Mexican science board tells researchers: don't criticize

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Mexico's newly politicized government science board has reportedly ordered researchers not to publicly criticize the body, and said they have to clear any public comments through its press office.

The council was already under fire after it helped prosecutors try to lock up 31 academics in a maximum security prison usually reserved for drug lords.

Local media reported Friday that the National Council on Science and Technology has issued a new set of rules telling employees and outside researchers "to avoid negative opinions or commentaries" about the body.

It was unclear what the proposed punishment for such offenses would be, but they apparently could be brought before disciplinary proceedings. The Council did not publicly confirm the existence of the new rules, a copy of which was published by the newspaper El Universal.

But the union representing workers at the Council confirmed the new rules had been sent out on Sept. 30.

Protests were heard from researchers in Mexico and abroad last month after prosecutors accused the academics and members of a scientific advisory board of money laundering, organized crime and embezzlement, for allegedly spending too much money. A judge refused to issue arrest warrants in the case.

Members of the advisory board, created to promote scientific discussion, said the $2.5 million was not misspent and that it operated under the council's own rules for more than 15 years. The idea that excessive spending was the main issue was further placed in doubt Friday, when the council released a slick, apparently costly five-minute video defending itself.

Critics say the strange moves by supporters of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador may threaten academic freedom.

Part of the problem is that the current director of the government science board, María Álvarez-Buylla, appears to be trying to inject the politics of López Obrador's administration—which he calls "the fourth transformation"—into science.

In a letter reportedly accompanying the new rules, Álvarez-Buylla told council members and researchers that employees "should not only be outstanding professionals, but also should have a commitment to society, the environment, human rights, and above all the public ethics promoted by the Fourth Transformation."

In the past, she has criticized some researchers for presenting reports in English, despite the fact that is the common language in some technical fields, saying they should speak in Spanish. She criticizes "western science" and "techno-science that makes knowledge merchandise," and has called for "collective processes of generating knowledge" more closely tied to social concerns.

"Western science has produced the most splashy, and perhaps most useless advances, like reaching the Moon," Álvarez-Buylla said in 2020.

It doesn't help that Mexico's attorney general, Alejandro Gertz Manero, decided to bring the most serious possible charges—money laundering,

organized crime and embezzlement—against people who had no criminal records and are respected in their professions, and sought to put them in the country's most-feared prison, which is normally used to house drug lords.

Gertz Manero's office defended the charges, saying the academics "used federal funds meant for scientific research on a private organization, buying furniture, vehicles, properties, and paying salaries and other services."

The office said it would re-file the charges.

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