

Student Activism on Steroids

Philip G. Altbach and Manja Klemenčič

Student political activism has always been a potent force in universities and in society. In the past decade, social movements, often with strong student participation or even leadership, have created significant unrest or have even overthrown regimes. Examples include Nepal, Serbia, Bangladesh, and others. There are a number of features of contemporary student activism that set it apart, including the crucial role played by social media.

As they have for much of the history of higher education, students remain at the center of social and protest movements around the world. Global protest trackers show that, while the number of protests around the world is growing, the number of protests led by students and youth is growing even faster. Attention to student activism too is rising, with broad recognition of the key role played by student protest.

A Brief Historical Perspective

For centuries, students have sporadically been active in politics. In Italy and elsewhere, students protested campus conditions in the medieval period and often ousted professors they did not like. Students played a key role in the ultimately unsuccessful European revolutions of 1848 which fought against monarchies. Students were also among the first organized groups to support Hitler in Germany in the 1930s and were key forces in anti-colonial and nationalist struggles in the Global South. Of course, students were especially active in the 1960s, both in anti-war protests and in favor of higher education reform in Western countries. While student movements have been generally on the left, this has not always been the case.

The “Iron Law” of Student Activism

Students can often bring public attention to social or political issues underpinning discontent and may help or even galvanize social movements that may destabilize or even overthrow regimes. In universities, students may stimulate reforms or disruption. As a social group, students often have the leisure of time and the advantage of education to develop ideas and organize in the university environment; when these ideas coincide with societal concerns, the result may be powerful. However, students cannot control national politics once a regime is removed or a major crisis takes place. Even when students are able to force universities to make reforms, such changes are seldom long lasting. Often, the adversarial and uncompromising voices of student activists do not succeed. Societal politics is generally about political power, vested in economic or military resources, and in the ability to build alliances and forge compromises. Indeed, politics after the end of a social movement often moves in directions different from those advocated by student activists. For example, although the

“Arab Spring” movements in 2011 were significantly influenced by students, groups who took advantage of those social movements—the Muslim Brotherhood, ultranationalist forces, and the military—were not favored by students, as these groups often repressed the student activists.

Protest Focused on Higher Education Reform

One notable exception to the “iron law” is Chile with the most successful student protest in recent history. From 2011–2013, the Confederation of Chilean Student Federations (CONFECH), joined by high school students and others, organized protests with demands toward increased public funding for higher education and free, quality public education. While not all student demands were realized, such as writing off accrued student debt, the student protesters over time halted the neoliberal education reforms. Main student leaders were elected to the National Congress, championing public debate on student demands and impacting the legislative agenda. The former President of Chile, Gabriel Boric, was a student leader who also appointed several former CONFECH leaders to his Cabinet and other governmental positions (although newly elected hard-right president Kast is likely to undo many of his reforms).

One might argue that this movement was successful because it focused specifically on higher education, not society more broadly, but other similar movements were less successful. #FeesMustFall student protests, which originated in South Africa, took place around the globe, but with varying success. In other contexts, such as the United Kingdom, student protests did not stop planned increases in tuition fees.

Recent Examples

The past decade has seen an unprecedented number of student-inspired protests and related movements—often with dramatic political and social impacts around the world. Student and youth protests against corrupt governments have become frequent and visible globally. Some of these protests have led to the government's fall or at least some change. For example, the Antidiscrimination Students Movement in Bangladesh, formed in 2024, was at the forefront of the July Revolution that ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina. In Mongolia, student protests in

2025 initially condemned the lavish lifestyle of the son of the prime minister and ultimately grew into a broad anti-corruption movement that ousted prime minister Oyun-Erdene. In Nepal, Gen Z protests led to prime minister K. P. Sharma Oli's resignation, voicing grievances over nepotism and corruption in the government. Other protests, like in Serbia, were less impactful. Since November 2024, Serbian students (and opposition members) have continuously protested against government corruption, sparked by an accident when a roof above the entrance to a train station collapsed and killed 16 people. These protests, however, have failed to oust the government.

In the United States, recent student activism concerning the Israel-Hamas war, both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel, roiled a limited number of mostly elite campuses. Creating disruption, accusations of anti-Semitism, and pressure from various constituencies, the demonstrations were handled poorly by some universities—and the “crises” created were used by the Trump administration as justifications for legal and financial sanctions against several elite private universities.

Contemporary Characteristics

Social media plays a key role in student protests today, as it allows students and other young people to quickly and widely promote grievances and mobilize action. Protests in one country, when shared online, inspire those in other countries, especially when there is similarity in experiences or grievances. In the case of the Western Balkans, the Serbian anti-government protests also sparked protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. In Asia, anti-corruption demonstrations that started in Indonesia and Nepal were followed in the Philippines.

The role of social media in protest movements has also been recognized by governments wishing to curb protest: there was a 30-day suspension of social media in South Sudan, a ban in Nepal, and a government shutdown of the internet in Iran to prevent demonstrators from mobilizing and coordinating protest action through social media. Specific tools and platforms have become integral aspects of student- and youth-led protest action. In Morocco, GenZ 212, a collective organized online by anonymous founders, has rapidly gained members on Discord. The “One Piece” Japanese manga symbol has been shared online and gradually adopted by Gen Z protest movements in several countries.

Persecution and use of violence against student activists continue to be common features, especially but not exclusively in nondemocratic regimes. In Iran, hundreds of students were arrested and faced academic suspension in 2023 when mass protesting the death in custody of Mahsa Amini. Several students died in a protest in Togo opposing the country's removal of presidential term limits. The “White Paper” protests in China in 2022 also resulted in multiple arrests of students. Many more cases exist and have been captured by organizations, such as Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project and The Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund.

Governments have always paid close attention to student activism: they either try to suppress it or use it as their own political tool. As higher education itself becomes more of a target by governments around the world, it remains to be seen if student protests will continue to increase or if they will become less pronounced in the years to come.

Philip G. Altbach is Monan University Professor and Distinguished Fellow Emeritus, Center for International Higher Education, Boston College. Email: altbach@bc.edu

Manja Klemenčič is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and an affiliate of the Department of Sociology, Harvard University. Email: manja.klemencic@gmail.com