

NYU, the Gulf monarchies and university-backed political repression

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28 December 2016

A recent op-ed in the *New York Times* by former New York University (NYU) student Kristina Bogos details the attempts by the governments of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar to shut down her research into labor conditions in the Middle Eastern monarchies. This biting report underscores the complicity of her former university in attacks on political and academic freedom.

The school's collaboration with the repressive UAE regime at NYU's satellite campus in Abu Dhabi shows the anti-democratic character of the pro-corporate administration. In the US, NYU has also denied club status to the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, cutting off political opposition to the ruling parties domestically.

In the *Times* op-ed, Bogos recounts her experience with authorities from the Gulf monarchies, which began with intimidating emails sent prior to her planned visit to Qatar in May. The messages accused her of conducting a "dirty mission" and warned that UAE officials had informed Qatar about her plans.

With the help of a security expert, Bogos established that her email had been hacked, most likely by the UAE government, which shared information with Qatari authorities. When she arrived in the capital, Doha, Bogos was denied entry and detained. Officials explained that she was on a blacklist due to her previous activities in the UAE while a student at NYU. She was ultimately permitted entry as a tourist, but state security forces kept her under tight surveillance during the visit. Her student visa application for graduate study in Qatar was denied.

Bogos was targeted because of her prior articles exposing the brutal migrant labor system in the Middle East. As an undergraduate journalism student at NYU, she spent a semester abroad in 2013. Her research included interviews with construction workers erecting the university's Abu Dhabi campus on Saadiyat Island. Currently she attends Georgetown University, which operates a foreign campus in neighboring Qatar. She sought to conduct thesis research on migrant communities there.

The attempt to silence Bogos is not an isolated incident. In March of 2015, UAE barred NYU professor Andrew Ross from boarding a flight to Abu Dhabi. Ross, a labor studies scholar, an outspoken critic of the labor practices in the Gulf region, intended to carry out field research before he was blacklisted for unexplained "security reasons." Prior to his planned trip, Ross discovered that he, along with other academics and journalists who exposed labor abuses in the UAE, were the targets of a private investigation. On a previous trip to UAE, he reported being followed, apparently by government security officials.

NYU responded to the travel ban on Ross by defending the school's relationship with the repressive monarchy. University Spokesman John Beckman claimed that students and faculty "experienced zero infringements" on academic freedom on the Abu Dhabi campus and that ultimately, "it is the government that controls visa and immigration policy, and not the university."

Similarly, Georgetown University responded to the banning of Bogos by asserting that "access to study and residence visas varies across individuals and over time." Both NYU and Georgetown added hollow phrases in support of academic freedom, even claiming that their presence in UAE and Qatar advance the cause of liberalism in the Gulf.

The records of these regimes show the opposite is true. The monarchies in the UAE, Qatar, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are among the most reactionary on the planet, notorious for their human rights abuses and extreme exploitation of foreign workers. "Morality crimes" are punishable by flogging and death by stoning. Human Rights Watch and other rights organizations have cited the arbitrary detention and disappearance of government critics. In the UAE it is illegal to criticize the government, the police or the royal family. Political parties are forbidden, and the press is tightly controlled.

Migrant workers, which make up the entire construction labor force in UAE, are systematically abused under the notorious *kafala* system of employer sponsorship. Migrants typically must pay recruiters up to a year's salary and are

forbidden to change employers without consent. Their passports are confiscated in order to restrict their movement. They have no access to legal recourse when they are swindled or otherwise abused. Strikes and other workplace struggles are met with jail time and deportations.

The rapid development on Saadiyat Island, which included not only the NYU Abu Dhabi campus but also branches of the Guggenheim and Louvre museums, is no exception. In 2014, a front page story in the *Times* documented abuses of workers constructing the NYU campus.

The report revealed that workers were forced to toil 11 to 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week just to make their promised income. They lived in squalor at dangerous labor camps, more than a dozen crammed into a 200 square foot (19 square meter) sleeping quarters. Their passports were taken away and purchases tightly controlled. Despite issuing an apology after a later report revealed further slave labor conditions, NYU did not compensate the hundreds of workers who were deported as a result of being framed up while working for NYU.

The oil rich Gulf countries remain key allies of the US government and principal conduits for US militarism in the Middle East. Collectively the Gulf monarchies produce over 20 percent of the world's oil. They hold an even larger share of the spare oil production capacity, which enables them to raise production rapidly and exert power over prices.

Saudi Arabia and UAE are the largest recipients of US weapons exports, according to research by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The UAE alone received \$18 billion worth of on-the-books military equipment from the US between 2007 and 2014, according to figures from the Congressional Research Service. Secret arms transfers were not tallied. These weapons transfers, whether official or covert, have played a key role in arming Islamist proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere in the region.

In addition, the US military maintains key infrastructure in the region. US military jets have access to bases in the UAE. Neighboring Qatar hosts the largest US base in the region. The Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Persian Gulf, is based out of Bahrain.

None of this is incidental to the expansion of NYU in Abu Dhabi—the flagship of its expanding global network that now counts 14 cities outside the US. In fact, locating the satellite campus in the UAE was carried out with the support of the highest levels of the US government. Hillary Clinton's former chief of staff, Cheryl Mills, played a key role in negotiating the final agreement on behalf of NYU. She negotiated with government officials from the UAE for four months while also employed by the US State Department under Clinton.

Washington Post reported that her responsibilities on the negotiation team included “free-speech provisions for students and faculty members, navigating how same-sex and unmarried couples could work at the university given the country's conservative laws, and working to ensure labor protections for workers constructing campus buildings.” None of these were of any real concern in the multi-million dollar deal.

Former president Bill Clinton demonstrated his support by giving the commencement address to the first graduating class in 2014. Clinton also reportedly collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking fees at events in the UAE while his wife was secretary of state. The Clinton Foundation reports UAE donations at the level of between \$1 million and \$5 million.

This support within the state apparatus is not simply a matter of the personal interest of the Clintons. Furthering the academic, cultural and business ties with the reactionary, semi-feudal Gulf monarchies is understood as important to cementing alliances that enable the US to project its influence in a strategically important area of the globe.

For its part, NYU's international expansion opens up access to a larger pool of wealthy, revenue-generating students and helps develop NYU as a global brand. The financial attractiveness of the endeavor was boosted by the Abu Dhabi government's commitment to fully funding the campus construction.

In addressing the controversy in Abu Dhabi earlier this year, NYU president Andrew Hamilton told the *Washington Square News*, “I wholeheartedly believe that a university's strength lies in its ability to debate, to discuss, to explore, to research, to teach without constraints.” He added, “We must always remain vigilant, and [academic restrictions] can occur in the United States just as they can occur in Abu Dhabi or Shanghai.”

Under his administration, now one year in, the supposed vigilance is nowhere to be found. NYU's complicity in the blacklisting of Bogos and Ross in Abu Dhabi mirror the moves in New York to prevent the emergence of a political alternative in the form of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. NYU is engaged in an intensifying attack on democratic rights of students and faculty, and it is up to students to fight for the rights of socialist groups to participate in the political life of this important campus.



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