

Student body president not censured for conference trip

By Miki Shine, CO-NEWS EDITOR - On April 13, 2016



The air was full of anxiety and energy as a spirited debate concerning the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference from March 2015 overwhelmed the room.

With the just over three weeks left during spring semester and in this term of Student Government (SG), Sen. Muhammad Imam and Sen. Rahma Elmohd introduced a censure resolution at Tuesday's Senate meeting against current student body president Andy Rodriguez for malfeasance, or wrongdoing. The resolution accused Rodriguez of attending the AIPAC conference after accepting a fully funded trip from AIPAC that he was only offered because of his position as student body president-elect at the time.

The resolution claimed Rodriguez violated SG statutes by attending the conference, as he took advantage of the official capacity of his office by accepting money for the trip, which placed him in conflict with the public interests of the student body.

"They (AIPAC) invite student body presidents so that they can say in front of all the congressmen and all the house representatives and all the senators that we've invited student body presidents. These are campus delegates," Imam said. "Rodriguez tokenized our student government to say that our student government supports the American-Israeli relationship."

Imam said this is not an issue isolated at USF, but that student body presidents across the nation accept these trips despite saying student governments shouldn't be involved in international politics. He also equated these trips to bribes from AIPAC for those student body presidents to stand against policies such as divestment.

He also told the Senate he warned Rodriguez that "(these) are the kinds of bribes that they offer you" before Rodriguez entered office, and accused him of being "brainwashed."

"AIPAC offers personal gifts to over 300 student body presidents in order to gain disproportionate access," the memorandum of censure attached to the resolution said. "AIPAC is not a student organization. AIPAC is not in any way part of USF but [is] trying to impact USF policies. Rodriguez's actions have led to illegal, undue and unfair influence of a foreign government in our university's policies and politics."

Rodriguez admitted to attending the conference and accepting the trip. However, he said he was not there in official SG capacity, but attended out of personal interest. He stated the resolution was a waste of his and the Senate's time for something that is nothing more than a political ploy.

"We work hard every single day in (SG) to make the student experience better. Mike and I ran on a platform that we felt would make the student experience better," Rodriguez said. "This has absolutely nothing to do with that."

"I attended the conference, yes. I went for my knowledge. I wanted to know more about the issue. While I was there, I was not clocked in. I was on vacation."

Rodriguez called the resolution and the common use of processes within SG to push a political agenda "disgusting."

He told the Senate not to pass the resolution just to make a point, which he felt it was trying to do.

He also said that if he was getting censured because the Senate felt like he wasn't doing his job, then it would be a different matter. He encouraged the Senate to then pass the resolution if it believed he hasn't been.

"Isn't that just part of his job?" Sen. Melisa Dincer said during discussion. "He gets offered these personal privileges, I guess, but that's just the nature of his job title ... He went on a trip, I don't see how this relates the work we're doing here in Senate."

After the brief discussion period, the Senate decided to vote on the resolution. It failed with a vote of 24-10 with applause from the Senate.

"If at any point during this year (SG) has looked bad, it's for stuff like this," Rodriguez said. "For people using processes within (SG) to push some sort of point."