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Hypotheses on Institutional Autonomy Decline

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9 Hypotheses on Institutional Autonomy Decline

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This chapter sets out three hypotheses on declines in university autonomy, as well as the relationship of autonomy decline with other aspects of academic freedom. These are derived from patterns identified in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) data and the eight case studies on countries with major declines in institutional autonomy: Bangladesh, India, Mozambique, Poland, and Turkey – in **Part II** of this book – as well as Brazil (Hübner Mendes, 2020), Egypt (Saliba, 2020), and Russia (Kaczmarska, 2020), which were part of an earlier publication.

The case studies show that state interference with university autonomy impacts all components of academic freedom, as it essentially co-opts the intellectual autonomy of universities and creates state (governmental) institutions. This interference can particularly be seen in governance and leadership, but also in centralization and expanding oversight or regulatory structures. The close interrelationship between the various means and manners of state control in practice, set out below – such as control of internal governance structures and university leadership, state centralization of higher education policy and governance, excessive oversight, restrictions in funding or subject areas taught – has the result that some of the examples are not easily delineated into a single hypothesis, and thus overlaps occur.

Interference may, of course, come from multiple other sources than the state, including businesses and vested interest groups. However, the focus in this book is on state intrusion. This focus derives from three rationales. First, the majority of students and scholars globally find themselves in state or state-controlled universities, that is, private higher education providers are in the minority in terms of enrolments (Williams and Usher, 2022, p.32). Second, it is the state that is the primary duty bearer for human rights, and thus has the responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights in question. Third, it is the state that is the primary source of interference with institutional autonomy, especially in cases of severe autonomy decline, as the state has the power to change fundamental legislation, funding, and regulation.

A central goal of this book is to contribute to the understanding of the causes of severe decline in institutional autonomy and its effects on other components

of academic freedom, and to facilitate future theory-testing research. Here this is set out in the form of three hypothesis:

- 1 Severe decline in university autonomy is usually the result of a broader trend of autocratization in a given country.
- 2 Where a severe decline in institutional autonomy occurs, government attacks primarily target university governance, both by changing its composition (leadership, governing board), and by substituting government control for academic self-governance (e.g., through regulatory bodies).
- 3 Attacking institutional autonomy is an effective way to stifle the freedom of science as it negatively impacts other components of academic freedom. However, it is not the only way to undermine academic freedom. Nor is there a typical playbook in the sequencing of attacks on the freedom of academia and the autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs).

The quantitative data from the AFI dataset provides a first overview of the different components of academic freedom in the eight countries under review. [Figure 9.1](#) shows the development in four of the AFI indicators (institutional autonomy, freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, and campus integrity) over the past 20 years. While nearly all indicators display some level of decline in all eight countries over the period

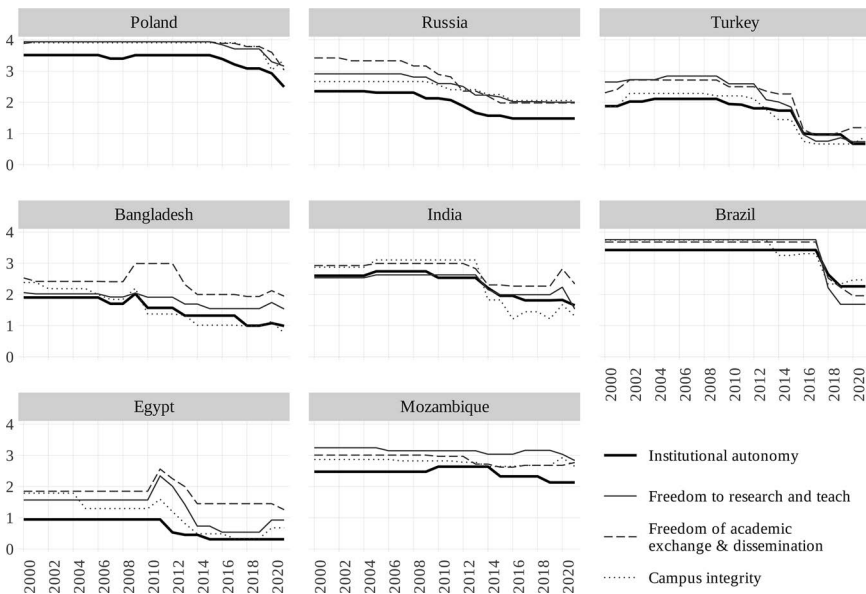


Figure 9.1 Academic freedom indicators for eight countries under review 2000–21. All indicators are scaled 0–4, with 0 corresponding to ‘completely restricted’ (or ‘no autonomy at all’) and 4 to ‘fully free’ (or ‘complete autonomy’).

Source: V-Dem (2022): v12.

under review, there are differences in how the various indicators relate to each other, and in particular to the decline in institutional autonomy.

The qualitative information from the case studies complements the quantitative data. The eight case studies reviewed in this part of the book, stemming from diverse parts of the world, all describe worrying trends of severe declines in university autonomy. Such decline has serious effects on the university as an academic institution in those countries, as well as on science more broadly, and there are multiple connections between a decline in autonomy and other infringements on academic freedom. In the following section, the three hypotheses are described in more detail, as well as how they relate to the qualitative and quantitative data.

9.1 University Autonomy and Autocratization

Hypothesis 1: Severe decline in university autonomy is usually the result of a broader trend of autocratization in a given country.

In all eight countries under review, the fall in institutional autonomy appears connected to a decline in the quality of democracy. Across the global AFI dataset of 177 countries and territories, in more than three-quarters (77%) of countries where there is a clear decline in democracy levels between 2011 and 2021,¹ there is also evidence of a decline in the institutional autonomy of universities. And for 95% of countries with a clear decline in institutional autonomy,² there is at least some decline in democracy levels within the same period.

In many of the countries, democratic decline manifestly precedes attacks on university autonomy. In the AFI data, the indicator on academic and cultural expression on political issues is less narrowly confined to academia and more attuned to the state of democracy outside the campus. In the data on the eight country cases reviewed, Poland, Turkey, Bangladesh, India, and Brazil can be identified as countries where the indicator on academic and cultural expression on political issues is negatively affected in the years prior to a clear decline in institutional autonomy (see [Figure 9.2](#)). In Turkey, for example, signatories of a peace petition prior to the attempted coup in 2016 were threatened physically and verbally and doxed³ even before the government heavily cracked down on university autonomy. Likewise in Mozambique, academics have faced verbal and physical threats and attacks, and an academic was charged with libel for criticizing the former president before university autonomy was stifled.

All case study authors for this book acknowledged that this hypothesis applied to the situation in their country. This finding suggests that academics may be attacked as part of an autocratizing trend that is already underway when institutional autonomy comes under fire. The assumption that a delay might occur also matches the observation from the global trends data (see [Figure 1.2](#)) that academic expression tends to be the most volatile, and institutional autonomy the least volatile of the five AFI indicators. For instance, institutional autonomy in Egypt did not change while other AFI indicators improved with the democratic opening around 2011; during the subsequent autocratic turn, the negative impact on the other indicators was more forceful than on institutional autonomy. This example illustrates that academic institutions are more inert and

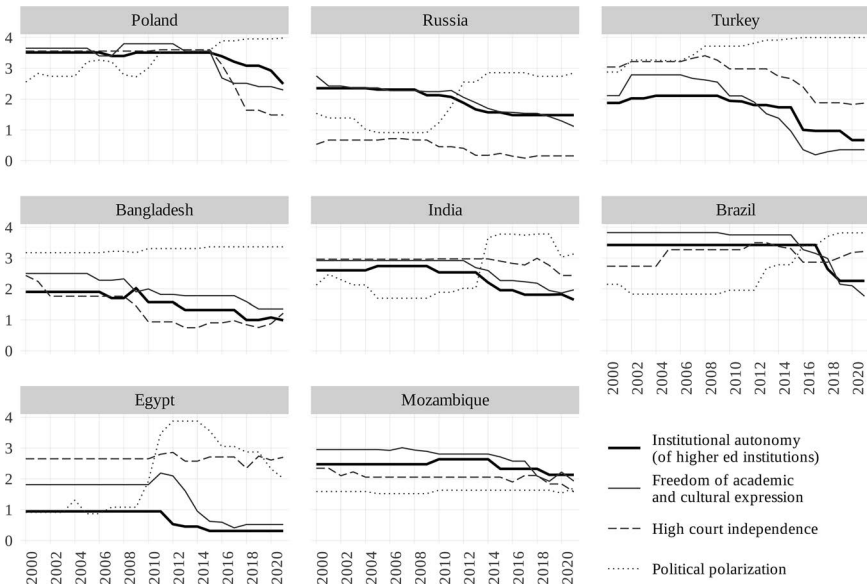


Figure 9.2 Political indicators for eight countries under review 2000–21. All indicators are scaled 0–4, with 0 corresponding to low and 4 to high levels.

Data source: V-Dem (2022): v12.

less sensitive to sudden changes in the political environment than other aspects of academic freedom.

Institutional attacks on universities can thus be expected to lag somewhat behind initial signs of democratic erosion. At which point in the process of autocratization such attacks on HEIs and their autonomy occur likely depends on various factors, such as the role of universities and scholars in the country and their perceived legitimacy in society. To clearly establish such factors requires more in-depth research. Generally, problematic anti-democratic laws may spread to universities even when they were not the original target. A stark example is Russia, where anti-democratic repressive measures such as the ‘foreign agent’ laws were applied to individual researchers as well as to sources of research funding. In one instance, this led to the withdrawal of the teaching license of the European University in St. Petersburg.

Other established national institutions, such as the judiciary, are often simultaneously under attack. The data analysis shows that in all eight countries the independence of the country’s highest court faced pressure at the same time as HEIs (see [Figure 9.2](#)). The severe interference with the independence of the judiciary in Poland is a prominent example.

The issues raised by the case studies and the quantitative data reflect findings by other scholars, which have shown that universities have been a target of what has been termed the ‘third wave’ of autocratization, characterized by gradual

democratic erosion, which undermines democratic institutions while not disposing of them (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). In this regard, it must be recognized that relatively free universities are, or are perceived as being, democratic institutions. Along these lines, Uitz argues that ‘illiberal interference with academic freedom often targets university self-government (university autonomy), through strategic appointments or institutional reforms’ (2021, p. 10). Examples of this are seen in all eight countries studied. Further, the same author illustrates, as do the examples in Roberts Lyer and Suba (2019), how government machinations in relation to universities can be easily justified under guises of legitimate improvements to educational provision, ‘excellence’, and access to external funding. As Uitz says, ‘once it is understood that illiberal leaders are not simply reforming higher education, but are actively cultivating an illiberal *Zeitgeist*, the prosecution of dissenting academics makes better sense’ (2021, p. 12). Again, the case studies bear out this understanding, with clear examples of such ‘reform efforts’ in Turkey, Poland, and India, in particular. This situation, in which universities find themselves amidst a growing trend of autocratization, has important implications for understanding autonomy. As set out in [Part I](#), universities must be autonomous entities in the sense of being run and governed by a community of academics for the purpose of advancing scientific knowledge by means of independent, critical thought. Where such autonomy is absent, academic freedom is likely to be severely under pressure as well. A reduction in or absence of autonomy can be expected to be closely linked to broader moves against democratic institutions in the country.

An additional and related observation from both the quantitative data and the case studies is that levels of political polarization are either high or growing in almost all countries under review with strong declines in institutional autonomy (see [Figure 9.2](#)).⁴ Polarization can work as a facilitator of democratic decline (McCoy et al., 2018, pp. 34–5; Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021), resulting in hostile encounters playing out on campus and against scientists, and of populist manipulation that degrades science and truth to the status of political opinions or fake news (Osmundsen et al., 2021; Väliverronen and Saikkonen, 2021). These dynamics can also reduce the legitimacy of academia in the eyes of the population and thereby lessen the political risks involved for those attacking institutional autonomy and other aspects of academic freedom. All eight case studies contain examples of the politicization of the academic space. In Brazil, the federal government engaged in anti-university rhetoric and a regional parliament established an investigatory committee that said it would examine the ‘ideological bias’ of faculty as part of its mandate (Hübner Mendes, 2020, pp. 76–7). The significant impact of anti-human rights ‘foreign agent’ and ‘homosexual propaganda’ laws in Russia, both to individual academics and to entire universities, shows the impact of politicization on academia. There is evidence that such regulations are selectively applied on the basis of political preferences. A leading Russian university (HSE) proposed changes to its internal regulations that would prevent faculty, staff, and students from discussing anything ‘political’ (Kaczmarek, 2020, pp. 114–5). Despite this, HSE’s rector

signed a 2022 petition supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, illustrating the utilitarianism of the prior policies. Legislative changes at the national level further defined a concept of ‘moral education’ aimed at fostering patriotism and ‘respect for the memory of the defenders of the fatherland’ (Ibid, pp. 120–1).

Closely related to this politicization is a common trait in the countries reviewed that their governments view the university as an inherent tool of the state and extension of national policy, resulting in extensive interference when universities (or individual academics) are seen as being political (generally that is issues which are pro-human rights or pro-democracy). One part of this understanding is that academic dissent is not tolerated, as individual scholars are not seen as having a right to speak their educated understanding of the ‘truth’. Instead, the academy is considered an organ of the state that should reflect the views of that state. In the case of Poland, ‘the university’s primary goal is [...] redefined as serving the state and national interest’, leading to a ‘subordination of universities to a political vision of Polish state and national identity that rejects both political and cultural pluralism’. In Bangladesh, ‘intense politicization’ prevails with university administrations described as acting ‘like an extended part of the government’. In Poland, the government has even adopted a strategy of establishing government-friendly, semi-autonomous or even fully politically controlled new universities or research institutions ‘from scratch’. This politicization connects to the second hypothesis, in which governments seek to have politically aligned university leadership.

9.2 Attacking Governance

Hypothesis 2: Where a severe decline in institutional autonomy occurs, government attacks primarily target university governance, both by changing its composition (leadership, governing board), and by substituting government control for academic self-governance (e.g., through regulatory bodies).

Centralization, burdensome oversight, and particularly, government involvement in the appointment of academic leadership suggests an increasing desire for governmental control of universities in many countries (see also Roberts Lyer and Suba, 2019). Interference in governance centres on two main areas: Politicizing university leadership and substituting government for academic self-governance (e.g., through state capture of regulatory bodies).

Governments target institutional autonomy by imposing government-appointed leadership selected based on their political affiliations. This approach to reducing institutional autonomy appears to be preferred by governments over attacking other aspects of university functioning such as funding, curricula, or admissions. Senior leadership is appointed by government in Turkey, Mozambique (public universities), Egypt, Russia, and India where vice-chancellors are appointed by the national or state government, meaning these

are usually political decisions. In Turkey, rectoral elections were cancelled, and politically affiliated candidates appointed as rectors and deans (e.g., in Boğaziçi University), and in the case of Egypt, the president exercised his prerogative to appoint university deans and presidents. In public universities in Bangladesh, the president appoints the heads of the universities (vice-chancellors), acting on the advice of the prime minister, resulting in political appointments that often bypass the candidates proposed by the university. As a consequence, these appointments are reportedly driven ‘almost exclusively by political connection and loyalty’. These vice-chancellors possess ‘disproportionate power’ in recruitment of faculty and officials, as well as control over firing and demotion. However, several case-study authors noted that politicization of appointments has also been applied to regular faculty (e.g., in Turkey, India, Egypt).

This type of state interference in institutional autonomy can be more long-term and difficult to monitor, and it may be preceded by enhanced centralization of higher education policy by the government, including increased regulation and burdensome oversight. Interference in leadership is all the more concerning because universities then de-autonomize themselves, through academic self-censorship that leaks into constrained curricula, state-friendly research proposals, hiring decisions, and to some extent even admissions, further transforming institutions into state-compliant bodies.

In addition to extensive interference in university governance, these examples illustrate high levels of state centralization of the functioning and purpose of HEIs in substitution for self-governance. For Mozambique, Zavale notes a 2021 study which found that institutions were placed in a subordinate position to the relevant Ministry through a centralization policy. He also writes that ‘Besides appointing top leaders, the government is also responsible for approving the statutes and regulations suggested by HEIs for their internal organization and governance’.

This all suggests that among the factors of institutional autonomy, state oversight, particularly through the establishment of councils and other regulatory bodies, deserves special scrutiny. The publicly stated rationale for this form of regulation is often the improvement of coordination between the state and HEIs while maintaining university autonomy. However, the case studies illustrate that this is not always the case, and excessive government control can serve to undermine any legitimate purpose of these bodies.⁵ Rather, regulatory and oversight bodies can be co-opted by the government. For example, in Turkey, Hünler writes that the Council on Higher Education (CoHE) ‘has begun to act as a symbolic entity that executes presidential decrees and decisions’. Of its 21 members, 14 are directly appointed by the president. These councils can also represent state centralization of decision-making in place of academic self-governance. The CoHE ‘is responsible for appointing administrative personnel such as rectors, deans, and department chairs’. Further, it decides on ‘fields of research, student admission quotas in departments and universities, student fees, the opening and closing of faculties and universities, and minimum

hours of teaching in education programmes'. The extent of the CoHE's power is evidenced by its July 2016 demand, following the attempted coup, for the resignation of all 1,576 deans in public and private universities. Other important scientific research councils in Turkey have also become subject to direct presidential appointment, without any academic or scientific criteria established for the posts.

In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has 'been described as a "prison warden" rather than a regulator, as it has helped to entrench an unprecedented degree of bureaucratization and homogenization', according to Jayal in this book. The UGC is actively involved in standardization initiatives around curricula and doctoral funding (through a centralized exam), licensing of academic programmes, and developing matrices to evaluate the quality of faculty for promotion and appointment. In 2018, it ordered universities to follow the civil service rules of conduct, implying restrictions on criticism of the government or government policy and political participation. Another example comes from the individual state (regional) level in India, where the Odisha Public Service Commission makes 'faculty appointments and decide[s] on the transfers and service conditions of teachers'. In Mozambique, Zavale writes, the quality assurance authority 'has become an inspection agency, imposing further limitations on HEIs' autonomy'.

Politicization of regulatory bodies poses a significant risk to university autonomy. In India, for instance, academics have been challenged for their writing on the basis that it violated governmental servants contract rules (in Kerala). In Poland, the Council of Academic Excellence recommends full professorships to the president, and there has been an example of an academic perceived as anti-ruling party who was not granted a professorship despite such a recommendation to the president.

These examples raise the question as to whether institutions operating under systems so heavily controlled by the government to the detriment of self-governance can truly be said to operate autonomously and raise serious concerns as to the reality of academic freedom in such contexts. Interference by installing politically aligned individuals in leadership positions means that from that point onwards, further changes made internally within the institution will not appear to obviously result from external intervention. The Turkey and India case studies report on appointments of family members (to academic or governance positions) and selection of ideologically aligned candidates; and while these appear to be decisions of the university, they are a consequence of government interference in leadership. It was similarly noted that in Russia, 'Two types of actors are primarily responsible for creating indirect limitations on research and teaching: state authorities (on both central and regional levels) and university management' (Kaczmarska, 2020, p. 104). Thus, one of the major consequences of a severe decline in institutional autonomy that observers need to consider is that attacks against academic freedom may subsequently come from within the university itself.

9.3 Sequencing of Attacks

Hypothesis 3: Attacking institutional autonomy is an effective way to stifle the freedom of science as it negatively impacts other components of academic freedom. However, it is not the only way to undermine academic freedom, nor is there a typical playbook in the sequencing of attacks on the freedom of academia and the autonomy of HEIs.

All the case studies have shown a strong relationship between institutional autonomy and other aspects of academic freedom. This is in line with the expectation formulated in [Part I](#) that academic freedom requires the autonomy of HEIs. Indeed, as the autonomy of universities drops significantly, the freedom to research and teach without interference, as well as the freedom of academic exchange and of dissemination – both within academia and outside – always come under pressure.

This connection is also shown by the global AFI dataset in the correlation between institutional autonomy and the two relevant indicators for all available country-years between 2000 and 2021, as illustrated in [Figure 9.3](#). The figure shows separate scatter plots for three pairs of variables. Each dot in a scatter plot represents a specific country in a specific year (‘country-year’). A country-year’s position on the y-axis shows how the country scored on institutional autonomy in that year, whereas its position on the x-axis shows how it scored on the variable of comparison. The correlations of institutional autonomy with freedom to research and teach (the first plot) and with the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination (the second plot) are relatively high at 0.89 and 0.88 respectively.⁶

These data patterns and the case studies suggest that deliberate interference with university autonomy aims to subordinate higher education to government objectives, which necessarily reduces the space for academics to freely operate. The situations in Bangladesh, India, and Mozambique particularly illustrate that where universities effectively become government institutions, it cannot be said

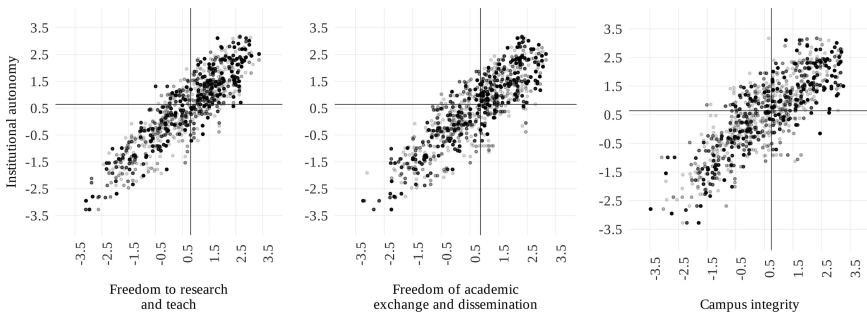


Figure 9.3 Distribution of country-years between institutional autonomy and three other academic freedom indicators 2000–21. Country-years are shown between 2000 and 2021, using raw values from the V-Dem model. The horizontal and vertical lines represent mean values.

Data source: V-Dem (2022): v12.

that there is genuine freedom to research and teach, particularly in subjects that may go against the political preferences or ideology of the government. In this sense, decline in institutional autonomy – particularly at the scale observed in the reviewed countries – serves directly and primarily to stifle academic freedom.

It must be acknowledged, however, that attacks on institutional autonomy are far from the only means of interfering with scholars' ability to freely pursue their work. This freedom can equally be targeted, for example, through the appearance of security forces, student militias, or surveillance on campus, censorship in publishing, the prosecution or even imprisonment or killing of individual academics or students, and other measures that serve to create a climate of fear and self-censorship, all of which were described by the case studies. These can but do not necessarily happen in conjunction with decline in autonomy. The indicator on campus integrity captures some of these alternative ways of applying pressure on academia and creating a climate of fear, and at 0.83, it is less strongly correlated with institutional autonomy than the two indicators discussed earlier. This may be a result of campus integrity being more open to interference from non-state actors (who can rarely impact institutional autonomy), but it may also reflect the fact that there are different forms of repressive means that governments can apply towards universities, of which attacking institutional autonomy is only one facet.

Evidence from the case studies as well as the AFI data suggests that there is no particular order in which these interferences and violations typically occur. In some countries, the freedom to research and teach is negatively impacted through other means before direct attacks on university autonomy take place. In India and Brazil, major incidents of campus integrity violations occurred before the autonomy of universities came directly under pressure. In fact, the repeated targeting of individual scholars or university campuses by third parties or by state agents, may also serve as a prelude or pretext for a systemic intervention in university autonomy.⁷ In other cases, the autonomy of HEIs declined before the freedom to research, teach, exchange, and disseminate appeared affected in the mid-term (e.g., Bangladesh), whereas in some countries they decline at the same time (see [Figure 9.1](#)).

9.4 Impact of Autonomy Decline on Other Components of Academic Freedom

Having presented the hypotheses, this section utilizes the case study examples to discuss in more detail how each of the other components of academic freedom (the freedom to research and teach, the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, the freedom of academic expression on political issues, and campus integrity) are related to and affected by a decline in university autonomy.

9.4.1 Freedom to Research and Teach

The case studies show that the most dramatic impact of declining institutional autonomy is on the freedom to research and teach. In particular, a number of areas where decline in institutional autonomy impeded the freedom to research

and teach stand out: Prioritization of funding, prevention of certain types of research, interference in hiring, and the creation of a climate of fear. The first three of these areas build on the examples above, in which excessive state control is exerted to increase costs for politically unwanted teaching content and research topics or approaches. The last (creating a climate of fear) is resorted to where administrative, legal, or regulatory measures fail – in these cases intimidation and violence are used to suppress academic dissent. All four areas have one central component, however, which is a state view that academics must bend to the will of the state – the very antithesis of academic freedom.

Prioritization for funding of certain academic fields over others – particularly of ‘hard’ sciences (e.g., prioritization of science, security, computing, data, and analytics in Turkey) over humanities and social science, as well as prioritization of specializations in ‘non-controversial’ topics – illustrates interference in both institutional and intellectual autonomy. As described in the Turkish case study, this represents the pushing of an ideological agenda. In Mozambique, while the overall low levels of core funding and research funding were starkly apparent, it was noted that the main sources of research funding ‘follow the government policy of prioritizing STEM fields’ to the exclusion of humanities and social sciences. Such approaches have been seen in other countries, like Ireland, and are also described in [Part I](#) in the context of market orientation (see [Chapter 2](#)). As Jayal describes, ‘In an extraordinary episode in 2016, the state government of Gujarat directed every university to ensure that its doctoral students conduct research on at least five topics out of a list of 82, which were mostly evaluations of the welfare policies of the government’. Funding prioritization impacts the freedom to research by de-incentivizing certain areas or issues and making it more difficult for academics to pursue their research agenda in those fields or topics. Low salary levels and low overall funding also affects the ability to teach, as academics (e.g., in Mozambique and Egypt) rather devote themselves to external projects such as consultancies. Precarious contracts also encourage self-censorship when academics fear for their jobs if they are perceived by those who control their contract renewals (usually university administrators) to be dealing with politically sensitive topics.

A more overt form of interference can be seen in the direct interference by the state in specific research areas. For example, cancellation of gender-related research in Turkey and Hungary (Roberts Lyer and Suba, 2019, p. 81). In Bangladesh, academics expressed concern as laws imposing criminal sanctions for ‘propaganda or campaigns’ against the 1971 liberation war are seen as legal restrictions on independent studies.

Some measures interfering with research fields may not impact a university’s institutional autonomy directly, but demonstrate state interference in the intellectual autonomy of the academy overall. For example, in Poland, the Ministry of Science interfered with the rankings of journals, by ‘assigning unjustifiable positions to journals of a specific thematic profile or published by selected institutions, which in many cases can only be explained by their connection to the current minister’. This interference also saw significant intervention in favour of

theology over other disciplines. As is well known, rankings impact publication choice among academics and are closely linked to promotion and the overall prestige of an institution. Another example is denying gender and queer studies the status of science in Poland which, as Bucholc describes, ‘may be expected to influence decisions regarding research and teaching’. Similar developments were described by Hünler in the Turkey study.

The creation of a climate of fear is a central challenge to identifying restrictions on freedom to research and teach, particularly what is *not* taught or researched cannot easily be detected. Academics may indicate that they are free to teach what they wish, but they may already have accepted a situation where freedom to teach means teaching ‘within the confines of what is government-permitted’. As described in the Bangladesh case study, ‘A culture of fear persists among Bangladeshi faculties about what to talk about and what not to talk about in the classroom and what research questions they should explore’. Politicization of research through government interference in hiring and firing of academics illustrates the extent to which this intrusion into institutional autonomy impacts the academic freedom to research and teach, as illustrated in these two examples from Bangladesh:

One interviewed academic stated that “there is a potential risk of losing my job if I talk about some issues in the class settings, especially the issues that are religiously and culturally sensitive topic that goes against the dominant ideologies within the state”.

Another said, “Direct criticism of the government’s actions [is] taboo. If agents of the ruling party hear of criticism, they may exert damaging pressure on the teacher’s career”.

A similar situation was described in Turkey with ‘a climate of fear and apprehension, censorship, and self-censorship, that makes it impossible to teach or study politically sensitive topics that differ from the state thesis’. The same case study outlines extensive self-censorship in the avoidance of ‘politically sensitive’ topics in class, on syllabi, and even in postponing courses and changing exam questions. Further, extreme measures such as punishing academics for their research and publications have been documented in the various governments’ interference with the autonomy of HEIs, such as in Turkey. This also closely relates to securitization of campuses and surveillance of academics. In Mozambique, the presence of intelligence agents in classrooms, disguised as students, results in self-censorship out of fear of possible repercussions. In India, intimidation has been seen from student groups; Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student group affiliated to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), successfully agitated for the removal of a Muslim professor from his department in a public university on the basis that his religion made him ‘ineligible’ to teach Sanskrit. They also complained against the content of a class by another professor who was then suspended.

9.4.2 Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination

There were fewer clear examples of the impact of a decline in institutional autonomy on the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination. However, a number of cases illustrated that the autonomy of the institution to determine the parameters of this freedom had been entirely circumvented by the state. In India, particularly stark examples were seen in the denial of both research visas and online attendance which ‘required prior approval from the Ministry of External Affairs to hold an online international conference or seminar on topics relating to the security of the Indian state or otherwise “clearly related to India’s internal matters”’. While this order was subsequently withdrawn, as Jayal notes, ‘Even before this, there was a technical requirement to obtain the approval of either the Ministry of External Affairs or the Ministry of Home Affairs for conferences to which foreign participants were invited’. There was also an interference, from the University Grants Commission (UGC), in creating research collaborations with China, which required permission from both the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of External Affairs. Similar attempts to control or limit scholarly interaction were seen in Russia with the government attempting to limit scientists’ interactions with international scholars on the basis that it was necessary to ‘protect industrial secrets’ (Kaczmarek, 2020, p. 131) and Turkey, where signatories of the Academics for Peace initiative had their passports annulled. Intimidation of scholars, and a view that academics should be in line with state policy, was also recorded in Russia: ‘Russian scholars presenting at international events need to take into consideration the potential presence of Russian diplomats in the audience and the possibility of these representatives questioning why a scholar – who works at a state-funded university or research institution – should criticize the current government’ (Ibid, p. 132).

9.4.3 Freedom of Academic Expression on Political Issues

The case studies illustrate serious restrictions on academic freedom of expression imposed by the state, circumventing universities’ self-governance on the matter entirely. In this regard, a distinction should be made between expression of academic expertise (i.e., what can be termed dissemination) and expression on political issues outside of the immediate expertise of the academic. Academic freedom traditionally covers the former, rather than the latter. However, it can often be challenging to differentiate between the two in practice, particularly when it comes to issues that have become highly politicized, such as human rights, gender, or migration. Moreover, the infringement of scholars’ freedom of expression on political issues – a democratic right – often has severe repercussions for their academic freedom as well.

In countries such as Turkey, where academic freedom is legally provided for in the constitution, it is undermined by other articles that prohibit ‘activities

against the existence and independence of the State, and against the integrity and indivisibility of the nation and the country'. In India, Jayal notes that 'While the numbers of teachers who exercise extra-mural freedom is typically not large, those that do have to contend with harassment by the state constabulary and sometimes even face false cases of political extremism'. In one example, 'the West Bengal Universities and Colleges (Administration and Regulation) Act, 2017, placed restrictions on teachers making "any statement of fact or opinion [...] that has the effect of any adverse criticism of any current policy or action of the state government or the central government"'. In Mozambique, Zavale reports extreme cases in which scholars have been shot and killed for their statements on political issues. In a similar manner, arbitrary incarceration and enforced disappearances of outspoken critical academics have been documented in Egypt (Saliba, 2020, p. 165).

Illustrating the point made previously, that once there is excessive state interference in autonomy, it can be difficult to truly differentiate the actions of the state from the actions of the university, several examples showed universities themselves acting as the protectors of state interests through the restriction of academic freedom of expression. In Bangladesh, two of the four major public universities – which enjoy relatively better autonomy – have reportedly fired academics for their political views. In one instance, authorities arrested academics for criticizing a deceased former health minister as being responsible for the poor healthcare systems during the Covid-19 pandemic. University disciplinary proceedings have been used to suppress 'critical' speech and punish members of the community. In Bangladesh, two scholars were investigated by the Ministry of Education for an allegation that they had 'defamed' the prime minister and president in Facebook posts, and the Ministry asked the university to expel them. Another scholar was ultimately removed from his position for an article he wrote, and a sedition case was opened against him. In India, a prominent academic at a private university resigned following pressure from the board of trustees that he was a 'political liability' as a result of a newspaper column he wrote. Numerous examples of the misuse of university disciplinary procedures against academics were documented in India.

Other examples show where HEIs have failed to stand up for the freedom of expression of their academics. This may be attributed, at least in part, to excessive state co-optation of institutions, including in the appointment of government-friendly leadership. In Turkey, some of the pressure comes through students, resulting in suspension or dismissal of professors. India has also seen the cancellation or disruption of seminars and lectures.⁸ In India, the threatening conduct of the governing-party-affiliated student group ABVP, which has apparently swayed universities in hiring and firing decisions regarding professors who express liberal or anti-government opinions, illustrates a system in which universities are failing to protect their own academics. Whether explicit or implicit, the space for excessive external interference in India is growing, which sees many groups (student groups, teachers unions) intrude into hiring and the content of specific syllabi on the basis of the views of the academics. This trend

not only restricts academic freedom, but is to the detriment of the quality of the education provided. In Poland, students who filed a motion for disciplinary proceedings against a professor were faced with ‘repeated hearings at the public prosecutor’s office as a result of an accusation of having falsified the materials on which the disciplinary proceedings were based’.

9.4.4 *Campus Securitization*

Lack of protection offered by universities on campus, for example in Bangladesh, indicates a system that is failing to protect scholars and students. This absence of protection is clearly linked to a decline in institutional autonomy that has arisen because of repressive state interference in academic life. The case studies show how the behaviour of governments often suggests that they view academics as a security threat to the state rather than a group that needs to be protected if threatened by state or non-state actors. Turkey is perhaps the starkest example. Academic institutions can collect data from state security and judicial organs about candidates for the purpose of checking they are politically sound. Moreover, extensive surveillance of academics takes place on university campuses. Students have also been arrested on university grounds on charges such as protesting against the Council on Higher Education. In Bangladesh, campus facilities are highly politicized: ‘When a new party comes to power, the supporters of the previous governing party are evicted from dormitories [...] by the supporters of the new ruling party’. In Mozambique, the campus is securitized, significantly impeding academic freedom. This is aggravated by the occasional classroom presence of intelligence agents or high-ranking politicians. Furthermore, there are situations with ruling-party political cells on campuses that use HEIs as political spaces. Police interference on campuses in India and Egypt has created an intimidating environment. For India, Jayal notes that ‘Since 2016, the intimidation of students and teachers by arrests and violence has become more frequent’. And, ‘Over the last two years, there have been multiple arrests of politically active teachers and students, besides human rights lawyers and activists, all charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act’. The monitoring of Russian academics abroad speaks to a similar view of academics needing to be in line with state policy (Kaczmarska, 2020, p. 132).

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter introduced three central hypotheses on decline in university autonomy, with illustrative examples from the AFI data and eight qualitative case studies. The comparative analyses showed the relationships between major declines in university autonomy and broader political trends in the respective countries, in particular those of autocratization and political polarization, which appear to cause and facilitate attacks on higher education. It identified that governments that interfere extensively in institutional autonomy usually

do so by targeting the governance composition of universities, including through excessive regulation that substitutes government control for academic self-governance. As a consequence, subsequent measures taken to undermine academic freedom are not as easily identified as the initial direct government interventions. The case studies further show that there is no typical playbook in the way or order in which different aspects of academic freedom and university autonomy come under attack. However, the obstruction of institutional autonomy also effectively undermines other aspects of academic freedom, including scholars' freedom to research and teach without interference, their freedom to exchange and disseminate their results, and the open research and learning environment that campuses should provide. Based on the empirical patterns and developments identified in the case studies and the AFI data, the next chapter proposes recommendations and policy options to strengthen the protection of the institutional autonomy of universities.

Notes

- 1 That is, more than a 0.1 decline on the 0–1 scale of V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem, 2022).
- 2 That is, more than a 0.5 decline on the 0–4 scale of V-Dem's institutional autonomy indicator (V-Dem, 2022).
- 3 Doxing describes the act of publishing private information about an individual or organization.
- 4 The relevant indicator in the figure defines political polarization as society being 'polarized into antagonistic political camps', whereby supporters of opposing political ideologies generally interact in a hostile manner. See V-Dem indicator *v2camps* in the codebook at Coppedge et al. (2022).
- 5 A similar situation has been seen in Ireland (Roberts Lyer and Potapova, 2020).
- 6 0 corresponds to no correlation; 1 corresponds to perfect correlation.
- 7 We thank Marta Bucholtz for drawing our attention to this point.
- 8 The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression (Kaye, 2020) lists as many as 65 events or seminars only on the campuses of public central universities (not including state universities and private colleges) for which permission was denied by the college or university authorities or, if held, were disrupted, most frequently at the behest of the ABVP.

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