

Opinion: The Uyghur genocide university divestment movement is here

China's human rights abuses have been getting a lot of attention in the run-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics in February. The disappearance and apparently staged re-appearance of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai in creepy videos posted online have shocked millions. The Chinese government will silence anyone who dares speak up against the behavior of the ruling Communist Party — including its ongoing genocide campaign against Uyghur Muslims.

But that attention hasn't resulted in much concrete action. The International Olympic Committee, rather than stand up for human rights, has helped the Chinese authorities to push their propaganda. The Biden administration is planning a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics, which is better than doing nothing, but not by much. Congress won't even pass the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which several U.S. corporations had the gall to lobby against.

After the Olympics, when the cameras have turned away, Beijing will have one less reason to fear the scorn of the international community. But behind the scenes, the infrastructure for a long-term divestment movement is being built by the one group of Americans with no diplomatic or financial conflicts of interest: college students. There's a historical precedent that shows why it just might work.

In 1977, a group of students at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., successfully persuaded the school's board of trustees to divest all holdings of companies that did business in South Africa in order to protest Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and the policy of apartheid. Although the small school removed just \$39,000 in stocks, by 1988, 154 more colleges had followed suit. The divestment movement became a key plank in the anti-apartheid movement, which helped speed the fall of that oppressive system.

In 2021, students in universities across the country are organizing to protest China's ongoing genocide against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., may have just scored the movement's first big success. On Oct. 18, the student government association unanimously passed a resolution calling on the university to divest any and all of its financial holdings connected to Xinjiang atrocities. In response, university officials told student leadership, and confirmed to me, they have commissioned an independent audit of endowment holdings for anything related to mass internment, forced labor, mass surveillance or other crimes committed against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China.

“All universities should have a commitment to avoid being complicit in mass atrocities,” student senator Gerald Sharpe, who introduced the resolution, told me. “This method works. This is just the beginning.”

Sharpe worked on the resolution and the campaign with members of the Athenai Institute, a bipartisan, student-run nonprofit organization founded at Catholic, which has been working to highlight Chinese Communist Party influence on U.S. campuses. The student government and Athenai are now planning to export this model to universities throughout the country. Catholic was a good candidate for divestment because it already has a screening process to prevent investments that run afoul of the institution’s values. But every university should follow suit, Sharpe said.

“I see this as non-negotiable for universities, particularly Catholic ones, whose mission is to explicitly uphold what China explicitly violates: human rights and human dignity,” he told me.

Rory O’Connor, an Athenai co-founder who helped draft the resolution, told me the campaign began with conversations among regular students in dorm rooms, hallways and cafeterias, all of whom became more and more shocked by the Chinese government’s actions. The university’s agreement to audit its endowments is positive, he said, but what it ultimately does with results remains to be seen.

“This is the first university in the United States to commit to divesting from companies that are complicit in the genocide,” said O’Connor. “We’re definitely going to hold them to it.” The Catholic University’s example sets a precedent that can be used to push for divestment in schools across the country and the world, said John Metz, Athenai’s executive director. Importantly, the resolution specifically calls out Wall Street index funds, which routinely funnel money from institutional investors — such as university endowments — into Chinese companies, including many that are connected to human rights abuses.

“This is not just about how colleges and universities in this country relate to China, it’s also about how investors with hundreds of billions in managed funds relate to China,” he said. The student anti-genocide movement is already working hand in hand with other human rights groups, including the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Students for a Free Tibet, Keep Taiwan Free and many more. The efforts to raise awareness of the Chinese government’s various atrocities are getting increasingly organized.

The students are taking the lead because our political and business class have abdicated responsibility for stopping the Chinese government’s human rights abuses. This next generation of activists is determined to force all of us to decide if we want to be complicit in a genocide or not. The movement’s success may be the Uyghurs’ only hope.