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Academic Freedom and

Democracy in Central America:

Risks, Vulnerability and Resilience

Origin of the study

One of the seven studies chosen by CLACSO and CAFA responding to the call: **Strengthening compared research and critical thinking in the framework of academic freedom in the Americas.**

Nature of the study

This is an exploratory study in four Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) based on review of digitalized documents, interviews with four persons in each of three countries (Nicaragua not included) and theoretical debate. **Findings, therefore, must be understood as working questions for more in depth and broader scope research.**

Research was conducted between February and October of 2025.
Civic Engagement activities are being carried out between January and April 2026.



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General conclusion



Academic freedom in Central America is going through a **structural crisis strongly linked to democratic backsliding, authoritarianism and institutional exclusion.**

In the past five years universities and other knowledge building structures have **stopped being safe spaces for critical thinking and have suffered censorship, self-censorship, precarization and repression.**



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Regarding IACHR Principles 1 y 2:

Weakness in protecting academic freedom PRINCIPLE 1

- **Nicaragua:** Cancellation of over 40 universities (UN, 2024) and ideological control
- **Guatemala:** Deterioration and control by corrupt actors of the only public university as well as cases of penal persecution against academic freedom defenders.
- **El Salvador:** Continued and accelerated “devaluation of academic freedom” which adds to analysis referring to “advancing conditions and tendencies towards authoritarianism”.
- **Honduras:** Attempts at commodifying higher education, threats against university autonomy since the political crisis of 2009, precarization of academic work/jobs.



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Regarding IACHR Principles 1 y 2:

University autonomy under siege PRINCIPLE 2

- **Nicaragua:** Reduction of public funding and state vigilance of academics.
- **El Salvador:** A Higher Education Law proposal ignores that Universidad de El Salvador is the only public university and the oldest one, that over a third of university students attend it and that the Constitution confers it autonomy
- **Honduras:** The creation of a Superior Council or Commission proposal to govern higher education, including control mechanisms of Universidad Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) “violates or eliminates university autonomy”.



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Exclusion practices in knowledge generation:

Thematical and ideological exclusions

Censorship or self-censorship of certain subjects that political, religious and economic elites consider sensitive or disruptive. Human rights, feminisms, sexual diversity, armed conflict memory, extractivist development models, climate change, indigenous rights, corruption provoke stigmatization, vigilance and even sanctions.

Effect

Stigma works as ideological control, self-censorship functions as a mechanism of professional survivance and universities run the risk of falling into the logic of thought homogenization.



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Exclusion practices in knowledge generation:

Labor and institutional precariousness

Contracts by class hours, absence of work stability, lack of access to basic benefits and low salaries are generalized conditions.

Effect

The development of a solid academic career is not viable, especially for young or critical teachers. This not only weakens the quality of education, but it also works as a hidden way of censorship and repression where fear of losing the job hinders the exercise of academic freedom.



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Exclusion practices in knowledge generation:

Repression and ideological control

Systematic pressure by interest groups, economic and political, on higher education institutions, especially those that have historically promoted a critical, autonomous and progressive view. Actions may include funding cutting or delayed payments; political appointments or control of university governance; closing of certain careers, programs and even universities, as well as criminalization of university authorities, teachers and students.

Effect

This context produces a climate of uncertainty and even fear that inhibits participation and neutralizes the critical function of universities.



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Exclusion practices in knowledge generation:

Epistemic exclusion

Disciplines and methodologies that don't comply with the dominant positivist and technical perspective -such as critical anthropology, oral history, cultural studies, epistemologies of the South or popular pedagogies- obtain less institutional recognition, less resources and less academic legitimacy.

Effect

Far from being spaces for autonomous thought, universities become disputed territories where political, economic, religious, ideological and disciplinary interests are in permanent confrontation.



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Risks and vulnerabilities

- **Criminalization** of critical thinking and forced displacement
- **Rupture of the bond** between university and society
- **Emotional impact** and academic migration

From Word to legal record

- *Beginning*: Defence of indigenous and peasant territory based on own rules and research findings.
- *Scaling up*: Starting with the invalidation of the “worth of Word” in agreements reached and its substitution with empty legal records; stigmatization (“usurpers”); up to the use of police forces and prosecutors.
- *Clímax*: Forced eviction of indigenous and peasant communities, displacement; media prestige attacks (“lazy people” vs “entrepreneurs”, for example, in Guatemala) or lethal violence.



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Differentiated risks and intersectional exclusion

- *Women and LGBTIQ+ persons: double vulnerability, stigmatization and symbolic violence.* Double structural burden: on one hand, they must deal with precariousness, censorship and generalized repression that affect all critical university actors; on the other hand, they suffer specific forms of symbolic violence, work and sexual harassment, exclusion from decision making spaces and delegitimization of their knowledge.
- *Indigenous peoples: epistemic exclusion and institutional racism.* Not only due to access barriers to education, but because their knowledge, pedagogical practices and research methodologies are delegitimized. It is not just a matter of lack of representation, it is about a structural epistemic racism that considers the indigenous as folklore, premodern, irrelevant in light of academic formal standards.
- *Students and youth: vigilance, repression and clientelism.* Students and politically organized youth have been one of the most vulnerable sectors to direct repression. As a result, many young people have opted for silence, withdrawal and even leaving the country. Universities have thus lost one of their most important sources of political innovation, social mobilization and disruptive thought.



Why is this happening

Perspective from universities

- **Guatemala:** a serious and dangerous politicization that is associated with the corruption of State apparatus.
- **El Salvador:** politicization where there still seems to be space for power play within university.
- **Honduras:** a neoliberal model of instrumental rationale prevails, not one of law and rights.

Perspective from other spaces of knowledge generation

- **Guatemala:** Repression is explained as a way of avoiding the awakening of the peoples and of maintaining privileges
- **El Salvador:** Situation is explained in terms of a neoliberal right-wing vision and of the recomposition of economic power.
- **Honduras:** Control by political parties and the interests of power. Control of academic world by men was mentioned.

***In common:** A growing lack of interest in research*



Resilience and resistance in the face of risks and exclusions

Initial reflection: Resilience is not passivity when struck; it is what makes viable the capacity to reorganize knowledge, alliances and practices from the margins in order to resist.

- Solidarity networks and other actions
- **Counterhegemonic practices:** participatory methodologies and local knowledge
- Denouncing internationally through global protection networks



Relationship between academic freedom and democracy

Academic freedom is a necessary condition for democracy

Democracy supports academic freedom

Tensions, limitations and internal contradictions in universities

Needed transformations:
towards a liberating academic freedom

1. Unite academic freedom with decolonizing processes.
2. Build democracy from below based on respectful listening and integral participation.
3. Generate discussion and reflection processes on IACHR and UN principles on academic freedom.





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