

Students graduating at Harvard University denied their degrees over Palestine protest



Boston, June 10 (RHC)-- More than two weeks have passed since the graduates' commencement ceremony for 2024 at Harvard University, but Asmer Asrar Safi is still waiting to receive the degree for which he spent four years studying.

"The situation remains as is, unfortunately," he tells Al Jazeera from Boston, United States.

Besides Safi, who is originally from Lahore, Pakistan, another 12 students find themselves in the same situation: they are all graduating students at one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the

world but will not be awarded their degrees for at least one year.

Harvard Corporation, the university's top governing body, barred these students from receiving their degrees during this year's graduation ceremony on May 23rd because of their involvement in the three-week anti-war encampment at the university last month.

"I am waiting for my appeals decision to come out," 23-year-old Safi, an international student of social studies and ethnicity, migration and rights at Harvard College, says.

"I am a Rhodes Scholar and trying to ascertain if I can matriculate at the University of Oxford given that my Harvard degree has been withheld for a year, even though I have met all the academic conditions for my program and have completed my degree requirements."

Shraddha Joshi is another student who will not be able to receive her degree, despite having the backing of her faculty at Harvard College, where she was studying in the same program as Safi. "After having completed the appeal application on my end, we seem to be in a limbo as we wait for communication from the university. Students and faculty members are all quite confused by the ambiguity of the process, and the timeline for appeals is unclear," she told Al Jazeera.

Born and raised in Texas, Joshi had been planning to pursue a master's degree in sociology in the United Kingdom, but says her future is now uncertain. "I was supposed to go to the University of Cambridge with the Harvard-UK Fellowship, but my plans are now in flux due to my degree status. The lack of transparency and poor communication from administrators make it difficult to predict what our next steps will look like," she says.

Like many other academic institutions in the US, Harvard University has found itself caught up in an increasingly angry debate about academic freedom and the right to protest over Israel's ongoing war in Gaza.

Having served as Harvard's president for just six months, Claudine Gay resigned from the position in January this year, following her appearance at a congressional testimony about "rising anti-Semitism" on the college campus in December 2023.

The encampment at Harvard University lasted for three weeks. [Courtesy of Shraddha Joshi]

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In her resignation letter, Gay, the university's first Black president and only the second woman to take the role in its 388-year history, cited personal attacks "fuelled by racial animus".

Her resignation came following pressure on her to step down as she also faced allegations of plagiarism about her academic work which surfaced soon after the congressional hearing.

In April, students at Columbia University, an Ivy League college in New York, began an encampment on their campus grounds in protest against the Israeli war on Gaza. They demanded that their university divest from companies linked to or doing business with Israel.

The protest movement grew rapidly across the country, with encampments appearing at more than 30 other universities, including Harvard, where the student protest encampment began on April 24.

The demand by students at the Harvard encampment, much like the rest of the college campuses in the US, was for a full disclosure of Harvard's investments in companies linked to Israel and divestment from those companies.

Following negotiations between the university administration and the Harvard Out of Occupied Palestine (HOOP) coalition, which was leading the protest, the encampment was disbanded on May 14.

To reach an agreement to end the encampment, Harvard, which had placed more than 20 students on “involuntary leave”, agreed to begin the process of reinstating those students and offered protesters a meeting with members of the university’s governing boards about divestment.

On May 14th, Harvard interim president Alan Garber said: “With the disruption to the educational environment caused by the encampment now abated, I will ask that the schools promptly initiate applicable reinstatement proceedings for all individuals who have been placed on involuntary leaves of absence. I will also ask disciplinary boards within each school to evaluate expeditiously, according to their existing practices and precedents, the cases of those who participated in the encampment.”

The protesting students accepted this outcome and decided to disband the encampment.

“As the protest tactic exhausted its utility, we realised that it was best to shift gears and move forward with organising along different lines,” says Safi. “Yet, while we stuck to our half of the agreement, the university did not and continued to discipline all of us in unprecedented ways.”

Joshi, who was not a camper herself but acted as a liaison with the college administration on behalf of the protesters, was among the group of more than 20 students who were placed on “involuntary leave” and asked to leave the Harvard campus.

Despite the university’s promise to begin reinstating those students, however, she says: “On May 17, I was told verbally that Harvard’s administrative board had chosen to place me on probation until May 2025, withholding my degree until then. This decision was confirmed in writing on Monday, May 20, affecting myself and 12 others.”

When Al Jazeera asked Harvard University to explain this decision, a spokesman said: “I will refer you to President Garber’s communication written to the representatives of those participating in the encampment. It does not speak to the outcome of disciplinary processes, rather it indicates he would encourage disciplinary bodies to move their processes forward expeditiously, in line with their existing precedents and practices.”

Student protesters at Harvard say the emergence of the solidarity encampment on their campus was not an “isolated event.” There had been numerous vigils, awareness campaigns as well as protest rallies across the campus, with the pro-Palestine students organising events that were more focused on educational and cultural events, even prior to the October 7 Hamas attacks in southern Israel.

Post-October, the group’s advocacy efforts have been mostly centred on protesting against “Harvard’s complicity” in the events in Gaza.

Safi says he has been working on pro-Palestine causes at the Harvard campus since 2020, helping organise various events. “Shraddha and I have planned various events regarding our divestment campaign, which has grown tremendously over the last few months, with students being forced to contend with the university’s complicity in the crimes committed against Palestinians,” he says.

Joshi adds that the students faced a large amount of harassment and pressure from counter-protesters, which she says was part of a broader trend of anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racism and discrimination. The faces and identities of some protesters were posted to social media accounts opposed to the protests.

“We had trucks on Harvard campus doxing us, targeting pro-Palestine students, with our names and faces being paraded on campus, and none of this was condemned or stopped by the university,” says Joshi.

Harvard University told Al Jazeera that it does take this sort of harassment seriously. A spokesman pointed to the fact that in January, President Garber announced a new Presidential Task Force on Combatting Islamophobia and Anti-Arab Bias.

Previously, in October last year, a university-wide message was sent out by Executive Vice President Meredith Weenick acknowledging safety concerns among Muslim students and “clearly stating that we do not condone or ignore intimidation or threats or acts of harassment or violence”.

This is not enough, say the protesters. “Students do not simply protest for fun or to make noise without reason. Students across Harvard chose to establish the encampment only when all avenues were exhausted and having doors slammed in their faces when they mentioned Palestine,” Joshi adds.

Safi says the decision to establish an encampment was in line with other protest movements on Harvard’s campus in the past, including protests that called for divestment from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, among others.

“It is this repression, and this unwillingness to initiate conversations on the part of the administration, that led to the establishment of the encampment. Yet, we have only seen the repression worsen since the establishment of the Gaza solidarity encampment,” he adds.

As the wave of protests across US college campuses picked up pace and grew in strength earlier this year, some college administrators resorted to using force, calling in law enforcement to disperse protesters and encampments.

While the administration at Harvard did not call in police, Joshi says that the encampment, which lasted for three weeks, ended with an agreement to decamp peacefully on the understanding that there would be a “good faith effort” from university administrators to process student disciplinary sanctions.

Instead, “Harvard leveraged disciplinary sanctions to intimidate students”, claims Joshi. “On May 10, four days after an email was sent from Interim President Alan Garber threatening involuntary leave to students, notices were sent out to several students – campers and non-campers alike – including myself,” Joshi, who was not part of the encampment but was entrusted with the task of liaising with the administration, says.

On May 18, Safi posted a message on social media platform X with the news that the university had decided to withhold the degrees of several graduate students for one year. Safi says he had never seen such “collective outrage” from the student body following the decision to bar the 13 students from receiving degrees.

“Though the decision came as a surprise to us, what was more surprising was to see students from across campus taking to social media to condemn the university’s decision. We were overwhelmed by the support, especially from faculty, nearly 500 of whom mobilised against the administration,” he says.

Collective outrage

The show of solidarity for those barred from receiving their degrees was on display during the commencement ceremony as well. Shruthi Kumar, the undergraduate speaker, went off-script from her prepared speech, as she spoke in support of the students. “As I stand here today, I must take a moment to recognise my peers, the 13 undergraduates in the class of 2024 who will not graduate today,” Kumar said, while the senior university administration officials watched on.

“I am deeply disappointed by the intolerance for freedom of speech and the right to civil disobedience on campus,” the double major in science and economics said. “The students had spoken. The faculty had spoken. Harvard, do you hear us?” Kumar added to loud applause and cheers from students.

More than 1,000 students, faculty members and commencement participants staged a walkout from the event, and the 13 students were honoured in a “mock graduation” ceremony which took place the following day.

For Joshi, witnessing the walkout, which she says was catalysed by the speech delivered by Kumar, was “extremely heartening”. “I see this particular moment as one of immense galvanising potential, as more and more students are realising the tangible effects of repression,” she says.

“However, as a movement, we must make sure that we can redirect peoples’ anger to the most important source of frustration. It is not enough to be in solidarity with fellow students; this solidarity must ultimately centre Palestinian liberation.”

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