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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

Iran: Student protests, including treatment of protestors by authorities (2013-January 2017) [IRN105716.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

A 2014 report by Amnesty International (AI) states that

[a]t various periods throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, students, teachers and academics have been among those particularly targeted by the Ministry of Intelligence and other security authorities for expressing dissent or leading protests. Often, they have been arrested and detained in harsh conditions, tortured or subjected to other forms of ill-treatment, and tried before grossly unfair Revolutionary Courts on vaguely-drawn charges, and convicted and sentenced to prison terms and, in some case, flogging. (AI June 2014, 44)

However, in a 2014 report, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) [1] reports that "[f]ollowing Hassan Rouhani's election as president [on 14 June 2013], some measures against students were eased" (GCPEA 2014). According to a BBC article from October 2014, the Iranian President "has called for greater academic freedom in Iran's universities," while speaking to students at Tehran University (BBC 7 Oct. 2014).

A September 2013 article from University World News, an international email-newspaper and website covering developments in the field of higher education (University World News n.d.), quotes Tehran-based Mehr news agency as reporting that the Ministry of Science's interim head had "insisted" that the "ministry would no longer target students for their political or personal beliefs, ... that there would be no more 'starred' students" [2] and that "a special committee" had been established in the ministry to review the cases of "'starred' and excluded" students (ibid. 19 Sept. 2013). The same source reports that in September 2013, the Ministry of Science announced that students who faced restrictions from universities for their political activism were allowed to resume their studies, although this pertained only to students who faced restrictions since 2011 (ibid.).

According to AI, in August 2013 the Ministry of Science stated that "126 formerly banned students had been allowed to resume their studies" (AI June 2014, 9). Further, according to a 2014 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,

[m]ore than 10 student groups (*anjoman*) in various universities whose activities were previously suspended were permitted to resume operations during the past year. At least 10 additional student groups also received permission to function for the first time. (UN 27 Aug. 2014, para. 35)

However, the 2014 AI report indicates that "there appears to have been no change" for hundreds of banned students and "they remain barred from university either because of their peaceful exercise of freedom of expression or the rights to peaceful assembly and association" (AI June 2014, 9). The same source indicates that of the university academics arrested after the 2009 elections "for engaging in peaceful protests or exercising their right to freedom of expression, ... many were still imprisoned as of March 2014" (ibid., 64). In a 2014 press release, AI further reports that there have been "some fresh arrests [of students] since President Hassan Rouhani's election" (AI 2 June 2014).

Human Rights Watch states that of the students and professors suspended for their political activities from 2005 to 2012, "dozens remained unable to continue their studies or teach" (Human Rights Watch Mar. 2014). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Founder and Executive Director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) [3] similarly stated that "although some 'starred students' have been able to resume their studies since Rouhani's election, most have not" (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016). Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, an affiliate of the Graduate Faculty of Political Science at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa who has researched Iranian politics, indicated that, for the period of 2013 until December 2016,

[t]here are no reports of the common practice during Ahmadinejad's presidency of giving student activists 'stars' and then using 'star branding' to prevent them from pursuing their education. However, at least one student who was given a star during Ahmadinejad's presidency has stated that her status has not changed since 2013 and she is still prevented from entering the university. In her public letter to President Rouhani, she states that there are still some other students in a similar position. (Affiliate 9 Dec. 2016)

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2016* report states that

[a]cademic freedom remains limited in Iran, despite attempts by Rouhani's government to ease the harsh repression universities have experienced since 2009. In the past two years, about a dozen student associations that had been suspended under the previous administration were allowed to renew their work. Several new student groups also received permits to operate. (2016, 5)

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015* states that

[t]he government significantly restricted academic freedom and the independence of higher education institutions. Authorities systematically targeted university campuses to suppress social and political activism by prohibiting independent student organizations, imprisoning student activists, removing faculty, preventing students from enrolling or continuing their education based on their political or religious affiliation or activism, and restricting social sciences and humanities curricula... Although universities reportedly re-admitted a number of students previously expelled under a "star" system, ... other "starred" students reported that government authorities still prevented their university enrollment because of their political activities. (US 13 Apr. 2016, 21)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher at York University, Toronto, who has researched Iranian politics, indicated that

[s]tudent associations have not reorganized themselves as before. However, the punitive power of disciplinary institutions supervising student life is weakened. This includes the Discipline Committees, assigned by Ministry of Higher Education and responsible for penalizing students who commit administrative, political, and moral violations. They have abandoned their harsh policies of suspending and purging dissident and protesting students. The heads of universities obtained more power over three other institutions, including *Harasat* (affiliated to the Ministry of Intelligence), Office of the Supreme Leader Representative at universities, and Student *Basij* [4] (student members of the Revolutionary Corps). The power of the last two institutions remains enormous and they play a key role in keeping the student body silent and suppressed (Researcher 3 Jan. 2017).

2. Legislation

The US *Country Reports 2015* states that the government restricted the freedom of assembly and prevented "anything it considered as antiregime protests," including student meetings and protests (US 13 Apr. 2016, 23).

The 2014 AI report indicates that

The Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of association in Article 26 but stipulates that associations "must not violate the criteria of Islam or the basis of the Islamic Republic", while

freedom of peaceful assembly is guaranteed under Article 27 so long as this is not "detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam". The main law restricting freedom of association and the right to assembly is the Law on Political Parties, Societies, Political and Guild Associations, and Islamic or Recognized Minority Religious Associations. Article 10 of this law requires the licensing of all organizations and associations by an official commission created under the law, and that all demonstrations and other public assemblies are authorized in advance by the authorities. (AI June 2014, 84)

The researcher indicated that

[a]ccording to the Cultural Revolution Law, students can assemble as [a] political body only in associations with an "Islamic" suffix. While the Islamic student associations remain the main form of organization for collective activity in recent years, the Rouhani government has encouraged the activities of Student Councils which are defined to deal with students' welfare issues and Students' Cultural Clubs, which embed the students' cultural activities. The Islamic Student Associations, the widespread unitary reformist bodies of strong mobilizing power across the country in the 1990s have disappeared from the scene as a result of suppression under the rule of headliners (2005-2013). In the absence of a student union like Tahkim Vahdat which brought together all Islamic student associations in the 1990s, in the recent years, active students of prominent universities have created informal networks and websites to organize their collective activities. (Researcher 3 Jan. 2017)

Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Student Activities and Protests

The affiliate indicated that there have been a number of student protests throughout Iran since 2013, including in Tehran and in a number of provinces, but that they have been "relatively small, localized, and mostly focused on student issues (such as tuition increases in state-run universities, quality of food, lack of suitable dormitory conditions, increases in the cost of dormitories and so on)" (Affiliate 9 Dec. 2016). The researcher similarly indicated that

There have been some protests over welfare issues, including a sit-in in front of the Ministry of [Science, Research and Technology], demanding the expansion of dormitories in Tehran and other large cities. Even the annual meetings of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, with representatives of the university students have recorded such protests. (Researcher 3 Jan. 2017)

The affiliate indicated that, according to a Mehr News Agency report, in the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year, there were student protests at Sistan and Baluchistan University, Art University of Isfahan, Tehran University, Shahid Chamran University in Ahwaz, and Khajeh Nasireddin Tusi University in Tehran (Affiliate 9 Dec. 2016). The affiliate further stated that according to the Iranian University Students News website, there have been "approximately 40 protests ... regarding various student-related problems in particular universities" in the 2016-2017 academic year (ibid.). The Media Express, a Paris-based news agency focusing on issues related to the Middle East and North Africa Region (Media Express n.d.), reports that September 2016 "saw a wave of student protests" and that "[s]tudents have been demanding improved resources at their universities" (The Media Express 5 Oct. 2016).

The ICHRI Founder and Executive Director stated that

...there were numerous protests at Tehran University and Amir Kabir University in Tehran during late 2014 and into 2015, involving hundreds of students, protesting the acid attacks against women in Isfahan in late 2014 and the lack of prosecution for those attacks. (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016)

According to the same source,

[t]here are also student protests each year on the birthday (December 21) of imprisoned student activist Sayed Ziaoddin Nabavi at his university, Babol Noshirvani University of Technology in city of Babol, in Mazandaran Province in the north of Iran. Sometimes protests on this anniversary extend to Tehran University as well. Nabavi, arrested in 2009, is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence for "creating unease in the public mind" due to his peaceful student activism. (ibid.)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.1 Incidents

Sources report the following incidents of student protests:

- In September 2013, "a group of 70 protestors, including students of Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran who had been suspended or expelled, demonstrated outside the university calling for the right to continue their studies" (University World News 19 Sept. 2013);
- On 22 July 2014, "[l]arge crowds of Iranian students and teachers" protested the "killing of women and children in the Gaza Strip" in front of the UN mission in Tehran (ISNA 22 July 2014);
- In May 2016, there was a 6-day student protest over the price of food at the University of Zanjan (Affiliate 9 Dec. 2016);
- On 1 October 2016, the Media Express reported that "a group of students in Khajeh Nasir University in Tehran held a demonstration and staged a hunger strike on the university's campus to protest against the poor condition of dormitories and hikes in enrollment charges, as well as the low quality and rising prices of the food served at the university" (The Media Express 5 Oct. 2016). The same source indicates that on the same day, students of Amir Kabir University in Tehran "stage[d] a demonstration ... while speeches by university officials were taking place," to protest "the same problems voiced by the Khajeh Nasir students" (ibid.).
- In October 2016, students gathered outside Bou Ali University in Hamadan "to protest the lack of internet service," and at Tehran's Oil Industry University "students called for changes in the quotas of student employment in the Oil Ministry" (ibid.).

3.2 Student Day Protests

The ICHRI Founder and Executive Director stated that

[d]uring the past several years there have been student protests on every Students [sic] Day (November 17), which marks the anniversary of the murder of three students of the University of Tehran on December 7, 1953. These protests typically involve large numbers of students, from several hundred to as many as thousands of students, often involving almost the entire student body. Topics covered include political freedom; government corruption; the ongoing (nearly six years now) house arrests of opposition Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and Zahra Rahnavard; permission to form independent student associations (largely shut down after the 2009 protests); permission to publish independent student newspapers (also largely closed since 2009); as well as living conditions inside the universities. The protests have taken place at Tehran University as well as in other universities in approximately a dozen other major cities in Iran. (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016)

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reports in December 2014 that "some students in Iran" celebrated Student Day on 7 December to "call for the release of opposition figures and jailed students" (RFE/RL 8 Dec. 2014).

Iran Focus, an independent news service that focuses on events in Iran, Iraq and the Middle East (Iran Focus 14 Mar. 2004), reports in December 2016 that Student Day protests occurred across Iran, with students expressing "their anger against the Mullah's regime" (Iran Focus 7 Dec. 2016). According to the same source, on 5 December 2016, students at Zahedan University protested rising university costs and "chanted slogans," including that "political prisoners must be freed" (ibid.) The same source indicates that on the same day, students at Tarbiat Modarres University in Tehran "repeatedly interrupted the speech" of the Minister of Environment "with chants about freeing political prisoners" and protests against pollution levels in Iran (ibid.). Without specifying a date, the same source states that students at Khajeh Nasir University in Tehran installed large protest banners with texts including "political prisoners must be freed" on an amphitheatre (ibid.).

Sources report that on 6 December 2016, students protested at Tabriz University, (NCRI 7 Dec. 2016; Iran Focus 7 Dec. 2016) in front of the university despite the presence of militia forces, chanting "'[o]ur last message to the incompetent regime: the freedom-loving nation is ready to rise up!'" (ibid.).

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), "a parliament-in-exile" with more than 500 members from "a broad coalition of democratic Iranian organizations, groups, and personalities" (NCRI n.d.), reports that "universities across the country marked Students [sic] Day on 6 December 2016," including at Amir Kabir Tech University, "despite Bassij paramilitary forces attempting to prevent" the protest; Sharif Tech University; Science and Industrial University; Teachers Training University; National University; the law school in the city of Yazd; the universities in Mazandaran and Ahvaz; Asfarain Tech University; Andimeshk University; and Semnan University (NCRI 7 Dec. 2016).

According to an article by the ICHRI on Student Day activities in Iran in 2016, the government tried to "extinguish displays of political dissent by cancelling speeches that had permits while issuing them for 'happy shows,' including musical concerts and stand-up comedy" (ICHRI 8 Dec. 2016). The NCRI report indicates that the "mullahs' regime" held a program called "War of Joy" at the same time as demonstrations for Student Day, in an attempt "to quell student protests" (NCRI 7 Dec. 2016). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Treatment of Protestors by Iranian Authorities

The affiliate stated that, to her knowledge, the "localized and student-focused protests have not led to arrests of students" (Affiliate 9 Dec. 2016). However, the same source further expressed the opinion that "it is difficult to assess [from] the outside the extent to which these student protesters have been harassed" (ibid.). According to the affiliate, harassment of students by authorities since 2013 "seem to be mostly in the form of outside interference in meetings and intimidation of students involved in university activities" (ibid.).

The ICHRI Founder and Executive Director stated that

[m]any of the students participating in the Student Day protests, the Nabavi protests, and the acid attacks protests ... were summoned to the disciplinary committees of their respective universities for questioning and were threatened with being handed over to the security agencies, which would mean prosecution and jail time. (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016)

In its 2014 Universal Periodic Review submission on the status of human rights in Iran, Human Rights Watch states that

[t]he government has either shut down or severely interfered in the internal affairs of various civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations such as the Tahkim-e Vahdat (one of the country's largest university student groups) ... (Human Rights Watch March 2014)

In a 2014 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran indicates that "between March 2013 and March 2014, at least 28 students were arrested by security forces and eight student publications were suspended by the university authorities" (UN 27 Aug. 2014). A "non-exhaustive list" (UN 28 May 2015, 52) of students and student activists arrested and imprisoned that is included as an annex in the 2015 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, is attached to this Response.

The US *Country Reports 2015* states that medical treatment is "routinely denied" to prisoners and that authorities "continued to deny treatment at external facilities for Bahareh Hedayat, a women's and students' rights defender sentenced in 2010, who suffered from serious gynecological problems" (US 13 Apr. 2016, 7).

The ICHRI Founder and Executive Director stated that

[s]tudent protestors, and indeed many Iranian citizens who engage in any form of peaceful public protest, are typically not given due process when arrested. Denials of due process typically include: arrest without explanation of cause; search and confiscation of the arrested individual's personal belongings without warrant; prolonged detention without charge and without access to counsel, often under conditions of solitary confinement; interrogations held without the presence of counsel and often under conditions of intense psychological pressure to "confess;" brief, closed trials in which the attorney representing them is often not the one of their choice and often denied full access to case files; and court proceedings in which evidentiary standards are well below international standards. In addition, hardline judges are often hand-picked by intelligence and security agencies to preside over political cases, and convictions are frequently made on the basis of forced "confessions." (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016)

4.1 Incidents

Sources report that in March 2014, student activist Maryam Shafi'pour was sentenced to seven years in prison by a revolutionary court for "spreading propaganda" against the system (Al June 2014, 5; *The Guardian* 3 Mar. 2014). An article in *The Guardian*, a UK-based newspaper, notes that "[s]he was arrested in July [2013] after being summoned for questioning and was kept in solitary confinement for more than two months without access to a lawyer" (ibid.).

In a 2016 report before the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran reports that "several students were allegedly injured" on 29 November 2015 in Yasuj, when an attempt to give a speech by a former member of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front and a current member of reformist United Iran Party was "reportedly disrupted by a group of hard-line members of the Basij" (UN 26 May 2016, para. 51). The same source states that the government

authorities indicated that "tear gas canisters were thrown by those accompanying the speaker but that incident had nothing to do with the security forces" (ibid.).

The ICHRI Founder and Executive Director stated in December 2016 that

[m]ore severe consequences have recently followed a group of students who tried to publish a student publication at Tehran University and Amir Kabir University (also in Tehran). Independent student publications have been largely shut down since the widespread 2009 protests that followed the disputed presidential election in Iran that year. It was relayed to [ICHRI] directly by one of the students that approximately ten students were summoned and detained in Evin Prison's Ward 2A (which is controlled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) Intelligence Organization) for two or three days after their arrest by IRGC security agents. The student who reported this to [ICHRI] was herself summoned and detained. She reported that the students have been in court repeatedly waiting for a decision. (ICHRI 14 Dec. 2016)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] GCPEA is a coalition of "organizations from the fields of education in emergencies and conflict-affected fragile states, higher education, protection, international human rights and international humanitarian law" that advocates for the protection of students, teachers, schools, and universities from attack (GCPEA n.d.).

[2] According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015*, a "'star' system was inaugurated in 2005 by then president Ahmadinejad to mark politically active students" (US 13 Apr. 2015, 21).

[3] The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) is a New York-based human rights organization composed of lawyers, researchers and journalists, that aims to support "the Iranian people's struggle for human rights," and which provides "relevant, verified, and up-to-date information about the human rights situation in Iran" (ICHRI n.d.).

[4] According to an article written by Saeid Golkar, a post-doctoral scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, "[t]he Student Basij are organized and run in a top-down fashion with the main headquarters in Tehran at the helm" (Golkar Summer 2010, 26). The Researcher at York University further indicated that "the head of the Student Basij is also a member of the Discipline Committee and its members serve as informants for Harasat" (Researcher 3 Jan. 2017).

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Oral sources: Assistant Professor, DePaul University; Assistant Professor, Maxwell School, Syracuse University; Assistant Professor, the University of California Los Angeles; Baha'i International Community; Democracy Council; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack; Human Rights Watch; Iran Human

Rights Documentation Center; Lecturer, Dublin City University; Lecturer, Northwestern University; PhD Candidate, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Postdoctoral Research Associate, Watson Institute at Brown University; Professor, Maxwell School, Syracuse University.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Daneshjoonews; Mehr News; *The New York Times*; UPR Info; UN – Development Program, High Commissioner for Refugees, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, UN Women.

Attachment

United Nations (UN). 28 May 2015. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ahmed Shaheed. "[Annex II: List of Detained Baha'is and Student Activists - Table 1, 2 and 3.](#)" *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.* (A/HRC/28/70). [Accessed 21 Dec. 2016]

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