

OP-ED

Algiers, 5 October 2026

The Shadow of Silence

An op-ed against the complicity of the scientific elite and for freedom in Algeria

Algeria, and its academic community in particular, is going through a dark period in its contemporary history. While academic freedoms are curtailed and lecturers, researchers and students are prosecuted or imprisoned for their opinions or their civic engagement, an institutional showcase continues to offer the regime an image of scientific modernity: the **High Council of the National Scientific Community Abroad**.

Such a body could have served as a valuable bridge between the scientific diaspora and the country's development needs. Yet in the face of the reality experienced by Algeria's academic world, the silence of its members raises profound questions. There is a striking contrast between the academic freedoms these researchers enjoy in the Western democracies where they live and their failure to take any public stand on violations of those very freedoms in Algeria.

In their meetings, ceremonies and official addresses, they favour consensual topics — technology transfer, the knowledge economy, digitalisation — while passing over in silence the prerequisite for any scientific activity: **the freedom to think, to inquire and to dissent**.

This situation raises a major ethical question:

“Can one promote scientific cooperation with a country while remaining silent when academics there are prosecuted for their opinions?”

Scientific prestige should not serve as an institutional banner at the cost of abandoning the principles on which academic freedom rests.

A university cannot flourish in an environment where a lecture, research in the humanities or public criticism may be perceived as a threat. The case of economist and professor **Djelloul Slama** — arrested in late January 2026 and placed in pre-trial detention after public, and indeed very measured, criticism of the costs and profitability of the **Gara Djebilet** mining project — illustrates the risks academics may face when they take part in public debate. More broadly, lecturers, students, researchers and citizens have been prosecuted or convicted for social media posts or for taking part in the Hirak. The cases of **Mira Moknache**, **Hakima Sbaili** and **Abderahim Guerna**, among others, illustrate this situation.

It is in this context that the responsibility of the High Council's members must be called into question.

THREE QUESTIONS ARISE

1. *Why has there been no strong public stand in support of academics who are prosecuted or detained?*
2. *How can one defend academic freedom at universities in Paris, Montreal or London while remaining silent about restrictions on that same freedom in Algeria?*
3. *How can silence be justified when citizens are deprived of their liberty for their opinions or their commitments?*

A researcher cannot indefinitely separate their knowledge from the responsibility that comes with it. Science cannot be reduced to a set of techniques serving development, detached from the freedoms that keep it alive.

THE OBJECTIONS

We know the objections. Some will say that science must stay out of politics. But **academic freedom is not one political opinion among others**: it is **the very condition of science**, the one these researchers defend without hesitation at their own universities in the West. Others will say that change is achieved more effectively from within than through public denunciation. Perhaps. But **influence from within is worth something only if it is actually exercised**. Silent engagement may be seen from the outside as an **endorsement**, or even as **a form of complicity**.

WHAT WE ASK

Herein lies the problem: if the members of a High Council attached to the Head of State cannot speak of academic freedom, and of freedoms in general, without fear, who can? The members of the High Council have what many academics who remained in the country lack: international standing, relative protection and direct access to the highest authorities of the State. This position confers on them a particular responsibility. We are not asking them to give up their mission, but to fulfil it fully. We ask them to raise, at their next meetings with the authorities, the situation of academics who are prosecuted — and sometimes suspended from their posts — for their opinions, beginning with that of **Djelloul Slama**. Finally, we ask them to express, individually or collectively, their solidarity with colleagues facing prosecution for their opinions, and not to let their prestige lend credibility to a discourse of modernity that ignores these realities.

What is at stake goes beyond the workings of an institution or the organisation of a few conferences. It concerns the responsibility of intellectuals in the face of their times.

There is still time to break the silence and to make academic freedom a principle inseparable from all scientific cooperation.