

University of Michigan bans pro-Palestinian student group as part of escalating assault on democratic rights

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On January 16, the University of Michigan banned the Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of the national pro-Palestinian group, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The ban suspends SAFE's club status for up to two years, depriving the group of access to university facilities and the right to promote its views on campus. It marks the first ever suspension of a legacy student organization in the university's history.

The action is direct retribution for peaceful protests carried out by SAFE against the US-backed Israeli genocide against Palestinians in Gaza since October 2023. SAFE has participated in rallies and an encampment on campus, as well as a protest at the home of a member of the Board of Regents, to demand that the university sever its financial ties to the Zionist regime.

The lifting of SAFE's student club status is part of a wave of repressive actions taken against pro-Palestinian students, faculty and others at colleges and universities in the US and around the world carried out under the fraudulent pretext of combating antisemitism. At least 70,000 Palestinian civilians, mainly women and children, have been killed by Israeli forces with bombs, bullets, combat jets and other weapons supplied by the Biden administration and continued under the fascist President Donald Trump, who has openly called for the removal of the Palestinians from Gaza. Unknown thousands of others have died as a result of the destruction of homes, hospitals and schools and the withholding of food and sanitation from the enclave by Israel, with US support.

The university has sent in police to attack and arrest anti-genocide protesters, and Democratic Michigan

Attorney General Dana Nessel has charged at least 10 protesters with felony crimes at the urging of the university administration and the Board of Regents.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UM denounces the ban on SAFE and demands that it be immediately lifted and SAFE be allowed to function freely as a student organization on campus. The IYSSE also demands the dropping of charges against anti-genocide protesters. The IYSSE calls on all workers, students and youth at UM and beyond to oppose the attack on SAFE as an attack on the First Amendment right to free speech.

On October 31, Stephanie Jackson, an outside consultant hired by UM, published a complaint on behalf of the university through the UM Student Organization Advancement and Recognition (SOAR) office. Her complaint alleged that SAFE had violated the Center for Campus Involvement's (CCI's) Standards of Conduct for Recognized Student Organizations.

The complaint cites a protest outside UM Board of Regents and Republican Party member Sarah Hubbard's home on May 15, a "die-in" protest against the Gaza genocide on August 28 during UM's annual Festifall student club event, and a tabling event on October 16 during Open MiC (Michigan in Color) Night on the campus Diag. Jackson's complaint claims SAFE's involvement in the Festifall protest "threatened and intimidated" students.

In a statement published on its Twitter/X account on January 30, SAFE wrote: "Last week, Umich admin overturned the student judicial ruling that found SAFE not responsible for the majority of the baseless accusations made against us by the university, urging

the administrators to not suspend SAFE.”

Under SOAR’s guidelines, the Central Student Judiciary (CSJ) may act as a student governing body for a public hearing on complaints referred to the CSJ by the CCI office. On December 5, the CSJ held a public hearing to review and examine claims made by Jackson and the SAFE co-presidents, Maryam Shafie and Mariam Odeh.

The CSJ’s December 13 recommendation, to which SAFE’s statement refers, found SAFE responsible for two of four violations at Festifall, one of two violations during Open MiC Night and none of the seven violations during the protest in front of Hubbard’s home.

On January 16, Dean of Students Laura Blake Jones issued the University’s official decision, dismissing the CSJ’s recommendation and imposing the ban on SAFE. In a statement posted on Twitter/X on January 30, Regent Sarah Hubbard cynically praised the banning of SAFE, hailing in Orwellian fashion the muzzling of the organization as a defense of academic freedom. She wrote, “Our campus community must be free from hate, intolerance and intimidation in order to allow academic freedom and diversity of thought to flourish.”

UM banned SAFE the day after Michigan Attorney General Nessel issued charges against three protesters involved in the Festifall “die-in” demonstration on the university Diag in August. The charges include resisting and obstructing a police officer, a felony, and trespassing, a misdemeanor that carries a possible 90-day jail sentence. The felony charge carries a possible sentence of two years behind bars.

According to a report from MLive, those charged include Samantha Lewis, an organizer with Detroit Will Breathe during the city’s 2021 police brutality protests, and Alice Elliot, a UM alumnus, each of whom was charged with one count of trespassing and one count of resisting and obstructing a police officer. The third protester, a 2021 UM graduate, received a single count of trespassing.

Lewis already faces a felony charge for resisting and obstructing a police officer issued against her by Nessel’s office for her involvement in the pro-Palestinian solidarity encampment erected last spring on UM’s Diag and torn down by the police in May.

On Wednesday, the Trump administration announced

an executive order titled “Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism,” which outlines the goal of “using all available and appropriate legal tools to prosecute, remove, or otherwise hold to account the perpetrators of unlawful anti-Semitic harassment and violence,” based on the false equation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism.

The order, in an effort to bring universities directly into the fold of the military-intelligence-immigration enforcement apparatus, instructs universities to “monitor for and report activities by alien students and staff relevant to those grounds and for ensuring that such reports about aliens lead, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law, to investigations and, if warranted, actions to remove such aliens,” i.e., to deport non-citizen students who protest against the anti-Palestinian genocide.



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