

A student expulsion at MIT: Questions about the MIT disciplinary process

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On October 8, 2025, Prahlad Iyengar, a graduate student in MIT's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, received a notice of disciplinary expulsion from MIT. The purported basis for this rarely-used sanction, the most serious punishment available to the MIT disciplinary system, was an article Prahlad had written for a student magazine a year earlier. This expulsion follows an earlier extreme and historically unusual disciplinary action – interim suspension – ordered, along with a campus ban on distribution of the magazine, immediately after the article was published in October 2024. At that time many groups, including the MIT chapter of AAUP, FIRE, the Scholars at Risk Network, the MIT Free Speech Alliance, and the cofounders of the MIT Council on Academic Freedom, noted that these abrupt and severe measures taken against Iyengar and the magazine raised important questions about MIT's commitment to freedom of expression and about the quality of the disciplinary process. The subsequent expulsion redoubles these concerns.

Prahlad's is a singularly dramatic case, but the failings of the disciplinary process presently in place at MIT are much broader. As Professor Marah Gubar has [written](#), "... to levy punishment on students engaged in a collective political protest represents a radical break with past precedent, whereby pro-Palestinian protesters have been subjected to a disproportionately harsh punishment compared to other prior groups of political protesters at MIT." This break with precedent needs to be understood and corrected.

This article describes the grounds on which the Committee on Discipline based its expulsion order and provides some background that brings into question the justifications for these unprecedented and punitive disciplinary actions. We identify systemic flaws in the disciplinary system that were not adequately addressed by recent committee reports, and suggest that addressing these irregularities requires a fresh faculty review of the entire disciplinary process.

The grounds for Prahlad Iyengar's expulsion

Prahlad Iyengar's disciplinary expulsion from MIT was a response to the article "On Pacifism" published on October 28, 2024, in [Volume 5 of *Written Revolution*](#). (The zine *Written Revolution*

is not formally affiliated with MIT.) The theme of this issue was “Honoring History, Shaping History.” Its contents reflected this broad theme:

- The Khan Younis massacre of 1956 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khan_Yunis_massacre
- A comparison of struggles for independence in Algeria and in Kashmir with that in Palestine
- A report and letter from several MIT student organizations on state-sponsored violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh
- Two pages of photographic artwork
- A call for an end to the Israeli system of Apartheid, occupation, and terror
- An essay on “Sustaining yourself through a revolution”
- A poem “Who should I save”
- The essay “On Pacifism” by Prahlad Iyengar

In this essay, Prahlad reflects on the actions taken by activists across the world in opposing immoral uses of authority. He voices his personal frustration at the paucity of results to date of the extensive, impassioned, and carefully considered anti-genocide protest movement at MIT – a movement that had already resulted in substantial disciplinary consequences for many. In this light, he appears as a classic figure, a young idealist disappointed by what his movement has been able to achieve. The essay is a cry from the heart, following the author’s encounter with Ward Churchill’s 1986 [Pacifism as Pathology](#). Churchill’s thesis is that an approach of limited disruption, as an overall strategy, plays into the hands of the existing power structure; by adopting it, one simply enables the status quo. Iyengar sees this exemplified in the standard procedure for organizing a protest – carefully controlling the danger participants expose themselves to, dutifully recording the expected police excesses, preparing rousing speeches and banners. The entire essay is a painful re-examination of the author’s previously held beliefs in “strategic pacifism,” and the consideration of an alternative strategy of “wreaking havoc.”

It is important to keep in mind what Prahlad did not do in his essay: he did not call for any specific action at the Institute, nor target any specific person. The purpose was to reflect on lessons from events in the past, especially within historical liberation movements, and compare these situations to the student movement for Palestine, including at MIT. He wrote an article. He exercised his right to freedom of expression. For simply expressing his ideas about political strategy, he received the maximum penalty from the MIT Committee on Discipline.

The CoD supported its interpretation of “On Pacifism” as inciting violence at MIT by referring to some of artwork appearing in the same issue of *Written Revolution*, asserting that it somehow “reinforced” the “intimidating message” of the article. Of course, the inclusion and placement of these images was not a choice of Prahlad’s alone -- it was a collaborative decision by the editors of this issue -- but he is being singled out for punishment.

The Committee referred to two images. The first was the annual PFLP [Land Day](#) poster from 2024. Some background helps here. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was founded in 1967, following the war during which Israel completed its occupation of historic Palestine. Between 1968 and 1993, it was part of the PLO. It was designated in 1997 by the US

as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PFLP has always had a strong cultural component, and scores of striking PFLP prints can be found on the web, many by the well-known Swiss artist Marc Rudin. The one appearing in WR is [here](#), for example.

The second image was not a PFLP production, contrary to the CoD's assertion, but rather [artwork](#) produced by American artist Mike Flugennock. Dating from 2014, it refers to three events from the summer of that year: the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the abduction of 43 students from a teachers' school in Mexico; and the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza during which almost 100,000 homes were destroyed and more than 2000 Palestinians killed. It supported the theme of the issue, bringing together diverse struggles for justice across the world.

Reactions to Iyengar's suspension in November 2024

Prahlad's expulsion followed – by almost a full year – an earlier “[interim suspension](#).” This mechanism enables the MIT administration to impose sanctions immediately, without due process or faculty involvement. It is an emergency measure, originally intended “to protect the intellectual integrity, health, safety, wellbeing, or educational or working experience of the campus community.” This was indeed the historical norm, but dozens of these peremptory measures were put in place between November 2023 and November 2024, invariably directed at students calling attention to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and to MIT's complicity with it but posing no clear and present danger to the MIT community. We refer to Marah Gubar's [article in the Faculty Newsletter](#) for an historical account of the unprecedented abuse of the interim suspension process by the MIT administration in its efforts to suppress pro-Palestinian speech. The effect of these “interim” measures was often dramatic. In Prahlad's case, it resulted in his being banned from campus and losing his housing and his NSF support.

Reaction to Prahlad's suspension – a sanction far less severe than his eventual expulsion – was immediate and widespread. The MIT chapter of AAUP wrote an [open letter](#) calling on MIT to reverse this disciplinary action as lacking due process and taking Prahlad's “nuanced and historically grounded arguments” out of context. Professors Alex Byrne and Brad Skow, cofounders of MIT Council on Academic Freedom, end [a piece](#) for the November/December 2024 issue of the MIT Faculty Newsletter as follows: “Opaque efforts to punish student publications for printing controversial essays undermine free expression, and the sanctions against Written Revolution should be lifted.”

Expressions of dismay were not restricted to MIT. The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association, MESA, wrote a [public letter](#) to President Kornbluth and others, criticizing the harshness of this suspension. In December, The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, FIRE, wrote a [letter](#) to President Kornbluth demanding explanations for this disciplinary action, calling attention to the fact that “there is no indication that the article did produce any lawless action.” The Scholars at Risk Network [wrote](#) about it with alarm. A [detailed article](#) about Prahlad's suspension appeared in *Inside Higher Education*.

Violations of MIT's policies and committee rulings

The *Written Revolution* article is clearly speech protected by the First Amendment. But it is also protected by MIT stated policy. In 2022, after much deliberation, the MIT faculty promulgated the [MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom](#). It contains the following language:

With a tradition of celebrating provocative thinking, controversial views, and nonconformity, MIT unequivocally endorses the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom.

We cannot prohibit speech that some experience as offensive or injurious. . . . Even robust disagreements shall not be liable to official censure or disciplinary action.

The “Ad Hoc Committee on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom” (CAFCE) was constituted with the mandate to translate this statement into actionable policy. This committee deliberated on the issues presented by *Written Revolution* 5. The [CAFCE website](#) contains a statement that expresses no opinion whatsoever about the article itself. It concludes, however, with this:

Regarding “On Pacifism,” CAFCE believes that it is not permissible for an MIT-recognized student organization to publish imagery linked to groups currently designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department in an MIT-affiliated publication in the context of advocacy.

The CAFCE statement regarding publication of this image is tendentious, and advocates an illegitimate restriction of speech on campus. Invoking this designation of PFLP suggests that the editors of *Written Revolution*, and MIT itself (based on the erroneous belief that the magazine is a recognized MIT organization), are at risk of being charged with providing “material support for a terrorist organization.” This statement confuses the magazine *Written Revolution* with a student group of the same name; the magazine has no official affiliation with MIT. The statement is a complete misrepresentation of the law and all existing applications of it. FIRE has an [excellent article](#) on this.

Two reports

On January 3, 2024, President Sally Kornbluth and Corporation Chair Mark Gorenberg requested that the Corporation Risk and Audit Committee (RAC) study the MIT disciplinary system, considering the volume of political speech cases it faced since the fall of 2023. The charge noted that “Community members have questioned ... the lengthy duration of the disciplinary process, its lack of transparency, and its rigid confidentiality rules, among other

issues.” As Prahlad’s case was to show, these are serious issues. The requested report appeared on October 11, and Faculty Chair Mary Fuller immediately convened [the Student Discipline Working Group](#), SDWG, charged with responding to this report and its proposals, naming Prof Andrew Whittle as chair. Following demands from the faculty, the charge of this faculty committee “was broadened to look at all aspects of the faculty-led student discipline system, including examining any potential bias.” The report was expected by the end of IAP 2025. A preliminary version was circulated on March 4, but the final report was only released in the middle of exam period in May 2025 and attracted little notice.

The SDWG report correctly pushes back on attempts embedded in the RAC proposals to increase the administrative control of the disciplinary process. But it largely failed to conduct a broader investigation of the student disciplinary system. At its core one finds a fundamental confusion, a version of the confusion of the notions of “safety” and “comfort.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires that MIT take measures to prevent “discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.” This is not the same as ensuring an environment free from challenges to one’s beliefs. This point is driven home in a [landmark decision](#) from October, 2025. In this decision the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit affirmed a lower court decision in favor of MIT in a suit alleging that MIT had insufficiently cracked down on discriminatory harassment by pro-Palestinian protesters. The Court affirmed that speech “cannot be restricted simply because it is upsetting or arouses contempt.”

But let us be clear: the pro-Palestinian protesters did in fact work to create a welcoming environment in the MIT encampment and at their rallies. [Videos](#) show their calm acceptance of counter-protesters harassing them. They actively engaged with anyone in the MIT community in discussion. No academic institution can mean by “a welcoming environment” one that is free of challenges to received opinions.

Both the RAC and the SDWG met several stakeholders, including “student leaders.” But neither committee heard directly from any student actually caught up in the tortuous disciplinary process nor from any faculty or others involved in the defense of these students. This avoidance of the evidence of the many failures in the system limits the reports’ utility in seeking constructive ways to make the system fairer.

The SDWG report ends by reassuring us that the existing disciplinary processes were “... ultimately effective in resolving cases in accordance with historical precedent and community values.” This statement is incorrect, as proven by the research of Professor Gubar.

Systemic failures of the disciplinary system

Actions of the MIT disciplinary system in response to political speech during the 2023-2025 period reveal serious flaws, and suggest the need for a careful study by the faculty. The

egregious response to Prahlad Iyengar's writing is in itself cause for concern, but the problems are much broader. The RAC and SDWG reports fail to address these problems.

The [Sixth Amendment](#) of the United States Constitution states: "In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, ...; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, ..."

While university disciplinary proceedings differ from courtroom trials, restrictions on rights demand justification. We note two dramatic restrictions on these rights in the existing CoD process. First, of course, the utter failure, in Prahlad's case, of a speedy resolution of his case. He was left in suspense for a full year, a critical time in a graduate student's life.

The existing CoD process also lacks the opportunity to confront witnesses bringing accusations. Many of the cases brought against students in the past two years have involved allegations of discrimination and harassment by community members. These accusations reflect personal reactions to a situation. It is possible to provide the accused student of this critical element of their defense without revealing the identity of the accuser. For instance questions can be submitted in writing prior to a hearing, or (as has been CoD practice in the past in sexual harassment cases) accuser and accused can be in separate rooms with only sound connected and the accused can address questions to the accuser.

The relationship between IDHR and the CoD needs to be clarified. IDHR was created to address Title IX issues, not to adjudicate questions of academic freedom. As the [IDHR website](#) makes clear, it is not designed to deal with cases of political speech, in which intellectual content plays a prominent role. A thorough study should determine whether, how, and when IDHR participation in CoD complaints is appropriate.

As it currently stands The IDHR process is grievously flawed. The interviews with students – allegedly designed to ensure that students know their rights and understand the system – were often experienced as hostile interrogations, characterized by leading questions and insulting invitations to disavow or justify actions. Students report that complaints made to the IDHR often do not receive any response at all, in direct contradiction to stated policy. This general problem became more acute in the fall of 2023 when large numbers of complaints of infractions against pro-Palestinian protesters in November 2023 were ignored. See [this report](#). As far as we know, not a single complaint arising from violence by counter-protesters resulted in CoD action. This serious bias was addressed by a [Faculty Newsletter editorial](#).

A further failure of the CoD process, especially pronounced in cases of political speech, is its narrow focus on "bad behavior," discounting the reality that the accused is a student and part of our community. This approach leaves no room for discussion of activities that provide a fuller picture of this individual. In Prahlad's case, for example, the CoD ignores his remarkable work with the MIT [SPOCs4Gaza](#) project, starting in the fall of 2024. This project, supported by MIT OpenLearning, has brought high quality educational opportunities to hundreds of students in the Gaza Strip or displaced from Gaza to Cairo. The courseware is accompanied by intensive support provided by scores of MIT students. It was Prahlad who saw the potential for this

transformative communal effort. He was lead TA in two of the courses and wrote numerous powerful letters of recommendation. He conducted a [series of interviews](#) with program participants, published in another issue of *Written Revolution*. There is no evidence suggesting that Prahad's work as a student was part of deliberations.

The process of identifying potential rules violators also needs reform. There is a repeated pattern of "rounding up the usual suspects." Often, a student was served notice of having violated some regulation, when in fact he or she had nothing to do with the alleged conduct. These students were often highly vulnerable to persecution because of visa issues or other constraints. Such casual accusations had a profound impact on these students and had the effect of warning them to "behave." Yet neither the SDWG Report nor the RAC Report suggests steps that would remedy this situation.

A call to action

While recognizing the usefulness of the SDWG and RAC reports, we see the need for a fresh, comprehensive, historically rooted, and broadly consultative task force on discipline. We call upon the Chair of the Faculty to convene a task force on campus discipline empowered with examining all aspects of the process. This review should include a study of IDHR and [OSCCS](#) procedures and how they have been used since October 2023. It should include an historical review of changes made to CoD process in the last decade. It should define a way to ensure confidentiality while protecting the right of the accused to question their accuser. Students and concerned faculty, e.g., advisors to students undergoing disciplinary procedures, should be interviewed to provide perspective on the actual impact of MIT disciplinary proceedings on them. The makeup and regulations of the Committee on Discipline should be examined. Moreover, the conditions under which it is legitimate to impose interim suspensions and who should be involved in considering such suspensions should be examined and clarified, with special attention to potential conflicts of interest. The role of historical precedents in judgments should be examined to prevent unfair determination of cases in a particular moment.

We also strongly endorse the urgent need, expressed by Professor Gubar in her Faculty Newsletter piece, for a faculty review of the narrowing of permissible modes of free expression embedded in the "time, place, and manner" restrictions added to the Rules and Regulations by the MIT administration over the summer of 2024 without any faculty input. Allowing the administration power to revise policy and impose discipline without oversight by faculty violates core principles of faculty governance.

The issues raised by Prahad Iyengar's expulsion and the disciplinary hearings of 2023-24 demand a broad review of the disciplinary process to ensure consistent, equal protection of all who come before the CoD.

