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# Censoring History Education Goes Hand in Hand with Democratic Backsliding

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by Julia Boechat Machado and Ruben Zeeman

Julia Boechat Machado is a PhD candidate in comparative history at the Central European University in Vienna.

*Ruben Zeeman is the co-editor of the [Network of Concerned Historians](#).*



*Students in Brasilia take the ENEM, the national high school exam of Brazil. Former President Jair Bolsonaro had attempted to revise the exam to promote a benign view of the country's period of military dictatorship.*

On January 12, 2023, the Department of Education in Florida labeled a draft Advanced Placement course on African American Studies “woke indoctrination” and rejected it for including readings from, among others, [historians Robin D.G. Kelly and Nell Irvin Painter](#). The Department's decision fit within the broader political vision of the governor (and former history teacher) Ron DeSantis, as well as [a nation-wide pattern of attempts to restrict the teaching of](#)

[gender and race in United States history](#). Florida's policies were quickly linked to similar ones in backsliding democracies in Europe, [such as Hungary, Poland and Turkey](#). [Data from the Network of Concerned Historians](#) for 2020–2023 suggest a correlation between attempts to censor history education and [the global backsliding of democracy](#), with India, Brazil and the Philippines being among the most grave examples.

Since 2014, when Narendra Modi was elected Prime Minister of India, Hindutva (or radical Hindu nationalism) has again become a cornerstone of internal politics, [exemplified through a surge in mob violence, discrimination against non-Hindu people](#), and a broad set of laws aimed at history education. Most frequently, these laws have targeted history textbooks. In March 2019, it was announced that chapters related to caste conflict would be scrapped from the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) history textbooks for class IX (the first year of high school). In July 2021 more than one hundred historians expressed concern over further changes to the NCERT history textbooks, and a year later acclaimed historian Irfan Habib criticized the textbooks for downscaling Muslim and Mughal history. Also in July 2021, the University Grants Commission released a new undergraduate history curriculum for centrally funded public universities that was widely criticized for its pro-Hindu bias, its downplaying of contributions to Indian history by Muslim and secular politicians, and the overrepresentation of Vedic and Hindu religious literature.

In addition to legislation, right-wing Hindutva groups exerted pressure on textbook publishers. In February 2020, Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS) demanded the immediate withdrawal of a class XI World History textbook in Goa, because it allegedly depicted the 17th century ruler Shivaji I, [often depicted as an important proto-nationalist Hindu leader](#), too critically. The HJS had previously demanded a ban on a book containing alleged derogatory remarks about Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966), and requested action be taken against the book's author and publisher.

Attempts to censor history education in India chiefly concern the inclusion of the contributions of people who do not fit an ethnocentric nationalist narrative of the past that serves as a foundational element of the government's political ideology. In that sense, these examples mirror most closely to what is happening in the United States.

Similarly, in Brazil former President Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly [attacked the way slavery was taught](#), for example by supporting the far-right thesis that, since Portuguese colonizers barely entered the interior of Africa, Africans themselves should bear the most blame for the enslavement and trading of African people. Additionally, the *Escola Sem Partido* [loosely, "school without politics"] movement has claimed to protect children against indoctrination in schools while targeting courses on Black history and culture and proposing laws that would, among other things, institute a complaint line for parents who felt that their children were being subjected to "Cultural Marxism," [encourage children to film their teachers](#), and reduce the time spent on teaching Black and Native Brazilian history and culture.

Moreover, in the run-up to the National High School Exam (*ENEM*) on 21 November 2021, Bolsonaro was criticized for asking Education Minister Milton Ribeiro to change wording to refer to the 1964 military coup as the "Revolution." The term aligned with the far-right revisionist history of the 1964–1985 military dictatorship. Since 2018, Bolsonaro had repeatedly criticized ENEM, leading to the disappearance of at least one question about the 1964 coup from the 2020 exam. His criticism was part of a pattern of interference and

intimidation, which included attempts by the director of the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research, the agency responsible for ENEM, reportedly demanding the exclusion of more than twenty exam questions, many of which dealt with Brazil's recent history. In November 2021 Bolsonaro stated that ENEM would start "looking more like the government," and that it would no longer have "absurd questions as in past exams" and would instead "start history from scratch."

In Brazil, censorship practices regarding history education have been concerned with both remote and recent history. The latter has been the focus of attempts to rewrite history in the Philippines, which have focused on the 1965–1986 rule of President Ferdinand Marcos, which was characterized by widespread human rights violations and corruption, especially during the period of martial law (1972–1986). In the lead-up to the May 9, 2022 presidential elections, campaigners for Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. proclaimed that the Marcos administration had brought glory and wealth, and that no human rights violations had taken place under martial law. Already on January 10, he had promised the revision of history textbooks.

Upon his election as President, Marcos Jr. appointed Sara Duterte as Minister of Education, increasing concerns that they would lead a campaign to rewrite history textbooks. During his presidency, Sara Duterte's father Rodrigo Duterte had expressed admiration for the Marcos regime, referring to those years as the "golden age" of Philippine history and calling on the public to "move on" rather than dwelling on the particulars of dictatorial rule. In July 2022, public historian Ambeth Ocampo of the Ateneo de Manila University, who had been a fierce critic of the younger Marcos's attempts at historical revisionism, was harassed online. A month later, the official Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF; Commission on Filipino Languages) tagged five books critical of the martial law period as "subversive" and their authors as "Communists," and banned them (though the order was rescinded after a strong pushback by the literary and academic community).

In [\*Responsible History\*](#), professor emeritus of Human Rights, Ethics and History Antoon De Baets has pointed out the intimate correlation between democracy and the freedom of historical research and teaching. The plausibility of this connection can be most clearly seen in its violations, as the four cases above forcefully demonstrate. More broadly, between 2020 and 2023, censorship of history education took place in at least fourteen countries. Of these, [twelve have seen a decline in their democratic status at some point during that period](#). This is not only the case with the censorship of history education, but also finds its expression, for example, in [state-led attempts to censor commemorative practices](#). The interference of states in research, teaching and commemoration of history is an important warning sign for its pending abuse, and for the erosion of democracy in general.

However, and more hopefully, state censorship can be met with resistance. In the United States, PEN America is at the forefront of opposing censorial practices, such as those in Florida. In Brazil, the National Association of Historians (ANPUH) protested repeatedly against Bolsonaro's attacks. In India, historians like Habib and the Haryana opposition leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda have criticized, in the words of the latter, the "politicization" of education and the "saffronization" of history. And in the Philippines, more than 1700 scholars and educators signed a manifesto calling for the defense of historical truth and academic freedom, pledging to "combat all attempts at historical revisionism," and vowing to protect historical, educational and cultural institutions and "preserve books, documents, records, artifacts, archives and other source materials pertaining to the martial law period." Their efforts should motivate us all to continue to step up and protect history from abuse by politicians.