



Via E-Mail

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October 22, 2020

Re: Zoom Censorship of Public Classroom Events

Dear Mr. Yuan and Ms. Haaland,

We write as civil rights organizations to emphasize the dangerous errors in your choice to censor events at San Francisco State University (SFSU) and University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM).

The first event you censored was an open classroom jointly organized by Professor Rabab Abdulhadi, Director of the Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies program, and Professor Tomomi Kinukawa, Faculty Lecturer in the Department of Women and Gender Studies. The event, for six classes, university colleagues, and the general public, was titled “Whose Narratives?: Gender, Justice & Resistance.” The open classroom featured Palestinian activist Leila Khaled and prominent activists from Palestinian, Black and South African liberation movements. The class was scheduled for September 23, via Zoom, before you notified the university you would shutter the classroom doors and pull the plug.

After this event was blocked, the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI) Organizing Collective called for an October 23 National Day of Action to protest this censorship. Faculty from around the country responded to this call, publicizing university events to take place on Zoom that featured Leila Khaled.

At UHM, numerous university groups including Students and Faculty for Justice at UH, KOA Futures (aka the Cancel Rimpac Coalition), the UHM Department of Ethnic Studies, the UHM Department of Political Science, and Hawai‘i Peace and Justice organized an event titled “We Will Not Be Silenced: The Case of Khaled and Solidarity from Hawai‘i to Palestine.” On October 20, you publicly announced that this event would be blocked.

Your actions are a dangerous attack on free speech and academic freedom, and an abuse of your contract with our public university systems. Your status as an essential public service does not give you veto power over the content of the nation’s classrooms and public events.

The threat is elevated by the fact that your decision to censor discussion of Palestinian freedom was in response to a systematic repression campaign driven by the Israeli government and its allies, which have long-targeted Prof. Abdulhadi and others who speak out for Palestinian rights with frivolous legal attacks and false accusations.

You received weeks of pressure from Israel lobby organizations, including the Lawfare Project, well known for threatening Palestine supporters with “massive punishment,” and an Israeli government-sponsored app which took credit for the cancellation.

Just days before the scheduled events, you announced you would not permit the discussions with Ms. Khaled to take place. You threatened to terminate the accounts of not only the professors organizing the events but the entire California State University system and University of Hawai‘i system if the universities allowed the events to proceed.

You then took unilateral action to cancel the events, sending the hundreds of registrants emails suggesting that the events’ faculty organizers had themselves cancelled the events.

The threats you received from Israel lobby groups were frivolous and based on an unconstitutional argument that it would constitute criminal activity to host Ms. Khaled for an academic discussion. Lobby groups claimed that it would constitute “material support for terrorism” to host Ms. Khaled as a speaker because she has been publicly affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group that the U.S. has designated as a terrorist organization, and because Ms. Khaled, now 76, participated in two plane hijackings fifty years ago, as part of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation.

The claim that professors in the U.S. cannot host Ms. Khaled to speak has no basis in law or fact. Ms. Khaled was not compensated for the events, she did not plan to represent the PFLP at either event, and fundamentally, the exchange of ideas in a university setting is constitutionally protected free speech. Again, these events are academic discussions: the September 23 class event was to examine critical narratives of resistance, gender and sexual justice, and the October 23 webinar’s focus is on liberation, censorship and academic freedom.

To extend counterterrorism laws to pure speech and academic discourse would severely undermine all of our First Amendment rights to speech and association, and places the professors engaged in scholarship and critical discussions at special risk.

You are exercising a function traditionally and exclusively reserved to the state, as the company contracted to provide online classrooms for the 482,000 students enrolled at the California State University’s twenty-three campuses and the nearly 50,000 students enrolled at the University of Hawai‘i’s 10 campuses while in-person classrooms are either closed or pose serious health risks. You are the guardian of a public classroom where First Amendment protections and academic freedom apply, and you are obligated to maintain an open marketplace of ideas.

Furthermore, your actions facilitate a right-wing agenda propagated by Israel lobby groups and the Trump administration to censor advocacy for Palestinian rights at a time when Trump’s

foreign policy seeks to liquidate the Palestinian issue. Your attempts at censorship also have consequences not just for movements supporting justice in Palestine, but for racial, Indigenous, gender, immigrant, economic, and LGBTQIA+ justice movements and movements challenging government repression and overreach within the United States and globally.

We expect you to correct your course and stand, not as a censor of critical discussions of Palestinian human rights, but as an open platform where pressing issues of our time can be debated openly in our university classrooms and by the people. We therefore demand that you cease censorship of USACBI events planned for Friday, October 23, and ensure that Palestinian narratives and voices, including Leila Khaled's, can be heard on your platform.

Sincerely,



Dima Khalidi
Director
Palestine Legal

On behalf of:
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus
Center for Constitutional Rights
Civil Liberties Defense Center
Climate Defense Project
Defending Rights and Dissent
National Lawyers Guild
Partnership for Civil Justice Fund
Project South
Water Protector Legal Collective