Iran’s Government Systematically Violates Rights of Students

written by Elahe Amani | October 8, 2024

The systemic violation of students’ rights and freedoms has persisted for forty-five years under the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the current period under President Masoud Pezeshkian. The denial of the right to education among other marginalized groups such as Afghan refugees, and *Bahá’í* community is another chapter which has been consistently highlighted in UN reports. The Iranian government has a policy that explicitly bars Baha’is from attending university. Tens of thousands of young Baha’is from all parts of Iran, have been barred from university, depriving them not only of university education but employment and intellectual development.

The Story of Majid Dari

The story of Majid Dari, a “star student,” (star refers to being expelled) poignantly illustrates the devastating impact of deprivation of education and the legacy of violence and oppression on young lives. In 2006, during Ahmadinejad’s presidency (August 3, 2005 – August 3, 2013), Majid Dari was expelled from Allameh Tabatabai University (ATU) for two semesters due to his protests at a time when student associations were shut down. In response, he, along with Mahdiyeh Golro, Sadegh Shojaei, and Saeed Faiz Allahzadeh, other expelled students, staged a sit-in, leading to their arrest. After release on bail, they formed the Council for the Defense of the Right to Education. In 2008, Majid Dari was sentenced to 7 years in prison, Mahdieh Golroo to 2 years and 4 months, and Reza Nabavi to 10 years of exile. Tragically, Majid Dari was arrested again in October 2022 during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising by security authorities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for education and human rights in Iran.

The Story of Mahdieh Golroo

During a recent conversation with Mahdieh Golroo, currently, a student and political activists in Sweden, I inquired about the personal impact of being deprived of education and becoming a “star student.” She stated, “The Islamic Republic has escalated repression to the point where expulsion from the university and education deprivation seem trivial compared to executions and long-term imprisonments. I felt isolated and eventually had to leave my country. Ask me which suffering has lingered the most, and I’ll say education deprivation. At 18, I entered ATU. I was preparing for my master’s exam in my seventh semester. However, due to student protests and gatherings, I was suspended, and my suspension was extended. In 1991, while in prison, I was expelled without attending a disciplinary committee meeting. One day, I was released from prison, and the next, I learned to live in exile. All these years, any person who had earned their degree felt like a dagger in my heart, reminding me of what I wanted and could have achieved if only I had been allowed. This deprivation felt like a heavy burden on my shoulders, never-ending! After 20 years, I have finally returned to university and laid this burden down, but I will never regain the 22-year-old woman who loved to study.” Mahdieh Golroo’s story, highlights the profound effects of being deprived of education by expulsion from university, which can have a lasting impact on individuals and the university community.

The Story of Reza Ghazinouri

In a similar conversation with Reza Ghazinouri who faced education deprivation, he also further

emphasized the impact of the violation of his rights to attend university and complete his education: “In 2009, on the eve of defending my master’s thesis in social science research at the University of Tehran, I was unexpectedly expelled by the Ministry of Higher Education disciplinary committee. This event turned my life upside down in ways I never imagined. I was forced to flee Iran, leaving behind my entire life. It was a period of immense challenge, with moments of uncertainty and despair. I was fortunate to find the strength to rebuild my life, but many others in similar situations were not as lucky. Some tragically lost their lives, while others suffered from permanent disorders. Depriving someone of their right to education is more than just an administrative decision; it’s a form of social execution, a cruel eradication of a person’s future and potential.”

Students who are expelled from university may feel marginalized, oppressed, and discriminated against, leading to depression, isolation, anger, and mental turmoil. The financial consequences of exclusion from education and expulsion from university can be significant, including loss of tuition and inability to transfer to another institution. Overall, expelling students can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for both the individual and the university community.

United Nations Conventions

The right to education is a fundamental human right, and international laws and conventions protect it. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is one such convention, which ensures the right to education for all citizens and emphasizes the importance of academic freedom. Additionally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) supports academic freedom and the right to education, even though it doesn’t directly refer to it. The UDHR recognizes the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which is essential for academic freedom, as it allows professors and students to discuss their ideas and opinions without fear of censorship or punishment.

The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) is another important international instrument that promotes the right to education and prohibits discrimination in education. The Convention has been ratified by many countries and is considered a cornerstone of international education law.

Global Trends and Retrogression

The global trends of the rise of extremism in religion, identity and politics along with the rise of populist movements, are aiming at redefining academic freedom not only in the Global South but also in the United State and EU countries. Despite international laws and conventions, states are altering higher education to undermine the academic freedom that is the founding principle of postsecondary education and research.

To address these violations, it is essential to hold governments accountable for their obligations to protect the right to education and academic freedom. International organizations, civil society, and individuals must work together to promote and protect these fundamental rights.

The truth of the matter is that Iran’s president Pezeshkian does not have the authority to make significant changes in policies. These policies are integral to the systems of oppression and human rights violations in Iran. The Supreme Leader’s Office and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps hold most of the power in Iran, which limits the president’s ability to implement significant changes. The president’s role is limited to ensuring the precise and timely implementation of the Supreme Leader’s decisions. The student movement in Iran is an integral part of the struggle for democracy, human rights and social justice and will keep moving forward, never turning back!

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