

Brazilian authorities are violating constitutional norms and jeopardizing academic freedom

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The world's largest association of academics engaged in research on Latin America points out that Brazilian police and judicial forces are taking inappropriate action against public universities, ignoring due process and violating university autonomy.

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) expresses its profound concern over the actions carried out by police and judicial forces against Brazilian public universities which ignore due process and violate multiple constitutional norms, including the guarantee of autonomy for Brazilian universities, based on Article 207 of the Constitution. LASA, which is the world's largest association of academics engaged in research on Latin America, points out at least 6 specific situations in the past year, where government authorities in Brazil have taken actions that have been widely interpreted as intended to intimidate or demoralize administrators, faculty, and students at the nation's public universities, raising concerns about academic freedom in the most populous nation in Latin America.

In light of this, LASA demands that any inquiry into alleged wrongdoing be conducted in accordance with the rule of law and with regard to the principle of academic freedom. LASA furthermore calls upon Brazilian political and judicial officials to adopt measures to respect the autonomy of Brazil's universities and fully respect academic freedom, which is essential to the functioning of a community of scholars. The prestigious association expresses its concern over the following specific actions and calls upon Brazilian authorities to investigate them, bring those responsible to account, and to take all measures necessary to guarantee academic freedom in Brazil.

November 29, 2016

A lecture at the Federal University of Pará in Belém on the environmental and social effects of mining along the Xingu River was abruptly terminated when Mayor Dirceu Biancardi of the municipality of Senador José Porfírio, accompanied by 40 other people, broke into the lecture hall and threatened to imprison the organizer of the event, Professor Rosa Acevedo of the Núcleo de Altos Estudos Amazônicos (NAEA--Institute for Advanced Amazonian Studies) and the other speakers.

December 9, 2016

Nearly 70 federal police agents intervened in the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, leading to the forcible detention or arrest of six individuals, including four faculty, all involved in a health education extension program that was being investigated for misuse of fellowship funds.

February 13, 2017

180 federal police agents intervened in the Federal University of Paraná, in Curitiba, issuing arrest warrants for 20 individuals suspected of misuse of funds earmarked for scientific research and temporarily imprisoning 12 of them. According to Rector Ricardo Marcelo Fonseca and his predecessor, the university had already implemented its own internal investigation of these allegations.

Overall, in the month of February 2017

Authorities arrested eight public university administrators, and issued 29 temporary detention orders and 36 arrest warrants against faculty and staff in universities in the states of Paraná, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Rio de Janeiro, due to allegations of misuse of funds.

September 14, 2017

The Rector of the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Luiz Carlos Cancellier de Olivo, was arrested on charges of obstructing an investigation into the alleged misuse of university funds. He was held in prison overnight but was soon released by a judge, who found that he posed no threat to the ongoing investigation. However, Cancellier de Olivo was prohibited by the police from setting foot on campus, and images of him wearing a prison uniform circulated on social media, causing him serious distress. Following these events, Cancellier de Olivo, who was 59 years old, killed himself.

December 6, 2017

Police officials intervened in the Federal University of Minas Gerais, purportedly to investigate allegations that funds for a memorial to victims of the dictatorship had been inappropriately funneled to research on that issue. The following day, the university Rector, Jaime Arturo Ramirez, was arrested at his home and briefly imprisoned, along with two other colleagues.

LASA notes that these raids, detentions, and imprisonments have occurred despite the fact that federal universities operate under the aegis of the Tribunal de Contas da União (Government Accounting Board) and the Controladoria Geral (Comptroller General), a circumstance that should both protect the principle of university autonomy and preclude the need for police raids on university campuses or against university officials.

About LASA

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) is the largest professional association in the world for individuals and institutions engaged in the study of Latin America. With over 12,000 members, over 65% of whom reside outside the United States, LASA is the one association that brings together experts on Latin America from all disciplines and diverse occupational endeavors, across the globe. LASA's mission is to foster intellectual discussion, research, and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean, and its people throughout the Americas, promote the interests of its diverse membership, and encourage civic engagement through network building and public debate.

If you wish to interview a LASA Executive Council member, you can contact the LASA communications office at (412) 648-7929 or lasa@lasaweb.org.

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