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Academic (Un)freedom in Iran after 1979: (Transnational) State Suppression of Academia and Risks for (Diasporic) Academics

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Abstract

This article explores the interventions by the Iranian regime in knowledge production, academic freedom, and the lives of academics since 1979, focusing on academics in Iranian universities and in the Iranian diaspora. The article combines an analysis of political and policy shifts with personal reflections from both my academic journey in Iran and my experience as a diasporic academic in Europe. I investigate the suppression of academic freedom in Iran, starting with the "Cultural Revolution" that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution and then moving on to subsequent state interventions in universities. The article examines the various methods used to restrict academic freedom, including both implicit and explicit surveillance, censorship, structural regulation of academic content and spaces, hiring practices, and the enforcement of self-regulation and self-censorship, among other tactics. The article concludes by identifying some areas where the state has struggled to enforce or sustain its own policies, while also highlighting the resilience displayed by the Iranian academic community in spite of rampant suppression and restrictions on academic freedom.

This article explores the intricate ways the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has meddled with the (re)production of knowledge and academic freedom, as well as the practices and lives of academics, since the 1979 Revolution. I will address political and policy approaches and also draw on my own academic journey in Iran and Europe. This includes my tenure as lecturer at various universities across Iran between 2009 and 2015 and my position as a researcher and lecturer working on Iranian politics after 2015 in a number of European institutions, including my current home institution, the University of Amsterdam. I acknowledge that my dual Iranian-European nationality is a privilege that shields me from the stresses of visa renewals and deportation risks that other scholars from the Global South, and especially scholars with Iranian nationality, have to deal with (see testimonials in Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023). My dual nationality empowers me to speak up about my birth country but also limits my access to it (I have elsewhere explained the way dual Iranian-European nationality, in spite of its many advantages, makes one precarious as well; see Rahbari 2022a).

In Iran, the interplay between state mechanisms of control and patriarchy manifests in both overt and sometimes transparent actions, as well as internalized forms of social control and self-regulation. My analysis in this article is influenced by feminist scholarship on the notion of academic freedom (Petö 2020; Dea 2021; Sultana 2018) as well as the Foucauldian perspective on the mechanisms of power and control (Foucault 2019, 2009). I will use this dual lens of feminist theory and Foucauldian analysis to dissect the multifaceted nature of power dynamics at work within Iranian universities, providing an understanding of its impact on knowledge production and on academics' lives, as individuals and as academics. While not exhaustively covering all the areas of academic freedom currently under assault, my goal is to spotlight key areas under state scrutiny and the justification for such suppression. The article concludes by identifying some areas where the state has struggled to enforce or sustain its own policies, highlighting the resilience displayed by Iranian academics.

Suppression of Academic Freedom after 1979

Early Interventions and the Cultural Revolution

Delving into the impact of the IRI's authoritarianism on knowledge production and academic life in Iran necessitates a reflection on the regime's Cultural Revolution (1980–83), during which universities were shut by the new regime in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. The regime and its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, demanded that the atmosphere of Iran's universities be Islamized (Golkar 2012). The new state, therefore, closed all universities and colleges in the summer of 1980 to make sure that dissidents were expelled, syllabi were purged, educational material was fully revised, spaces were regulated, and future higher education corresponded to Islamic ideology (that is, the version of Islam that the new regime propagated; see Sobhe 1982; and Golkar 2012). This era was characterized by a concerted effort to erase what was perceived as Western and non-Islamic influences from the academic landscape of Iran and realign educational institutions with a revolutionary and politically charged version of Islam espoused by the IRI.

The Cultural Revolution entailed not only interventions in content and study material—questioning the legitimacy of "Western" knowledge and establishing a new approach to determining which types of knowledge should be produced in academic spaces—but also a serious intervention in the organization of spaces and bodies. Following the state's implementation of compulsory veiling and spatial segregation in many public spaces across the country (Rahbari 2021), the segregation of male and female students in classrooms and the purging of curricula were pursued in parallel (Razavi 2009). Disciplinary committees were also put in place to sanction students who failed to follow the dress code—including wearing the hijab—or exhibited other "un-Islamic" behavior (Golkar 2012).

The authoritarian grip on academia was further tightened through the establishment of offices within universities for state entities, among them the Basij, a conservative paramilitary

organization founded in 1979 that recruited conservative religious and politically loyalist individuals (Basij has been sanctioned by the European Union for serious human rights violations; see European Council 2023). Another entity installed later in 1993 in all universities is the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representative in Universities. The latter wields significant influence over university administration, including deans and rectors, while Basij operates as a well-funded student organization that organizes propaganda events and partakes in surveilling and reporting nonconformist behavior by fellow students and staff. The presence of student "spies" on campuses, tasked by such entities with monitoring and reporting back to them, has contributed to the restriction of academic freedom and repression, leading to the frequent expulsion of students and staff for behaviors deemed unruly, antiregime, and un-Islamic.

Mounting Oppression inside Iran

After their reopening following the Cultural Revolution, universities remained under constant scrutiny and political and cultural contention. Having already witnessed a systematic purge, they were subjected to new hiring policies for academics in the following decades (Golkar 2012). Candidates were required not only to demonstrate their professional qualifications but also to pass through a rigorous inquisition and investigation process. This inquisition aimed to ascertain the depth of one's adherence to Islam and loyalty to the regime (Golkar 2012) through questions about religious beliefs and personal and political practices. In an inquisition process to receive a permanent contract at a public university in 2014, I was asked to disclose whom I voted for in the presidential elections (information that is supposed to be private). In another inquisition process to receive a permanent contract at a public university in the field of anthropology in 2015, I was asked by a member of the committee to recite Quranic verses. In both cases, the questions regarding my political and religious beliefs were asked in the second step of the hiring process, widely known as the Aghidati interview in Persian, translatable as "ideological selection," which follows the successful completion of the "scientific selection."

The IRI's purging effort permeated the very structure of academic disciplines. This meant not always a complete elimination of a discipline but rather a rebranding of its content. For instance, in 2001, the Department of Social Sciences at Tehran University offered a master's and later a doctoral degree in "women's studies." This program was later labeled un-Islamic. It was argued that "the field of women's studies is in serious conflict with Islam in the way it is taught in universities around the world" and in need of change (Balatarin 2012). The discipline has since been divided into two narrower fields: "the rights of women in Islam" and "women and family." Such restructurings are reflective of the broader "Islamization" of education, a deliberate and continuous strategy pursued in the wake of the 1979 Revolution's educational reforms.

Additionally, the implementation of gender quotas has emerged as a mechanism to manipulate admission into various academic fields, effectively segregating disciplines by gender. The quota was implemented to curb women's access to higher education. It was argued that the

higher percentage of women in the universities would shift power relations between men and women in the labor market and the family in an "un-Islamic" direction (Hoodfar and Sadr 2010). Gender quotas and sexism in the academy have together contributed to the systematic elimination of women from certain fields and their overall access to positions of power and authority at the university.

The regime's control extends to the realm of research, with outright prohibitions on certain topics. Studies of LGBTQI issues are banned, and research on gender issues is heavily monitored, with the risk of academic censure or dismissal for crossing undefined boundaries. In 2015, the journal *Women of Today*, one of the very few outlets for women's studies scholarship in Iran, was suspended following the publication of an article on nonmarital cohabitation (BBC 2015). The article studied the phenomenon of "white marriage" in Iran (that is, illegally cohabiting with a partner of the opposite sex to whom one is not married; see Golestaneh 2022). The journal was accused of promoting "white marriage" simply because it published the study. Such incidents are not isolated and, together with self-censorship, highlight the precarious nature of academic freedom in Iran.

Diaspora, Surveillance, and Transnational Suppression

Scholars of Iran, particularly those delving into topics deemed "sensitive" by the Iranian regime, are somewhat accustomed to various forms of intimidation and surveillance. The Iranian regime's surveillance ranges from practices within Iran to transnational methods of control and intimidation in the diaspora, including social media monitoring and harassment, as well as photographing, filming, or monitoring academics publicly or privately (Rahbari 2024). This constant surveillance of academics—although always present—has been exacerbated since the Woman, Life, Freedom antiregime uprising in Iran broke out in 2022. The new wave of surveillance disproportionately affects diasporic women scholars, as they constitute the majority of researchers studying gender politics and women's rights in Iran in relation to the recent uprising.

The IRI exerts significant transnational repression on Iranian academics in the diaspora (Moss 2016). Yet, for many scholars, departure and seeking a home institution outside Iran is the only viable option, even though this move can become a one-way journey, as it has been for me. Engagement with sensitive topics that displease the Iranian government makes return not just impractical but perilous, especially for those holding dual Iranian-European nationality, who find themselves vulnerable to being used as pawns in geopolitical negotiations (Rahbari 2022b, 2022a). This is not to claim that academic freedom is perfectly respected and upheld in the Global North. Even though the European academy does not face the same degree of constraint, it is not devoid of biases (for literature that discusses the nuances of academic freedom in the Global North, see Vatansever and Kölemen 2022, Karran 2007, and Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). However, undemocratic and authoritarian countries such as Iran pose specific threats to academic freedom

and repercussions for academics (for example, serious risks to life and livelihood, imprisonment, and displacement).

State Failure, Academic Resilience, and Survival

For several reasons, notably the sharp rise in the number of university students in the early 1990s and the lack of resources, the state became less able to vigorously pursue the policies it had initially promised to implement during the Cultural Revolution (Razavi 2009). Universities also failed to maintain gender segregation as the number of female students increased steadily (Golkar 2012), and the student body ignored or did not observe the imposed segregation regimes. As a result of this failure to maintain full control over university spaces, gender segregation was gradually abandoned—with repeated failed attempts to revive it—some disciplines were reopened to female students, and university atmospheres became slightly more relaxed (Mojab 2004; Rezai-Rashti 2013), giving students an opportunity to form activist spaces. Some universities resorted to leniency toward student behavior while maintaining the appearance of following gender segregation.

In spite of the existing restrictions to academic freedom, research on many "sensitive" topics, such as gender, feminism, and women's rights, are actively pursued across various domains in Iran, albeit with certain unspoken boundaries. For instance, while restrictions on academic freedom do not allow scholars to criticize the state's role in legitimizing violence against women, sociological studies on the correlation of violence against women and individual-familial factors—drug use, level of religiosity, divorce, and psychological problems—have thrived (Rahbari 2023). These studies sometimes seemingly ignore the absence of legal-structural protections for women victims and the legal and societal power imbalances favoring men, but they indirectly and implicitly shed light on how structures lead to women's vulnerability in the household. Such strategies of tacit critique are used across disciplines and are often tolerated.

In this essay, I have focused on some direct mechanisms of state control and the extent to which they limit academic freedom in Iran, yet it is crucial to recognize that power also permeates interpersonal relationships and manifests in unofficial capacities. The concept of governmentality, as introduced by Foucault (2009), illustrates how power operates not just through overt coercion but also through subtler means of self-regulation and self-censorship. An atmosphere saturated with distrust, a direct consequence of the state's efforts, has had great implications for personal and professional relationships. Colleagues, students, and university staff become potential threats in a competitive academic environment. The pervasive sense of surveillance prompts some individuals to self-regulate, avoiding any actions that might draw unwanted attention. Others strategically employ conservative political performance in order to achieve positions of power (Mohammadzadeh, Shirbagi, and Bolandhematan 2021). The consequences of academic restrictions in Iran transcend the impact on academic practices, diversity of content and scholarship, and social spheres; they are fundamentally existential. The

government's power to terminate an academic's career or a student's right to study imposes a significant burden on individuals that compels them to operate within the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable in an effort to protect their livelihoods.

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