

Brains versus brutality - The status of Iran's student protests and how the international community can help

December 2022

University campuses often play an important role in opposing dictatorships. Iran is no exception to this. Iranian university students have historically been protesting and opposing Iran's dictatorial Islamic Republic, often as part of wider social movements. Today, student protests in Iran are broader and more encompassing than ever and a highly influential faction in today's protests. But what do these student protests actually look like - and how does the response by Iranian authorities impact students' safety? And, finally, is there a way for the international community to support Iranian students in their peaceful fight for (more) democracy in Iran?



Thousands of students have been protesting at numerous universities in Iran

Wider geographical scope

During earlier protests, student protests occurred only in Iran's metropolises such as Tehran and Mashhad. This was even the case at the height of the Green Movement and the [student protests of 1999](#). These days student protests are occurring in over a hundred universities across Iran.

As such, the geographical range of the student protests is wider than ever before. But there is yet another distinction between earlier student protests in Iran and today's ones. Traditionally, protests only arose at public, state-funded universities. The current protests are also happening at private universities. For instance, at the Islamic Azad University in the city of Shiraz in southwestern Iran, [students were arrested at the university gate](#) and detained at an unknown location following student uprisings.

Main demands

While the student protests are centred around many demands, the most common ones include the demand for more democracy in Iran, the removal of the obligatory hijab, an end to gender segregation at universities and regime change.

Table 1: Top 20 universities with most protests between September 17 to December 7, 2022. Source: hra-news.org

University name	Province	# of protests
Allameh Tabataba'i University	Tehran	35
Tehran University	Tehran	30
Shahid Beheshti University	Tehran	19
K. N. Toosi University of Technology	Tehran	18
Tarbiat Modares University	Tehran	16
Tehran Polytechnique University	Tehran	16
Kharazmi University	Tehran	15
Babol Noshirvani University of Technology (NIT)	Mazandaran	14
University of Guilan (Rasht)	Guilan	14
Alzahra University	Tehran	14
Tehran University of Art, Practical Art	Tehran	12
University of Science and Culture	Tehran	12
Pars Higher Education Institute of Art and Architecture	Tehran	11
Sharif University of Technology	Tehran	10
University of Kurdistan (Sanandaj)	Kuristan	10
Yazd University	Yazd	10
Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz	Khuzestan	9
Tabriz University of Medical Sciences	East Azerbaijan	9
Shiraz University	Fars	9
Razi University (Kermanshah)	Kermanshah	8

Reclaiming public space

The current protests attack the status quo in the country in very tangible manners. Iranian students have taken to openly defy gender segregation practices in university canteens. For instance, on October 4th 2022, [some female students of the literature and languages](#) faculty of Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran not only took off their headscarves but marched into the canteen designated for males amidst loud cheering by their male counterparts. Students at other universities have also protested against gender segregation. Male and female students eating together in either canteens or outside at the university grounds has become an increasingly common sight, as is also visible in video's circulating on social media. This happened, for instance, at the universities of Sharif, Tehran, Babol Noshirvani, Kharazmi, Tarbiat Modarres, Qom, Yazd and Shahid Beheshti University.

This practice can be considered a big achievement for the students. Never in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran did students enforce free mingling between male and female students on university grounds. What's more, in some universities, including Tehran's Sharif University of Technology and the Allameh Tabataba'i University (specialized in social sciences), lecturers and professors have openly endorsed the students. For instance, English lecturer Adel Ferdosipour¹ joined students during a (mixed gender) picnic and sit-in at Sharif University of Technology to express his support.

¹ Besides being a professor, Ferdosipour is also a highly popular TV football commentator and producer and journalist in Iran. In 2009, he was listed by Newsweek as being one of the '20 most influential Iranians'. As such, his attendance at the student protests gathered a lot of publicity.

Gender segregation

Gender segregation has been the norm in Iranian universities for decades. For instance, male and female students sit on opposite sides in lecture halls or tutorials rooms. They also eat separately: either in male or female only canteens or in restaurants where both sexes have been allocated separate spaces, often separated by curtains.

Read more: Student protests at university canteens

The precise way in which the unification of males and females was achieved – and (temporarily) sustained – during mealtimes differed per university. In Shahid Beheshti University, students created a human tunnel at the self-service restaurant's entrance to protect students entering and exiting the now mixed gender restaurant. At universities where they could not sit together in canteens, students would sometimes take trays to the outside and mingle there. In other cases, where canteen staff refused to serve male and female students who sat together, students sometimes offered alternative catering. Meanwhile, at universities where joint dining at university canteens cannot be enforced (anymore), students often hold vocal protests just outside the canteens, demanding that these should no longer be gender segregated, sometimes with female students waving their headscarves into the air or burning these.

In addition to the protests outlined above, students in Iran also resort to more 'classic' ways of protesting. Besides vocal rallies, students have carried out head scarf burning performances, sung revolutionary songs, created protest sign murals, and have poured red paint (to symbolize the bloodshed) on classroom walls and lecturers' desks. Also, sit-ins are organized, and lectures are sometimes boycotted. The strength of the protests is such that students at several universities could defy campus security and universities need to call in police and security forces to try and take back control.

Besides tearing down barriers enforcing sex segregation, protesting Iranian students have also instigated other changes in the public realm. A women-only park in Tehran entitled Banowan Park (Women Park) was renamed 'Jina Park' after Kurdish woman Jina Amini, whose fatal collapse in police custody on 17 September 2022 sparked the current protest waves in Iran. While the new name sign was swiftly removed by Iranian authorities the park's new name is now being used by people.

Hidden organisers

During the COVID-19 lockdown, students made online groups to organize themselves. While this was initially for the purpose of studying and socialising, these networks are now used by students to connect with one another and organise protests. Since the organisation of protests is now largely happening online, cracking down on these and the arrest of organisers has become harder for the Iranian authorities. The protests are not carried out by any known leadership or specific organisation, but coordinated by many. Meanwhile, there are also reports that some of the student unions and associations support the protests in clandestine ways, thereby adding to the successful coordination of the protests.

Duration

The current protests also stand out in another way. In the past, when students protests occurred they would usually dissipate after a few weeks or even a few days. Starting on the 18th of September, students have now held protests for nearly three months. Moreover, the current student protests have not abated; they keep flaring up throughout the country.

This is in spite of a harsh crackdown by police and security forces, that don't just target protesting students with tear gas, clubs and plastic bullets, but, as indicated by videos circulating on social media and the reports of human rights groups, sometimes also with bullets or other live ammunition.

Repercussions

The situation of students who have been protesting at universities has become very dire. Students not only get severely beaten and arrested during protests on campus, but also in buses going to or departing from campus – and sometimes also in their own

Students in street protests

While many of the protests by students take place on university grounds, students are also an important faction in the street protests that are sweeping through Iran. Sometimes with dire consequences; at least four students have been killed while attending these protests. Conversely, the protests on campus sometimes gain outside support. In October, students at the renowned Sharif University in Tehran were trapped in a car park by the Basij militia and security forces, who opened fire on them with rubber and paintball bullets, causing many to collapse. After word spread in social media of the students' predicament, Tehran residents created a miles-long traffic jam around the campus "in support of the students, honking their horns and shouting "death to the dictator" from their windows".

Administrative and legal action against students

The Iranian authorities have also resorted to administrative and legal action to try and stem the student protests. In some universities, including Sharif University of Technology, all classes went online until further notice. In Kurdistan all universities were closed on October 26. While the authorities blamed an influenza outbreak, the measure is widely considered to have been taken for political reasons. Meanwhile, nationwide the Student Disciplinary Code of Conduct was changed in November. Changes include stricter punishments for female students who refuse to wear the hijab, while students now also need to obtain a permit for creating a social media (chat)group of over 100 members. Students that get caught creating such groups, will be expelled for at least one term and are unable to return to university for the coming five years. Furthermore, bags of students are inspected, mobile phones and student cards of students are confiscated, and their personal photos and videos and social media pages are checked by university officials. At the Azad University's Science and Research Branch in Tehran, students may only come in after they have removed their face masks. Also, student cards are randomly confiscated in this university without any known reason or justification.

Additionally, Iranian MPs also formulated policy proposals towards the end of November that will prevent students involved in protests from leaving the country.

house. In some cases, students have also been kidnapped on campus or been detained and subsequently assaulted and arrested in their dormitories by armed (plain clothes) police. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), at least 605 university students had been arrested by police and security forces by the 9th of December. Once in custody, students may face torture, be sent to psychiatric hospitals or to jail – or even face the death penalty. For that reason, student protests are increasingly (also) focusing on the release of arrested students.

Besides being at risk of being persecuted, tortured and arrested for exercising democratic rights as a result of their participation in the protests, activist students can also face barriers to continuing their studies. These include being expelled from their universities altogether, to being banned from lectures or exams² (and subsequently fail it) to being denied access to their student accommodations by the university leadership.

Meanwhile, student protesters may also be at risk from violence of students belonging to the student wing of Iran's militias that are an extension of the Iranian government or who support the Iranian regime in other ways. Of course, these students may also spy on them and report them to the authorities, as university staff may also do. Meanwhile, plainclothes police sometimes also join the protests, with the purpose of identifying 'troublemakers'.

Support

All in all, students in Iran that have participated in anti-government protests, or are suspected of doing so, are not just under threat of severe violence by the Iranian state, but may also face severe restrictions preventing them from progressing with their studies and leading normal lives. Given the current circumstances and the great stress they are under, Iranian protester students are in great need of support, including by the international community.

Such assistance could help to achieve the following:

1. The formation of a committee which documents information on the number of detained students and those receiving disciplinary punishments because of their participation in protests.
2. Targeted campaigns that demand the release of detained students and demand free access to university grounds for all students – including those who currently facing problems upon entering due to increased control and surveillance on university campuses.
3. Helping students to campaign for the right of freedom of association and for the creation of independent student unions and societies.
4. Educating students on the usefulness of creative non-violent resistance techniques such as art that unites, original types of civil obedience and choosing the right shouts when scanting. This can increase the chance

2 Sometimes students are also failed altogether to punish them. For instance, the Art University of Tehran has banned all MA students that enrolled in 2021 and 2022 from taking all of the end of semester exams, while giving a number of students in BA courses a zero (out of ten) for being absent – in spite of the fact that no lectures had been given and no professor had registered these students as being absent.

of success of the protests, while reducing the risk of persecution for the students involved.

Such actions will especially be powerful when the demands of students are linked (more) with the demands of other social groups involved in the protests in Iran, from high school students to workers.

5. The creation of a helpline for Iranian students, alongside free online counselling services.

This should be a free and safe platform staffed by volunteer specialists providing counselling to students that were detained, assaulted or faced other types of hardship and are at risk of post-traumatic stress or other mental issues as a result. Also, it could help students deal with grieving over the loss of friends who were imprisoned or help them to process the violent or life-threatening situations many of them were in. As a student activist in Mashdad, who was quoted in the Guardian, put it: "I don't know a single friend who hasn't witnessed a kidnapping, arrest or hasn't helped save an injured friend." Besides reducing drama, psychological services could also be used to help activist students to become (more) resilient or be used by family members and friends to understand traumatized loved ones better. The creation of a helpline and online resources providing students with legal advice.

6. The creation of a helpline and online resources providing students with legal advice.

Activist students can benefit from legal advice in many ways. While the Iranian juridical system is flawed and biased in many ways, arrested students will nevertheless appear in court. By knowing their rights, they can be more confident when detained and in court (it happens frequently that detained Iranians are denied the right to legal representation during the interrogations and throughout their detention). Our experience shows that dissident Iranian citizens who know their rights tend to stand a better chance in court than someone who is scared and doesn't know their rights.

The legal advice line could also be consulted by family members of detained students who are allowed visitors. Through their family they could then find out more about their rights. For instance, often the activist and their family are told to keep the arrest quiet when it's actually in the best interest of the arrested person that word is spread about the arrest, as this increases the student's visibility. By knowing their rights, activists and their families can be confident they do not violate any laws by making the arrest public.

Finally, the helpline could prepare students for situations in which authorities use frames to justify their arrest, including claims they are spies working for foreign powers, as well as assisting students who were suspended from university or banned from certain exams or lectures. As with the counselling helpline, the legal helpline could be staffed by trained volunteers, preferably with a good knowledge of the student target group.

While these six measures won't end the precarious situation student protestors find themselves in, it can reduce the risks they are facing, strengthen their legal position and assist in reducing their chances of lifelong trauma. Furthermore, these measures help improve the impact of these student protests.

About us

Volunteer Activists (VA) is a nonprofit, non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands. From 2001 to 2007, VA operated inside Iran as the largest capacity building organization in the country. From 2012, the VA team continued its activism from Amsterdam following security threats. Assisting Iranian CSOs through research-informed capacity building is one of the primary activities of VA. Other specialisations include: facilitation of information exchange among civil society activists, advocacy and expansion of democracy and human rights and peace building - both within Iranian society and communities in the MENA region.



Contact us:

info@volunteeractivists.nl

Radarweg 29
1043 NX, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

<https://volunteeractivists.nl/en>