

# Columbia University President Shafik resigns amidst right-wing attacks over anti-genocide protests

Elliott Murtagh  
15 August 2024

Columbia University President Minouche (Nemat) Shafik resigned on Wednesday, less than three weeks before the Fall semester is set to begin. Shafik, who led a brutal police state-style crackdown on anti-genocide and pro-Palestinian student protesters in April, is the third Ivy League president to resign over the past eight months after coming under right-wing congressional attacks.

Far-right Republicans, who have been allowed by the Biden administration to spear-head the witch-hunt of protesters and the campaign to whip all university administrations into line, rejoiced in the news of Shafik's resignation. Their message throughout the campaign to topple the presidents of elite universities has been clear: Nothing short of a total crackdown on student protesters will do, including mass expulsions and arrests and a complete subordination of academia to the war machine.

Thus, fascist Republican Representative Elise Stefanik issued a vile statement calling for a purge at universities. "THREE DOWN, so many more to go. ... After failing to protect Jewish students and negotiating with pro-Hamas terrorists, this forced resignation is long overdue."

An equally repugnant and threatening response was made by Christian nationalist House Speaker Mike Johnson, who labeled anti-genocide protesters as "pro-Hamas radicals."

As a result of President Shafik's refusal to protect Jewish students and maintain order on campus, Columbia University became the epicenter for virulent antisemitism that has plagued many American university campuses since Hamas' barbaric attack on Israel last fall. ...

We hope that President Shafik's resignation serves as an example to university administrators across the country that tolerating or protecting antisemites is unacceptable and will have consequences.

Johnson staged a provocation the day after the mass student arrests at Columbia, calling on President Shafik to resign for not sufficiently crushing the protests.

Democratic US Representative Ritchie Torres, an outspoken Zionist, also took to X to applaud the resignation, labeling Columbia "as ground zero for campus antisemitism in NYC. I hope the new leadership will summon the moral clarity and the moral courage to confront the deep rot of antisemitism at Columbia's core."

Shafik, a former leading official of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Bank of England, announced that she will take a job working under the UK's Foreign Secretary in Parliament, while praising right-wing, pro-war Labour leader Keir Starmer's "important legislative agenda."

Dr. Katrina A. Armstrong—CEO of Columbia's Irving Medical Center, Health Sciences Dean, and Executive Vice President for Health and Biomedical Sciences at Columbia—is taking over as interim president, who will be working closely with Shafik for "an orderly transition."

In a statement to the Columbia academic community, Shafik described her tenure as "a period of turmoil where it has been difficult to overcome divergent views across our community," and that "tension, division, and politicization have disrupted our campus over the last year."

Trying to justify herself, ex-President Shafik saw fit to refer to the famous passage from Abraham Lincoln's famous speech opening his 1858 campaign for the US Senate seat from Illinois against Stephen Douglas:

I have tried to navigate a path that upholds academic principles and treats everyone with fairness and compassion. ... As President Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand"—we must do all we can to resist the forces of polarization in our community. I remain optimistic that differences

can be overcome through the honest exchange of views, truly listening, and—always—by treating each other with dignity and respect.

With these words Shafik has only demonstrated her ignorance of the struggle against slavery and of the role of America's greatest president. The full passage from Lincoln, its first words coming from the Bible, reads, "'A house divided against itself, cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other."

Thus the future president warned that compromise with slavery was impossible, that those differences could *not* be "overcome." Shafik, on the other hand, is calling for compromise, which was the position of slavery sympathizer Stephen Douglas, not of Lincoln. She insists on compromise between those who support the US-backed Israeli genocide of Palestinians and permanent occupation—today's equivalent of slavery—and the attacks on academic freedom and the right to protest, and those who fight against this.

This "compromise" and Shafik's "dignity and respect" towards Columbia students took the form of inviting a horde of New York Police Department (NYPD) officers to descend upon the campus to violently break up and arrest over 100 peaceful student protesters, who set up a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" last semester. This action was undoubtedly coordinated with the highest levels of the New York and US state, and it was the first time the NYPD was called to a campus since the 1968 anti-Vietnam War student occupation.

The crackdown came the day after Shafik testified before a McCarthyite congressional hearing led by extreme-right forces, like Republicans Stefanik, Virginia Foxx and Jim Banks—who, along with Speaker Johnson, all embrace Trump's Hitler-style attacks on immigrants—who demanded Shafik "answer" for supposed rampant antisemitism—i.e. anti-Zionist protests—on campus. This was part of a series of hearings which previously targeted and led to the ousting of Harvard President Dr. Claudine Gay and University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill.

While Shafik responded to the hearing by sending police on students and threatening to call in the National Guard, the student arrests at Columbia only intensified student protests throughout campuses in New York City and across the country. Shafik came under further right-wing attacks saying she did not crack down hard enough, while the campus largely closed down and became a guarded militarized police zone following another student occupation—"Hind's

Hall"—and round of violent mass arrests at the end of April.

Shafik is widely hated among the student body due to this role she played and news of her resignation has been celebrated by student protesters. But however justified the hatred of Shafik among students and faculty may be, this celebration is misplaced, and illusions that it represents a "victory" for the anti-Genocide protesters are nothing short of dangerous.

The political and class issues involved in the Gaza genocide and the attacks on academic freedom have not been and will not be resolved with the swapping of a university leadership that has no doubt been negotiated at the highest levels of the state and the Democratic Party.

Interim President Dr. Armstrong has already poured praise on Shafik, as well as former Columbia President Bollinger—who was also widely hated, especially by grad students—saying, "I assume this role able to stand on the shoulders of our two most recent presidents, Minouche Shafik and Lee C. Bollinger, whose dedication to Columbia is boundless, and I take comfort in knowing they will be available to me and to Columbia going forward."

The celebration of Shafik's resignation by the fascist Republicans like Stefanik is a strong indicator that, behind the scenes, their campaign played the central role in forcing Shafik's ouster. In fact, all of the recent resignations of university presidents have only served to bolster the far right, as well as the role of the military in dictating university affairs. Harvard's new President Alan Garber appointed Vice President Jennifer O'Connor, who served as the US Department of Defense's general counsel and "Vice President of technology and information law and policy" at major defense contractor Northrop Grumman. Northrop Grumman is deeply implicated in the ethnic cleansing and genocide in Gaza, manufacturing weapons for the Israeli military.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in New York City has stated, the way forward against the genocide and the state-led repression on campuses requires an understanding that students are faced with a struggle not just on this or that campus, but against the entire ruling class and a social system. Students can only undertake such a struggle through a turn outward, toward the working class, and a complete break from the politics of pressuring the Democratic Party and university administrations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**