

Threats to Academic Freedom in Uganda

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Hi! My name is Stella Nyanzi. Police arrested me many times for peaceful protests against oppression. I was also imprisoned twice in maximum security prison as a political prisoner of conscience.

Political repression is a signature of authoritarian dictatorships. When dissidents and regime critics are punished, academics become lambs for slaughter. Many critical scholars are subjected to demonization, demotion, dismissal from jobs, denial of access to academic resources including space and community, detention, disappearance, degrading torture during interrogation, and even death.

For five years, I was repeatedly suspended from my tenured position as a permanent and pensionable Research Fellow at Makerere University in Uganda because I criticized the failures and excesses of the president's wife who is also the Minister of Education. She directed university administrators to transfer me from my research unit in the Social Sciences to a teaching position in the School of Law – a position I was not qualified for. Although I won three different appeals (against these suspensions) at the academic tribunal, the university never reinstated me back into my job because of fear of reprisals from the tyrannical president and his nepotistic wife. Instead, I received threats to my life.

When I sought protection from the police, I was arrested, remanded, slapped with trumped-up charges, prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to 18 months in prison. When I was a prisoner, I suffered a miscarriage due to torture by prison wardresses. Supplementing the loss my pregnancy in prison, I also contracted Urinary Tract Infections and my kidneys got poisoned. During my trial, state prosecutors applied to the court to subject me to involuntary mental examination – in order to discredit me as a government critic.

In addition to state surveillance and monitoring of critical creative scholars, authoritarian dictatorships are also conservative. Consequently, they discourage, censor and gag independent research and autonomous inquiry into non-normative forms of humanness because in order to thrive, dictators rely on oppressive hierarchies including misogyny, patriarchy, homophobia, imperialism, financial opacity, exploitative extraction of natural resources, authoritarianism, etc.

As an African Queer Scholar, competitive research funding I had secured was confiscated, kept in an institutional bank account, and later returned to the funders. Some of my research projects were criminalized as “promotion of homosexuality” in a highly homophobic legislative regime. My research data were seized by police officers during numerous raids on my home and office. At the university, I was widely ostracized for undertaking research on same-sex sexualities and non-conforming gender identities. All my research was published only outside Uganda.

I have briefly highlighted that in dictatorial national contexts such as my home-country Uganda, the pillars of academic freedom including free expression, freedom of conscience and thought, and intellectual freedom are highly threatened. Universities lose autonomy as centers of critical thought. Academic qualifications do not protect regime critics.