

Momodou Taal tells London meeting: Protesting the Gaza genocide “placed a target on my back”

Momodou Taal
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Momodou Taal delivered the following speech at a public meeting in London hosted by the Socialist Equality Party (UK) on Saturday May 31, “Trump’s war on free speech: The case of Momodou Taal”.

A British-Gambian citizen who was studying at Cornell University, Taal was forced to leave the United States in March to escape arrest and detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents following his lawsuit challenging the legality of US President Donald Trump’s decrees banning campus protests against the Gaza genocide.

The report has been edited slightly for publication. An initial report of the meeting was published by the World Socialist Web Site on June 1, 2025.

Thank you so much for coming out. I will begin by perhaps talking more about our particular moment, what Palestine represents for me in this moment, why I got involved, the crisis which we’re facing in so many of our countries, and then I’ll go into the specific details of what happened to me in my last two weeks of being in the United States. As [Taal’s attorney] Eric Lee will tell you, it was a very, very interesting and quite an unreal experience.

I was recently at the centre of an international media storm. Cornell University was prepared to be amongst the first in the United States to deport an international student over pro-Palestinian advocacy. My crime: remaining a vocal and ardent critic of Zionism and the state of Israel. My continued involvement in protests on campus placed a target on my back.

My case garnered international coverage, as thousands globally signed a petition demanding the university reverse its decision. If you were to ask the administration, they would claim ‘we don’t have the power to deport’. However, I ask here what I asked them at the time: what is the word for telling someone that they are no longer allowed to remain in the country, even though I have no desire to leave right now?

On the 23rd of September of 2024, I walked towards the university’s official administration building. I had been summoned to meet the university administration after attending an action that brought to a standstill a careers fair that featured arms companies supplying Israel, including Boeing and L3Harris. And these were some of the companies that were specific targets of our divestment campaign on campus.

“The university had made the decision to crush pro-Palestine protests and wanted to make an example of me”

The university had made the decision to crush pro-Palestine protests and wanted to make an example of me. As I made my way, I went past the site of a historic black power students’ protest that led to the founding of the

first department of Africana Studies in the US, challenging the foundations of a university founded on indigenous genocide. If those sites could talk, I suspect they would speak of a collectivist spirit, the kind of spirit that has historically pushed for a more just world. I was reminded of the hopes and dreams of those who believe in the transformative power of education. We had come a long way since those heady days, I said to myself.

Despite presenting myself in person, I was told the administrator would be absent and instead join remotely via Zoom. This was the first step in a cold and cynical process. She appeared over a large widescreen TV hung from the wall and read a list of supposed violations. And it’s important to note that this was the case, this protest which I attended in September would later go on to be what the government uses as grounds for my deportation.

And the violations... I held a megaphone. That’s one of the violations. I was too loud. I led loud chants, for example. And these were the things that would then lead and which the government would later say are grounds for my deportation. In subsequent meetings, I was labelled a public health and safety concern. I was banned from campus. I could not teach. I was banned from teaching as well. I was not permitted to use the Muslim prayer facilities. I was even asked to give intimate details of any conditions I may have before being granted permission to use the health centre. Despite there being no evidence of violence on my part, the administration seemed determined to cast me as a threat.

I find it increasingly hard to recognize Cornell as a serious academic institution. On one level, the university’s posture suggested the prioritizing of the financial interests of corporations, including weapons manufacturers, outweighed the moral right to protest what I consider to be a genocide. On another level, droning administrators clinically doled out disproportionate punishments in scenes reminiscent of [Hannah] Arendt’s banality of evil. The university could care less if the cause was just. What mattered was that the institution maintained its reputational standing and maintained its own internal power structures. It preferred to comply with the status quo and suppress dissent under the guise of maintaining law and order.

I was reminded of the university’s Office of Student Code of Conduct and Community Standard, and given that I was suspended twice, I’ve become very familiar with this process. Cornell’s Student Code of Conduct process, and this is a quote on their website, “focuses on principles of reflection and learning. The process incorporates restorative practices to build a culture of community and healing, rather than a community that centres around judgment and punishment. Our goal is to support you in navigating situations that might not meet our community’s expectations. We believe students should not be defined by their mistakes, but rather by their willingness to learn.”

They claim their aim is to foster a community built on restorative practices, not punishment. Yet when I was told I would face deportation, it was difficult not to see the absurdity of this claim. The language of restorative practice was co-opted and weaponized to present an image of compassion, while in effect entrenching an oppressive and completely punitive system, privileging power over principle.

Specifically named by Congress as a threat

Under mounting pressure from political forces such as Congress and AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] it's important to note that the Congress' Committee of Ways and Means wrote to Cornell University, and basically threatened that if I am not punished, we might remove your status of tax exemption. And I was specifically named by Congress. And forces like AIPAC as well. So what we're seeing is that universities have become targets for crackdowns on pro-Palestinian speech.

We witnessed one university president after another subject to hearings and investigations in which the message was clear that support for Palestinian advocacy on campuses would no longer be tolerated. On a lot of college campuses they will talk about how we have a proud legacy of protest and they'll cite Vietnam and they'll cite South Africa. But when students act in a similar way today, they come down extremely hard and with extreme repression. And I'm sure in 50 years' time they will celebrate the same students today. That's what we're seeing. That's what has been done and will continue to happen as well.

The current stance of the university shows that these institutions are more likely to align with the state's interests when the issue at hand challenges the very foundations of that power. The repression on campuses is not just about shutting down pro-Palestinian voices. It is a broader crisis of legitimacy faced by these institutions, universities and governmental institutions. When students are confronted with moral crossroads and the universities side with the oppressors, their legitimacy falters. For me, Palestine is the issue of our age. As [Frantz] Fanon teaches us, each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it.

The daily images livestreaming Israel's crimes have served as a conduit for consciousness raising. The Palestinian refusal to be forgotten forms new constituents of radical care. The student movement is a realization of the centrality of the Palestinian question. It is through Palestine that US imperialism and US status as an empire is understood. When we say that Palestine is a litmus test, that is not to say that we privilege Palestine over every other form of suffering or struggle, but rather that Palestine represents a convergence of struggles. Palestine presents a challenge to the international world order. That is to say, the presence and existence of Palestinians forces us to reckon with the contemporary realities of colonialism and settler ideology.

The hypocrisy of the Western world is palpable with the presence of Palestine. The struggle is an indictment of the entire Western ruling class. We witness the disparity in response towards Ukraine versus Palestine. It is as if the ruling class and institutions expect us to forget how quickly they were able to mobilize and sanction Putin versus the response to Netanyahu. What can account for this difference?

If we begin to centre imperialism, US imperialism in our analysis, these glaring contradictions become coherent and logical. The repression meted out by universities is made legible once we make Palestine central. Our institutions will continue to suffer from a crisis of legitimacy among students if every time they are confronted with a moral question or crossroad, they opt for complicity and side with the oppressors. If the

universities and government institutions are determined to dig their heels into the increasingly untenable ground of Zionism upon which the genocide is justified, then these institutions will continue to suffer.

Persecution of students: "a dress rehearsal for what's to come for other US citizens"

The current state of play has shown us that even if you capitulate, you will not be saved from the chopping block, and that's important to note. People say 'it might not affect me, it's a thousand miles away'. I think what's happened to students in this moment is only a dress rehearsal for what's to come for other US citizens. And secondly, we need to seriously think and reconsider the type of place and type of world we want to live in, and I think Zionism is becoming increasingly untenable.

That was just a kind of introduction to the ground where I stand in relation to the institutions. But specifically, about my case and what happened in the US, I attended a protest for five minutes in September 2024. The protest was a peaceful protest, but again I was there for five minutes. I left the protest and then upon leaving, a police officer who had been a campus police officer had recognized me and then reported me. Then I received an email that I had been suspended. The suspension, I posted on Twitter, it got a lot of backlash, because to be an international student, you must be a full-time student. You must have your student status active. And if you're suspended, that no longer counts. So Cornell would say, 'we don't have the power to deport', but effectively I would have had to leave the country.

So, there was a huge backlash, and Cornell relented. But then Cornell subjected me to some extremely draconian measures. Something I've always said is that it is ironic that I was protesting apartheid and bordering, and I'm subjected on my campus to forms of apartheid and bordering. I was told when I leave my house (because my house is on campus) I can go left, but I can't go right. Literally at my front door. As I said before, I was told I had to give any details when I wanted to go to the GP or go to the doctors. And I was declared, I had a form given to me by the campus police, which declared me as persona non grata and I was banned from teaching as well, all for attending a peaceful protest.

Given the kind of public backlash and Cornell's position, it placed a target on my back. And when Trump was on the campaign trail he said that if you attended a pro-Palestinian rally as an international student, 'we're going to find you and we're going to deport you'. If I'm being honest, it was at that moment I realized my time in the US is going to come to an end at some point. I had that always in the back of my mind.

Challenging the constitutionality of Trump's anti-democratic executive orders

Then Trump was elected and had his inauguration. And I think within the first two days, he signs an executive order, which is under the title of combating antisemitism. And he says this makes it incumbent upon universities to basically give up their international students. At that moment, my brilliant attorney and legal team, we were thinking of ways in which they can protect myself and others similarly situated.

What we said was it would be best if you sue the administration, challenge the constitutionality of the executive orders, but also seek a nationwide injunction for all international students. Because I thought to myself, we cannot just allow international students to become sitting

ducks, right? And I think a week before we filed was when Mahmoud Khalil was picked up returning home, while his pregnant wife is filming the video. I had been targeted by the *New York Post*. I had been targeted by Betar [a Zionist group] and so many right-wing forces. Betar said we have compiled a list of names for deportation to give to the Department of Homeland Security. And the *New York Post* said, 'we have seen the list' and they named me on that list.

It was only a matter of time before I was targeted. So I thought, we can't just allow the complete erosion of any semblance of democracy. What would be a way we can fight back? We filed the lawsuit I believe on the 15th of March. And then a day after I was sat with Eric and my legal team and we received a call that the FBI and ICE are looking for Momodou right now. These are some of the things we had gone through and thought about. But the presence of the FBI did throw me a little bit because I'm thinking, this is a free speech immigration issue. Now the presence of the FBI suggests something more serious, right? I've had to navigate that.

So again, where I was staying initially at home, I'd left to stay with someone else and I'd left again to stay with another friend. And I was instructed by my legal team, make sure you sleep with our numbers in your pockets, make sure you sleep with medicines in your pocket that you might need, make a video that says, 'if you're watching this video, then I am now in jail'. This is what we were going through. And to be honest, I had anticipated personally a long, drawn-out court battle. That's what I anticipated. But the government's position was, and we're looking into this more, they said this is not retaliation for Momodou filing a lawsuit. What this is that we had planned to revoke Momodou's visa one day before he filed his lawsuit, apparently. And we're still looking into that.

So at this point I'm two-and-a-half weeks in hiding. And I was somewhat losing my mind in that place as well. Then the next day, ICE agents did turn up to my house, they couldn't find me. Two days after that, my lawyers received an email saying that you must surrender Momodou to ICE custody. And two days after that, I get an email from the Department of Homeland Security that my visa has been revoked. This is all before we've even seen a judge. This is all before we've even had our time in court. I don't attend the court because I knew ICE agents were present. And then the judge, from the transcripts and what I've heard, the judge basically says she's inclined to believe the government. A few days after that, and I'm sure Eric will go into much more detail, she rules against me. But on that day before she rules, we filed a temporary restraining order against Trump and the administration to offer me more protection.

Essentially what she was saying is that whilst there's huge merits to the case and we raise important free speech issues, she doesn't see why I cannot fight the case from being in jail. So after two and a half weeks of being in hiding, it's Ramadan, I'm fasting, and it's really an intense time. I have a meeting with my legal team about 8 p.m. on a Sunday. And I think my legal team has always been very honest with me and the lawyers in them wanted to fight, but they're always going to put their client first. And I think what they were saying is that given the kind of flagrant disregard of the judiciary in this moment, we can't even guarantee that a favourable ruling from a judge would mean that you can now walk the streets. And it might mean you have to be looking over your shoulder for a very long time or be basically in captivity for a very long time.

I think that meeting was about 8 p.m. on a Sunday and then about 11 p.m. I made a very abrupt decision to self-deport. My friend was in Atlanta, flew in in the morning and rented a car. We drove to the Canadian border, in Niagara Falls, which was the most nerve-wracking drive of my life. We had so many contingencies... But entry at the Canadian border was very uneventful. Deeply uneventful. They asked me a couple of questions, like how long do you plan to stay in Canada? And then I got through.

But what was interesting, after I had that sigh of relief and had a very surreal moment of making a statement and leaving the US safely, what was troubling was when my friend, who's an American citizen went back to the US. And this is a US born citizen! When they placed their passport, they were pulled out and said, 'We know who you went to Canada with'. That was the first thing they said. This was counter-terrorism at the airport. And they said, 'where's Momodou now?' They questioned my friend for about five hours, seized all their devices, questioned them about other people who know me as well. And this is what they're doing to American citizens, right?

I keep saying that while people think they're maybe safe because they're a US born citizen, what we're seeing time and time again in this moment is that is not the case. What's happening to international students now, if there's not a robust response in terms of people fighting back, the government will feel emboldened to go after and erode further rights as well.

Where things stand now, I'm still a student of Cornell. I'm still allowed to get my degree. I'll be doing it remotely. And what I would say is that I will do it 100 times over. I have no regrets.

What we're seeing in Israel and Palestine in Gaza should be a cause of concern for every single person with a heart. And given the levels of repression that we're facing in the US, it suggests to me that Zionism is not actually moving from a position of strength. But rather it has been eroded, and people are seeing it becoming undone in many ways. Thank you so much for listening. Free Palestine!



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