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Iran's assault on academic freedom

By Ivan Sascha Sheehan, contributor



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In the years following the 1979 revolution in Iran, hundreds of students and faculty were killed, victims of a brutal campaign to silence dissent, stifle academic freedom and impose uniformity of thought. Thousands of other students and faculty suffered brutality, torture and detention for "propaganda against the system," "participating in illegal gatherings" or "insulting" government officials, i.e., exercising rights guaranteed under international law to freedom of speech, freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Tens of thousands more had their university educations or careers upended and were forced into exile. This assault on academic freedom did not stop in the 1980s, but has instead become a principal feature of the contemporary Iranian regime.

While some thought that the 2013 election of a "moderate," Hassan Rouhani, as president would bring about change in the academy, a loosening of restrictions did not materialize. Amnesty International reported in 2014 that students and academics were still being routinely harassed, detained and even barred from studying or teaching because of their views or beliefs. Since this time, surges in "Islamicization" of higher education have continued. Today, restrictions in access to university education — particularly for women and minorities — are on the rise.

The 1979 revolution that toppled Iran's monarch, Shah Pahlavi, and established the Islamic Republic of Iran began in part with the writing of "open letters" to the shah. These letters asked for elemental rights for freedom of speech and association guaranteed under Iran's 1906 constitution and the Universal Declaration of Rights. In particular, the National Organization of Iranian Academics "campaign[ed] for academic freedom and democratic procedures in education and beyond."

Ironically, while it was in Iranian universities that the central "texts" of the revolution were written and circulated and these institutions became the "spaces" where open-ended critical discourse was developing, the universities would become the first target of attack after the shah was ousted and Ayatollah Khomeini took the reins of power in Tehran. Within short order, the concept of the state was reinvented, not as students of the revolution had imagined it in terms of freedom of expression and democratic procedures, but as a religious state controlled by a clerical elite.

By the early 1980s, universities would be shut down for as long as three years, books were banned, courses deleted and hundreds of professors expelled as the new regime sought to bring universities in line with Islamic dogma and purge the academy of all Western influences, including the very students and faculty who advocated for the revolution in the first place.

As of this writing, these assaults on academic freedom have not ceased. In the aftermath of the protests that followed the disputed 2009 election alone, hundreds of students were rounded up, beaten and detained, and some were tortured. Two years later, in the "Joint Statement on the Right to Education and Academic Freedom in Iran," 17 human rights organizations noted the "alarming" state of academic freedom in the Islamic Republic, which "allow[s] authorities arbitrarily to expel and suspend students, and fire graduate instructors on the basis of their political views or activities."

According to this document, "Over six hundred students, as well as some university lecturers, have been arrested since 2009, many of whom have subsequently been imprisoned, and hundreds deprived of education, as a result of their political activities." Some are still in jail for exercising freedom of expression and, as recently as May 2015, an Iranian university professor was re-sentenced to death for calling for freedom of speech.

The experiences of students and academics like these are a part of global but rarely acknowledged problem: the silencing of students and scholars in authoritarian and near-authoritarian states around the world. The denial of such liberties poses a significant global challenge to the realization of democracy when dissenting voices are stifled.

In totalitarian societies, power is maintained in part by the control of memory and reinvention of the past. While all societies promote a collective history, totalitarian states tend to advocate a single authorized version. In contemporary Iran, revolutionary ideology and memory itself has been reconstructed to erase any trace of the role of democratic-leaning students and academics in creating an official narrative that implies that the revolution was not about freedom or rights but only about Islamic identity. Recovering silenced accounts of the past has the potential to challenge dominant narratives and become a tool for advocates for change.

Academic freedom is the belief that freedom of inquiry by students and faculty is essential to the mission of universities and that scholars should have the freedom to teach or communicate ideas or facts without being targeted with repression, job loss or imprisonment. While the concept has a long history, dating back at least to the Enlightenment in Europe, it has been most clearly formulated in response to encroachments.

This was certainly the case in 1915, when in reaction to the firing of professors who supported unions, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) developed a "Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom" arguing that the freedom professors need in their teaching, research and "extramural" speech are not matters of personal privilege but of broad public interest. It was also the case in the 1930s when scientific research was brought under strict government control in the Soviet Union and Michael Polanyi wrote a series of papers arguing that freedom to pursue science for its own sake, without government control, was a fundamental necessity for the production of knowledge.

As the world pays tribute to the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, it is important for U.S. officials to champion the freedom to think, write and teach freely and consider all of the implications this has for the development of tolerant and pluralistic societies. By supporting academic freedom as a universal commitment, U.S. leaders can make a small contribution toward a more democratic discourse in the Middle East and uphold a basic value too often taken for granted in the West.

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