

## NEWS

# Freed Palestinian student accuses Columbia University of inciting violence

**HOLLY RAMER AND  
AMANDA SWINHART**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONTPELIER, Vt. — A Palestinian student arrested as he was about to finalize his U.S. citizenship accused Columbia University on Thursday of eroding democracy with its handling of campus protests against the Israel-Hamas war.

Mohsen Mahdawi, 34, who led anti-war protests at the Ivy League school in New York in 2023 and 2024, spent 16 days in a Vermont prison before a judge ordered him released on April 30. On Friday, an appeals court in New York denied the government's request to halt that order, saying the Trump administration's jurisdictional arguments were unlikely to succeed and that it hadn't shown that Mahdawi's release has caused irreparable harm.

"Individual liberty substantially outweighs the government's weak assertions of administrative and logistical costs," wrote the three-judge panel at the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The Trump administration has said Mahdawi should be deported because his activism threatens its foreign policy goals, but the judge who released him on bail ruled that he has raised a "substantial claim" that the government arrested him to stifle speech with which it disagrees.

Mahdawi spoke to The Associated Press on Thursday, a day after pro-Palestinian protestors clashed with campus security guards inside the university's main library. At least 80 people were taken into custody, police said.

Mahdawi said instead of being a "beacon of hope," the university is inciting violence against students.

"Columbia University is participating in the destruction of the democratic system," Mahdawi said in the interview. "They are supporting the initiatives and the agenda of the Trump administration, and they are punishing and torturing their students."

A spokesperson for Columbia University, which in March announced sweeping policy changes related to protests following Trump administration threats to revoke its federal funding, declined to comment Thursday beyond the response of the school's acting president to Wednesday's protests.

The acting president, Claire Shipman, said the protesters who had holed up inside a library reading room were asked repeatedly to show identification and to leave, but they refused. The school then asked police in "to assist in securing the building and the safety of our community," she said in a statement Wednesday evening, calling the protest actions "outrageous" and a disruption to students

for final exams.

Mahdawi, a legal permanent resident, was born in a refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and moved to the United States in 2014. At Columbia, he organized campus protests and co-founded the Palestinian Student Union with Mahmoud Khalil, another Palestinian permanent resident of the U.S. and graduate student who was arrested in March.

On April 14, Mahdawi had taken a written citizenship test, answered verbal questions and signed a document about the pledge of allegiance at an immigration office in Colchester when his interviewer left the room. Masked and armed agents then entered and arrested him, he said. Though he had suspected a trap, the moment was still shocking, he said, triggering a cascade of contrasting emotions.

"Light and darkness, cold and hot. Having rights or not having rights at all," he said.

Immigration authorities have detained college students from around the country since the first days of the Trump administration, many of whom participated in campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war. Mahdawi was among the first to win release from custody after challenging his arrest.

In another case, a federal appeals court ruled

Wednesday in favor of Tufts University student Rumeysa Ozturk, upholding an order to transfer her from a Louisiana detention center back to New England to determine whether her rights were violated and if she should be released.

Mahdawi said his message to the Turkish student and others was "stay positive and don't let this injustice shake your belief in the inevitability of justice."

"People are working hard. Communities are mobilizing," he said. "The justice system has signaled to America with my case, and with Rumeysa's yesterday with the Second Circuit, that justice is functioning and checks and balances is still in function."

Mahdawi's release, which is being challenged by the government, allows him to travel outside of his home state of Vermont and attend his graduation from Columbia in New York later this month. He said he plans to do so, though he believes the administration has turned its back on him and rejected the work of a student diplomacy council he served on alongside Jewish, Israeli and Lebanese students.

"I plan to attend the graduation because it is a message," he said. "This is a message that education is hope, education is light, and there is no power in the world that should take that away from us."

## POPE

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Vatican flag at the Pontifical North American College. The hilltop institution for U.S. seminarians is a short walk from St. Peter's Basilica, where Leo made his first speech to the world on Thursday evening as the new leader of the Catholic Church's global faithful of 1.4 billion people.

The cardinals highlighted how his American nationality wasn't a deciding factor, especially in the most geographically diverse conclave in history, though many rejoiced in it.

"The fact that he was born in the United States of America, boy, that's a sense of pride and gratitude for us," Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York said.

But Dolan and others added that Leo's experience as an Augustinian as well as ministry in Peru — where he also acquired citizenship — and leading the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops made him a "citizen of the world."

"In a very real sense, Cardinal Prevost in his life has been at his core a missionary, in every way," Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington said.

They also said that Leo could build bridges to all world leaders, including U.S. President Donald Trump. U.S. Catholic bishops have had a fraught relationship with Trump, especially over the crackdown on immigration, and Pope Francis had sparred with Trump since he first was a presidential candidate.

But cardinals in the conclave were most concerned with "who among us can bring



Gregorio Borgia | Associated Press

From left, U.S. Cardinals, Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the USA, Robert McElroy of Washington, and Wilton Gregory, archbishop emeritus of Washington, attend a press conference at the North American College in Rome, Friday, May 9, 2025, one day after U.S. Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost was elected Pope Leo XIV.

us together, who among us can strengthen the faith and bring the faith to places where it has grown weak," Cardinal Wilton Gregory said.

Earlier, the first U.S. Black prelate to assume the rank of cardinal had joked that he and Leo had chatted "from one south sider of Chicago to another."

The United States had 10 voting cardinals in the conclave, the second-highest number of any country after Italy. Four of them currently serve as archbishops in the U.S. — Blase Cupich of Chicago as well as Dolan, McElroy and Tobin. Joining them were archbishops emeritus Gregory and Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston in Texas, as well as French Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio to the United States.

They urged the faithful to see the conclave not as a political campaign, but as a grave choice driven by the

window on Sunday ... papa is back," Dolan added, referencing the blessing that popes have long bestowed on the crowds on Sundays, and which Leo — "il papa" in Italian — is scheduled to deliver on May 11. "It's the office of the successor of St. Peter that endures."

Several of the men referred to the man — who they've known for years as Bob or Robert — by his papal name, Leo. On Friday, they joked with each other and the journalists — including Dolan and Tobin saying that the conclave might have been short, because the first night's meal wasn't conducive to sticking around.

But they highlighted that ultimately what delivered a majority in less than 24 hours stemmed from discernment and the grace of God.

"We were able to treat each other with great respect, to listen to each other during the congregations beforehand, and then when it came time for voting, things seemed to just jell and go in a direction that set us on a path of unity," Cupich said. "If only the rest of us, in our lives and in the world, could have that mad dash to unity that we seemed to have in conclave."



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## MCSO

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investigation of Fisher. He claimed Johnston had a personal interest in the case.

"I do not find that your conduct was unbecoming of a law enforcement officer," Assistant Ombudsman Chelsea Borich wrote in a letter to Johnston dated Friday, outlining her findings. "I do not see any indication of abuse of authority or conflict of interest."

The incident stems from the school district's decision last year not to renew the contract of Oskaloosa High School Activities Director Ryan Parker. Comfort claimed that Johnston is personal friends with a member of Parker's family. Johnston also signed a petition to keep Parker in his job.

Johnston started his investigation following a complaint by Parker's wife, Renee Parker, that Fisher was harassing her kids by repeatedly showing up to their classes in the high school and Oskaloosa Middle School.

Johnston finished his investigation without filing any charges against Fisher.

Borich address several of Comfort's claims in her letter.

— In his complaint to the ombudsman, Comfort said that Johnston attended a school board meeting, in uniform, at which the petition to retain Parker was discussed. That amounted, Comfort claimed, to Johnston signaling official endorsement of the petition.

Borich noted that sheriff's department policy allows deputies to attend public meetings, but to remain neutral if they are in uniform. But Johnston was outside camera's view at the meeting, which is recorded. Borich wrote she made no findings on this claim.

— Comfort complained that Johnston started conducting his investigation before he formally opened one by assigning a case number. But Borich found this irrelevant, noting that law enforcement officers have a lot of discretion when and how to start a formal

investigation, and it's not uncommon for them to do preliminary inquiries before getting a case number.

— Comfort complained that Johnston did not disclose his personal friendship with the Parkers to the Mahaska County Attorney's Office. Borich disagreed.

— Comfort also claimed that Johnston exerted "undue pressure" when he texted him to disagree with the school board's employment decision, and forwarded Comfort a string of social media posts highly critical of Fisher from people who knew him when he was superintendent in Charles City.

"While my complainant's questions and concerns were valid and I understand their perception of a conflict of interest and possible misconduct, I cannot substantiate from the evidence I reviewed that you conducted yourself in an unlawful, unreasonable, or unfair manner," Borich wrote.

"The key takeaway from my investigation is that no criminal charges were filed against Mr. Fisher, despite the concerns about your investigation and your objectivity," Borich wrote.

Mahaska County Sheriff Russ Van Renterghem told the Mahaska County Board of Supervisors about the findings Monday morning, two weeks after Comfort told them he had filed the complaint.

"Since the complainant in this matter chose to make the complaint public, I felt the public had a right to know the outcome of the investigation," Van Renterghem said of addressing the supervisors.

Johnston could not be reached for comment.

Comfort didn't have any comment about the ombudsman's findings, and said he will not pursue the matter any further.

"I did what I felt was the best thing to do as a citizen, and I will never apologize for that," Comfort said.

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