Exile as an Institutional Response to Authoritarian Interference

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In August 2021, as Kabul fell to the Taliban, administrators of the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) burned sensitive documents to protect staff and students. The Taliban would target anyone associated with this private university partially funded by the United States government, because it championed free expression, pluralistic ideas, and gender equality. Fortunately, that was not the end of AUAF. The government of Qatar invited the university to reopen in Doha, where it now serves Afghan students in person and online. AUAF has joined the small but growing cohort of institutions operating as universities in exile around the world. In the past 20 years, at least five universities in different parts of the world have gone into exile.

How are they able to survive abroad when so many universities impacted by war and strife either succumb to new regimes or shutter? What does it even mean to be a university in exile? We define a university in exile as a higher education institution (HEI) physically displaced under duress that resumes academic activities elsewhere yet maintains a strong commitment to the national or cultural community it originally served. We hope contributing to a better understanding of this phenomenon can guide HEIs facing similar challenges in the future, encourage interventions and collaborations to reduce the dangers of exile, and generate further research on this emerging and important aspect of higher education in the modern world.

In today’s increasingly volatile world order—one more and more hostile to democratic institutions—political leaders seek to exert more control over higher education. University exile occurs amid these broader geopolitical conditions. Of the cases we examine, two come from post-Soviet countries rebounding towards authoritarianism after a period of relative liberalism, another comes from a country invaded by its neighbor, and two more emerged from countries whose governments were overthrown by internal military groups.

Universities in Exile

European Humanities University (EHU) and Central European University (CEU) were private institutions founded in Belarus and Czechoslovakia (later relocating to Hungary), respectively, in the early 1990s. Their purposes were to orient the next generation towards European values, liberalism, and democracy following the fall of the Soviet Union.
Preserving Democratic Ideals

These examples show that a critical factor precipitating a university’s displacement is a liberal democratic orientation amid mounting nationalism. However, the qualities of a steadfast mission promoting academic freedom and strong connections to international partners are also what allow institutions to successfully move to a new location when remaining becomes untenable.

Universities in exile do more than provide continuity of teaching, learning, and research. They keep hope alive for the future among those with marginalized national identities aligned with democratic values. Instances of institutional exile have risen over the past 20 years, and we can reasonably expect this phenomenon to continue. It is therefore imperative that allies of democracy around the world proactively develop strategies for response. The Open Society University Network has emerged as a key organization. But other defenders of democracy in government, academia, and the non-profit sector should supplement their work by considering key questions such as how can diplomatic interventions upstream mitigate such extreme measures? What role should governments play in strengthening democracy in other nations? And to what extent should universities in exile orient themselves back towards their home countries with the hope to return?

Universities in exile provide value to both their original and host communities. For example, AUAF enables Afghan students to continue learning in safety, whether in Qatar, remotely (and secretly) from Afghanistan, or elsewhere amid the global diaspora. AUAF preserves networks of Afghan intellectuals and connects them to supporters around the world. It lays the groundwork for an eventual return to Afghanistan. Should the day ever come, AUAF will be poised to contribute to rebuilding the nation’s educational infrastructure. Meanwhile, AUAF brings diverse perspectives and bright minds to Qatar. In turn, Qatar’s generosity in providing a home for AUAF raises the country’s image in the eyes of the democratic world. Supporting universities pressured into exile is a key way for the global higher education community to fight back against rising authoritarianism.