



PULTE INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN CENTRAL AMERICA in the Face of Closing Academic Spaces



OVERVIEW

MAURICIO'S STORY

Mauricio López,¹ a professor and social researcher at a CARA partner organization, knows well enough the severity of the repression that researchers, academic and civil society organizations are experiencing in Central America. An expert in social movements and democracy, Mauricio has suffered directly from government persecution and repression for the past four years: he has been requisitioned by the police, has had his research activities interrupted forcefully, and he and his collaborators have been surrounded by elite police forces and intimidated while conducting workshops. In addition to these direct attacks, the organization that Mauricio works for has been harassed by the country government, which has ignored police attacks against its installations, subjected it to unprecedented audits, stopped recognizing it as a higher education institution, limited its access to economic support, and denied access to the country to some of its highest authorities. The consequences of this institutional harassment have impacted Mauricio and his coworkers, who, despite the organization's goodwill, were asked to resign as professors, renouncing the stability that that title means, and are now hired on a limited-term contract with unsecured funds. Even in the face of these strenuous conditions, Mauricio has never filed a report for fear of further repression and reprisals against his family. Until recently, he has also not considered leaving his country.

Mauricio's story is heartbreaking, both because of the personal hardships he is enduring, and because the attacks he has suffered are intended to stop him from producing evidence that could help his country advance towards a better functioning democracy. Unfortunately, his is not an isolated case. In April 2022, the Central America Research Alliance (CARA) and the Research Technical Assistance Center (RTAC) held a webinar where researchers from Central America and Mexico shared their experiences working in contexts of closing academic freedom and provided viewers with a list of recommendations for how to cope and continue working in these conditions. During the webinar, presenters told participants how in the last three years they have been:

- asked to resign or removed from committees and other senior management positions,
- denied funding opportunities,
- harshly questioned by government officials,
- discredited and questioned publicly by government officials,
- harassed by the police while doing fieldwork,
- and even spied on and had their private conversations taped.

¹Names have been changed to protect the identity of our collaborators.

As alarming as these stories sound, they are in no way rare. The Scholars at Risk Academic (SAR) Freedom Monitoring Project indicates that in the year to August 2020, 40 attacks against professors, staff and students of higher education institutions were reported in 58 countries - 40 of them in Latin America and the Caribbean ([SAR 2020](#)). The number of reported attacks against Latin American scholars decreased to 15 in 2021 ([SAR 2021](#)), but the Global Public Policy Institute (GPI) rated three Latin American countries (Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela) among those with the worst levels of academic freedom -as measured by the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) - in 2020 and indicates that in Brazil, Nicaragua and Colombia AFI scores have deteriorated significantly in the last five years ([Kizenbalck et al 2021](#)). Furthermore, the experience of CARA members and other researchers in the region show that the situation has worsened and spread to other countries recently, and that many more incidents go unreported (see for example [Academics Under Threat](#)).

Attacks against researchers and research institutions have the objective of silencing, controlling, and discrediting the production of ideas that governments and other interest groups (such as authoritarians and military forces) find threatening ([SAR 2020](#)). Its occurrence is, in consequence, not only a violation of human rights, but also a direct threat to societal development and the adequate functioning of democracy ([Laakso 2022](#)). The intellectual and research activities that take place in universities, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and think tanks serve to foster critical thinking, form new, informed citizens, inform and monitor government activities, promote accountability, and promote democratic participation.

International interest in protecting academic freedom is growing, and with it the resources available to those who have been victims of repression. There are now several mechanisms to report threats, efforts to monitor the occurrence of violations, temporarily remove individuals from harm's way, and studies and indexes that compare the situation across the globe.² Many of these reports and networks provide recommendations and propose strategies to protect academic freedom, suggesting what should be done to decrease attacks and oppression against academics -in other words, they are advocacy tools for those who want to preserve academic freedom in a given country.³ There are also multiple networks and other initiatives that offer counseling, liaison with universities abroad, and economic support for those scholars who are seeking to leave their country. However, the support offered to academics and researchers who are victims of repression most commonly involves their moving to another country. As Mauricio's story demonstrates, not everyone wants to or has the option to leave.

² See for example [Free Universities: Putting the Academic Freedom Index Into Action \(Kizelbach K et al. 2021\)](#), [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law \(ICNL\) Closing Academic Space. State Restrictions on Higher Education Institutions \(Roberts Lyer K and Suba A., 2019\)](#), [Scholars at Risk Free to Think Reports \(2021\)](#), [1er Informe de la Red Académixs en Riesgo: Situación de académixs en riesgo en América Latina \(Lessa F, Figari Layús R, Tapias Torrado N, 2018\)](#), and the [Global Observatory on Academic Freedom \(Central European University Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education, nd\)](#).

³ Among these are [Scholars at risk](#), [Academicxs en riesgo](#), the [Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas](#), the [Philipp Schwartz-Initiative](#), the [International Institute for Education Scholar Rescue Fund IIE-SRF](#), and the [Council for at-Risk Academics - CARA](#).

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CONTEXT

Central American researchers - including those in academia and civil society organizations - who choose to stay in their country face multiple challenges specific to their context. These challenges are the product of the history of the region, and the role that academia and civil society organizations had during the conflicts, peace processes, and post-conflict periods. In Guatemala and El Salvador, some universities participated in monitoring of human-right violations during the civil war.⁴ However, the role of civil society organizations was extremely limited, as they were perceived as social movements supporting anti-government forces and their activities tended to be repressed.⁵ This perception further influenced their participation in the peace process, from which they were marginalized, especially in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Some authors consider the participation of civil society in the peace process in Guatemala a success, claiming that it was instrumental in the start of peace talks and the emergence of the political reform proposal, post-conflict justice and reconciliation,⁶ even when it did not have an important role in the implementation phase.⁷

The post-conflict period opened the door to the emergence of civil society actors - including organizations conducting independent research, interested in participating in the country reconstruction and the promotion of democracy.⁸ In Guatemala and El Salvador, civil society groups that had been active during the civil war organized formally and gained legal status, focusing their work on filling the gaps in the peace accords (such as transitional justice, human rights, and community reconstruction).⁹ In Nicaragua, the emergence of civil society and non-government organizations took longer and was rapidly politicized.¹⁰

Currently, the context in which research and evidence-based civil society organizations and universities operate within the region is mixed: The Economist (2022) classifies Costa Rica as a full democracy; Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as hybrid regimes; and Nicaragua as an authoritarian regime. To add to the attacks and suspicion of authoritarian governments, civil society organizations and some researchers in the region are now also seen with distrust by critics who accuse them of adapting their agendas to donor priorities, thereby undermining their own autonomy, impartiality, accountability and legitimacy (Belloni, 2008, p. 200, quoted in Nilsson).

⁴One example of this is the emergence of the [Human Rights Institute \(IDHUCA\)](#) at the Central America University in El Salvador amidst the armed conflict in 1985.

⁵Álvarez (2013), Booth and Bayer Richard (1996), and Booth and Bayer Richard (1998).

⁶Wanis-St.John and Kew (2008)

⁷Nilsson (2018)

⁸Nilsson (2018)

⁹Sprenkles (2005)

¹⁰MacDonald (1997)

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO PROTECT AND STRENGTHEN RESEARCH IN CLOSING SPACES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The following recommendations to continue conducting research in closing spaces in Central America were formulated by academic and policy-oriented researchers in the region:

INFORM YOURSELF

Seek the legal and administrative resources available for your (eventual) defense.¹¹

PRACTICE SELF-CARE

These are tiring and stressful times and they can be best faced in good mental and physical health. Rest, exercise (if possible), eat as best as you can, and keep your social and family life active.

CONNECT

Seek support to let others know what you are going through, formulate joint coping strategies, keep track of your whereabouts, and be informed of the options you have available. In addition to colleagues, support networks you may consider include human rights organizations, professional associations,¹² international networks supporting threatened scholars,¹³ and international universities. Be clear with your allies about how public or private you want to be during this time.

ESTABLISH SAFETY PROTOCOLS

Formulate, along with your family, friends, and coworkers, a protocol to identify situations in which you are particularly vulnerable or exposed (for example, while conducting fieldwork, participating in events or after doing an interview). This protocol should include, at least, a safe place you can go to in case of an emergency; the way your family, colleagues and other allies can contact you; emergency contacts (including national and international human rights organizations that work in your country); and a way to access your documentation (birth certificates, passports, academic credentials, etc.).

PRACTICE DIGITAL SECURITY

Observe best practices to protect your information and digital communication. Avoid using Whatsapp, Gmail and Outlook, which do not have encrypted security. Prioritize safer means of communication such as Protonmail and encrypted applications such as [Briar](#). Follow established guidelines to keep your computer safe (install firewalls, use an international VPN, update your software, protect your passwords, etc.). Make copies of your data in the cloud (interviews, databases, etc.).¹⁴

¹¹[Scholars at risk](#), [Academicxs en riesgo](#), and the [Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas](#) are useful for this.

¹²For example, the [Latin American Studies Association \(LASA\)](#) has expressed support to Latin American researches suffering from harassment.

¹³See [Scholars at risk](#), [Academicxs en riesgo](#), the [Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas](#), the [Philipp Schwartz-Initiative](#), the International Institute for Education [Scholar Rescue Fund IIE-SRF](#), and the [Council for at-Risk Academics - CARA](#).

¹⁴[Microsoft](#) provides clear, easy to follow guidelines to keep your home computer safe.



SEEK FUNDING THROUGH COLLABORATION

In addition to its academic advantages, collaborative, inter-institutional research can be a useful strategy to keep financially afloat in closing spaces. As official funding sources and international organizations' ability to operate and seek funds in some contexts shut down, collaborations (including participation in cross-country research proposals, inter-university projects, etc.) have proved a useful way to keep the research work in Central America.



BE PLURAL

When conducting research and disseminating research findings, consider different viewpoints, political stances, socioeconomic strata, and communication channels. Some CARA members have found that in closing spaces polarization hurts more than it benefits, so whenever possible, they try to participate in spaces that promote dialogue.



ADVOCATE

As security allows, continue to advocate using your research evidence. The region's unsolved democratic challenges make it vulnerable to autocratic regimes and the role of researchers is critical to fighting that authoritarianism. Commonly, autocratic politicians tend to hide information and dismantle data collection agencies. The evidence produced by CSOs is an unbiased way to fill this vacuum and advocate under an academic umbrella that is an important counterbalance to entrenched interests in the political sphere.

ABOUT THE CENTRAL AMERICA RESEARCH ALLIANCE

The Central American Research Alliance (CARA) is a network of diverse civil society organizations, universities, and think tanks producing action-oriented research in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. CARA aims to promote the translation of research findings into policies and programs that strengthen democratic institutions. Given the increasing fragility of democracy and closing democratic spaces in Central America, CARA seeks to promote and defend human rights and the rule of law, and to strengthen democratic ideas and values through regional collaboration and the reliable production and dissemination of information. The University of Notre Dame's Pulte Institute for Global Development is the founding secretariat and the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Sociales y Desarrollo (INCEDES) is a founding member of CARA.

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