

Activists support U.S. professor forced from Columbia University over Palestine solidarity

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A Palestinian flag flutters in the wind at a pro-Palestinian encampment inside Columbia University's campus in New York City [File: Andres Kudacki/AP]

New York, January 13 (RHC)-- Academics, lawyers and activists have voiced support for a law professor who says she was pressured to leave Columbia University for her advocacy for pro-Palestinian students.

“Effective today, I have reached an agreement with Columbia University that relieves me of my obligations to teach or participate in faculty governance after serving on the Columbia law faculty for 25 years,” Katherine Franke, a tenured law professor at the Ivy League university in the United States, said in a statement on Thursday.

“While the university may call this change in my status “retirement,” it should be more accurately understood as a termination dressed up in more palatable terms.

“I have come to the view that the Columbia University administration has created such a toxic and hostile environment for legitimate debate around the war in Israel and Palestine that I can no longer teach or conduct research,” Franke said.

Protests against Israel’s war on Gaza erupted on Columbia’s New York City campus last April and inspired similar encampments at other institutions across the US and beyond. Students demanded that the university divest from Israel, which has been accused of war crimes and genocide in Gaza. They also called for a ceasefire to end the war that has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians and turned Gaza into rubble.

The prestigious Ivy League school, however, attempted to push back against the students’ protests – a crackdown that brought criticisms from rights organisations.

Some critics argued that the crackdown on pro-Palestinian students and groups put a damper on free speech on the college campus, while others allege the university administration has allowed a hostile atmosphere to thrive.

Commenting on Franke’s resignation on Saturday, Francesca Albanese, the United Nations special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories, said Franke has become “another victim of the pro-Israelism that is turning universities, and other spaces of public life, into places of obscurantism, discrimination and oppression”.

On Sunday, Noura Erakat, a professor at Rutgers University and human rights lawyer, called the university’s mistreatment of Professor Franke “egregious”.

“She has resigned after 25 years of an illustrious academic career and commitment to her students because she decided there is nothing to return to – it is far too hostile,” Erakat posted on the social media platform X.

Todd Wolfson, the president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), described Columbia’s actions as “truly shameful” and said on Saturday that the AAUP stands with “Professor Franke and against this repression of pro-Palestinian speech”.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, an advocacy organisation, said on Thursday that Franke’s resignation represents “an egregious attack on both academic freedom and Palestinian rights advocacy.”

According to a New York Times article, Columbia University spokesperson Samantha Slater said that a complaint had been filed [against Franke] “alleging discriminatory harassment in violation of our policies. An investigation was conducted, and a finding was issued.”

In her resignation statement, Franke noted how last February, two of her colleagues filed a complaint against her with the university’s Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, charging that one of her comments to US news outlet Democracy Now! amounted to harassment of Israeli members of the Columbia community in violation of university policies.

In a January 2024 interview, Franke had spoken about the university's graduate-programme relationship with countries including Israel and said: "It's something that many of us were concerned about, because so many of those Israeli students, who then come to the Columbia campus, are coming right out of their military service. And they've been known to harass Palestinian and other students on our campus."

As the investigation of complaints against this comment progressed, Franke said that in April 2024 during a US congressional hearing, Congresswoman Elise Stefanik asked then-Columbia President Minouche Shafik what disciplinary actions had been taken against Franke, who had commented on Israeli students on campus.

Stefanik wrongly attributed the remark "all Israeli students who served in the [Israeli army] are dangerous and shouldn't be on campus" to Franke. "President Shafik responded 'I agree with you that those comments are completely unacceptable and discriminatory.' President Shafik was aware at that time that Congresswoman Stefanik's summary of my comments was grossly inaccurate and misleading, yet she made no effort to correct the Congresswoman's deliberate mischaracterisation of my comments," Franke said in her statement.

Professor Franke says she faced harassment, including death threats, following the Congressional hearing. Shafik, who was criticised for the handling of the students' protests, stepped down as the university president in August.

Meanwhile, an external law firm was later hired to investigate Franke's comments last November and concluded that her remarks had violated the university's Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action policies. Franke has said she has filed an appeal.

"Upon reflection, it became clear to me that Columbia had become such a hostile environment, that I could no longer serve as an active member of the faculty," Franke said in her statement.

"Rather than defend the role of a university in a democracy, in fostering critical debate, research, and learning around matters of vital public concern ... Columbia University's leadership has demonstrated a willingness to collaborate with the very enemies of our academic mission."

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