washington, D.C., for Iowa Republican Representative Randy Feenstra, a far-right Christian fundamentalist.

Thaqi, Chowdhury’s successor, was an intern for Michigan Political Consulting. The firm partnered with Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, providing her election campaign donor and opposition research while assisting in recruiting volunteers and in its text banking program (the process of reaching out to voters, donors and supporters via text message).

The University of Michigan administration worked with Nessel to prosecute protesters involved in a pro-Palestinian solidarity encampment on campus. Police dismantled the encampment during the Winter 2023 semester. Nessel charged 11 of the protesters, seven of them with felonies.

After interning in the US House of Representatives in 2021, Thaqi worked for the Democrats in the 2022 midterm election. In 2023, he interned for four months with a management consulting firm in Amman, Jordan, whose clients include the governments of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman, as well as the US Agency for International Development (AID), a longtime cover for the CIA.

According to his LinkedIn page, Thaqi began working as a public sector financial services intern for Guidehouse in Washington, D.C. and plans to join the firm full-time after graduation. Guidehouse is a US consulting firm for businesses and government entities.

On its website, Guidehouse boasts of deep connections to every department and office in the US federal government, including the Department of Defense (DoD) and the intelligence agencies. In November, Guidehouse won a \$1.8 billion DoD contract for personnel and readiness support.

Shut It Down received substantial support from the student body during CSG elections due to its opposition to the US-backed genocide in Gaza. However, Chowdhury and Atkinson alienated students and CSG members by using their positions to block funding for student clubs and activities, maintaining that the funds would be released only if and when the university severed its ties to corporations and agencies supportive of the Israeli government.

This self-isolating and politically suicidal tactic played into the hands of the university administration, the Regents, the Democratic Party and pro-Israel groups. It was bound up with the narrow nationalistic politics and perspective of Shut it Down.

Rather than opposing the crackdown on protesters against the genocide in Gaza as an attack on the free speech and political expression rights of all students, faculty and staff, Chowdhury and Atkinson helped drive a wedge between the student body as a whole and the anti-genocide protesters.

This was a political gift to right-wing, pro-Zionist forces aligned with the Democratic Party and the Regents and hostile to the anti-genocide protests.



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