



FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



COMMITTEE: HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Freedom of speech is addressed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stating that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. The principle behind this right is often objected and redefined, therefore it is important to differentiate hate speech from free speech in the laws of a country; this principle is very difficult as it can be very subjective and controversial. The term ‘expression’ can be defined as any lawful verbal or written means by which individuals communicate ideas to one another, including all forms of peaceful assembly, protests, speaking verbally, holding signs, circulating petitions and distributing written materials.

Freedom of expression is easily exploited by protestors where platforms for public speech are abused and inaccurate or entirely inappropriate information is communicated. This was seen when a man advocating for the psychological abuse of “curing homosexuality”, despite lacking any scientific affirmation, was given a platform on a British breakfast show to communicate these perverted ideas and his presence on air conferred him legitimacy he did not deserve.

This issue is very contentious due to recent restrictions, notably in universities, of controversial speakers being disallowed a public platform to address the students: after a recent study, almost 2/3 of universities and colleges were ‘severely’ restrictive of free speech. There have been many examples of this, such as Ben Shapiro who was banned from speaking at the California State University on Black Lives Matter and safe spaces due to claims that he was making an ‘attack’ and not a speech. Public institutions have been introducing ‘free speech zones’ which began during the Vietnam War era in order to safely contain anti-war protests.

Free speech has also been compromised around the world, notably after the Charlie Hebdo shootings that were described by David Cameron as “a challenge to the values of free speech and freedom of expression”. It is therefore important to consider how freedom of speech can be enforced and these rights of citizens can be protected against violence and terrorism. Alternatively, many nations do not practise absolute freedom of expression, due to resources expended on the removal of terrorist propaganda from media so the UN should consider to what extent freedom of speech should be limited.

Many countries have shown to exploit this right, where oppressive governments are restricting freedom of expression in the purest of cases. Russian authorities have intensified a crackdown on this, using invasive surveillance and denying a voice to anyone dissatisfied with the current situation of governance. This has also been prevalent in Myanmar where arrests have been made with prosecutions and long prison sentences. The UN therefore has an important role in ensuring freedom of speech is maintained in public institutions especially, where students should not fear persecution for expressing their opinion.

The right to freedom of expression is not a license to abuse, it is a responsibility given to every citizen.

To consider

- What legal rules must public institutions follow when considering free speech on campus?
- How can the difference between ‘controversial’ and ‘abusive’ free speech be defined?
- Where does your country stand on freedom of speech – does it have an oppressive government that is likely to regulate this right?