

Joe Biden uses fascist rhetoric while condemning student protests



By Sharon Zhang / TRUTHOUT

Washington, May 5 (RHC)-- In a move straight out of the fascist playbook, President Joe Biden delivered a speech on Thursday morning attacking the wave of pro-Palestine protests that have sprung up in college campuses across the country, smearing students for using tactics that have been employed by

nearly every social movement in U.S. history to demand an end to Israel's U.S.-backed genocide of Gaza.

In his remarks, Biden falsely claimed — without citing a single instance of pro-Palestine demonstrators instigating violence — that the pro-Palestine protests have been violent and threatened the safety of their communities. He then condemned the supposed “lawless[ness]” of the protests, purposefully neglecting to acknowledge the U.S.’s role in Israel’s repeated violations of international law.

The speech was, in essence, a veiled threat against protesters who have opposed Biden’s policies toward Gaza — both those who have set up encampments on university campuses and those who have used increasingly disruptive tactics for demands like a permanent ceasefire and institutional divestment from Israel in the face of repressive tactics and police violence.

“We are not an authoritarian nation where we silence people or squash dissent. The American people are heard. In fact, peaceful protest is in the best tradition of how Americans respond to consequential issues,” said Biden. “But neither are we a lawless country. We are a civil society, and order must prevail.”

“Dissent is essential to democracy,” Biden went on. “But dissent must never lead to disorder or to denying the rights of others so students can finish the semester and their college education.”

The rhetoric of “lawless” protests, with demands that “order must prevail” and dissent must fall within predetermined limits, echoes the fascist rhetoric that world leaders have historically used to crush resistance from the public.

In 2020, when Donald Trump called for “law and order” in response to the Movement for Black Lives uprising, many scholars, experts and political commentators noted that Trump was issuing an open call for authoritarian violence against protesters, whether from law enforcement or bloodthirsty right-wing vigilantes.

A particularly potent 2021 essay by Yale University philosophy professor Jason Stanley, who wrote a book entitled *How Fascism Works*, documented how Trump kicked off fascism’s “legal phase” while following precedents of historical repressors of anti-war and civil rights protests who also called for “law and order” in order to reign in “lawless” protests — specifically ones opposed to the American imperialist regime.

As commentators have pointed out, Biden’s speech equates violence and civil disobedience in an attempt to taint the view of the demonstrations at large — rhetoric that lawmakers have historically applied to smear protests, including the illegal marches, sit-ins and bus boycotts of the civil rights movement led by figures like Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Peaceful protest in America — violent protest is not protected, peaceful protest is. It’s against the law when violence occurs. Destroying property is not a peaceful protest. It’s against the law,” said Biden, using a shifting definition of violence in order to blur the lines between violence against people and destruction of property.

“Vandalism, trespassing, breaking windows, shutting down campuses, forcing the cancellation of classes and graduations — none of this is a peaceful protest,” he went on. (University administrators are the ones who have decided to cancel classes or graduation due to protests; this has not been a primary demand of any of the major encampments.)

Disruptive protests are the crux of successful social movements. This often means that protesters may break the law in order to exert pressure and interrupt business as usual — including laws that have been passed in the U.S. that explicitly outlaw certain forms of protest. Notably, U.S. politicians often condemn state suppression of protest in other countries while using those same tactics on protesters at home.

Data has demonstrated that Biden is wrong in implying that the protesters have been instigating violence; in fact, research released Thursday demonstrates that the violence that has occurred at protests has largely been inflicted not by protesters, but by the highly militarized police forces sent by university administrators to crush dissent.

According to a research brief by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 99 percent of the student protests that have occurred in April have been peaceful — the exceptions being instances like the pro-Palestine protest at the University of California, Los Angeles, where Zionist counterprotesters and police unleashed a spate of violence this week, hospitalizing dozens of demonstrators.

Meanwhile, likely in part due to rhetoric by Biden and other lawmakers painting pro-Palestine protests as dangerous, ACLED found that police intervened on pro-Palestine protests at a rate over four times higher than they did pro-Israel protests last month.

What Biden hasn't called out as unlawful, on the other hand, is Israel's genocidal assault against Palestinians in Gaza — despite the many legal scholars, world leaders, humanitarian groups and advocacy organizations who have said that the assault flouts international law, and that U.S. support of it violates domestic policies. The siege has killed over 35,000 Palestinians so far and threatens the lives of hundreds of thousands more.

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