

„Our voice will not be silenced“

Special Report on the Impact of State Violence on the Iranian Teacher Movement, Centering on the Period May 2022 to September 2023

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Executive Summary

Teachers are among the most organized workers' groups in Iran. However, the presence of the Iranian teacher trade union movement is relatively obscure outside the country. This report sheds light on the Iranian teachers' trade union movement's experiences and challenges against a backdrop of severe government repression – whilst also discussing avenues for the international community to provide assistance.

This report studies the history of the teachers' trade union movement in Iran and looks at the major events impacting the movement between May 2022 and September 2023. The aims of this report include:

- To evaluate the factors influencing teachers' trade union activities, including their participation in the popular protests of autumn 2022.
- To examine the context in which teachers operate, including the structure of Iran's education system and the history of the teachers' trade movement.
- To identify teachers' trade union demands.
- To highlight government threats and pressures on teachers' trade associations and activists, including arrests and loss of employment.

Over the past decade, the teachers' movement joined the larger workers' movement through field protests and activism, and has become one of the country's most dynamic social movements. Between May 2022 to September 2023, the teachers' movement underwent significant upheaval. Research by Volunteer Activists found that 220 trade union activists were arrested between May 2022 and September 2023. They received judicial sentences and faced employment deprivations due to their involvement in the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' anti-government uprising, their support of youths and students in the protests, and their advocacy for better working conditions. Prior to the start of the mass protests, the teachers' movement was at a relative standstill due to severe repression by security forces.

Although teachers' trade associations and activists could not organize many protests and strikes during the past year due to increased pressures by security forces, they remained active online by utilizing social networks and social media, and succeeded in creating strong connections with other social groups.

Key takeaways:

- **Evolution of Focus:** Teacher activist groups in Iran have evolved from advocating for teacher rights to actively supporting Iran's democratization movement. This positions them as a pivotal player in advancing societal progress in Iran.
- **Government Repression:** The Iranian government, beyond arresting teacher activists and disrupting gatherings, increasingly employs workplace discrimination to silence teacher voices.
- **Muzzled Influence:** Despite remaining a significant force in Iran, the Iranian teacher trade union movement faces effective muzzling through intense governmental surveillance, reaching unprecedented levels.
- **Organizational Impediments:** The Iranian trade union movement encounters organizational challenges due to the arrests of its leaders, and the decision-making process is hindered by the Iranian government's restrictions on holding general assemblies.

Recommendations

In light of the challenges faced by the Iranian teachers' trade unions movement, particularly under the conservative administration of President Ebrahim Raisi, the following recommendations are proposed to support and strengthen this movement:

Strengthen Resilience and Capabilities:

- **Training Programs:** Develop targeted training programs, possibly online, to enhance the mental resilience and IT skills of Iranian teacher activists, improving their online safety and activism strategies.
- **International Exchange:** Facilitate exchange programs enabling Iranian teacher trade unionists to connect with global counterparts, fostering mutual learning and support.

Enhance Visibility and Advocacy:

- **Leverage Communication Platforms:** Use the extensive networks of labor rights groups – especially teachers' movements internationally, policymakers, and activists internationally to amplify Iranian teachers' voices and raise awareness about the violation of their rights.
- **Engage the Media:** Encourage journalists to cover the plight of Iranian teachers, bringing international attention to their struggles.

Diplomatic and International Civil Society Engagement:

- **International Forums:** Highlight the situation of Iranian teachers in international arenas, urging Iran to adhere to human rights treaties. Specifically, demand the release of detained trade unionists and advocate for the right to free association and assembly.
- **ILO Involvement:** Bring the issue to the International Labour Organization, urging Iran to ratify key conventions and challenging its role within the ILO due to its systematic workers' rights violations.
- **U.N. Mechanisms Utilization:** Engage U.N. Special Rapporteurs and the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission to document, investigate, and report on the Iranian regime's crackdown on teacher trade unions.

By adopting these recommendations, the international community can play a crucial role in supporting the Iranian teachers' trade union movement, ensuring its resilience and effectiveness in advocating for essential rights and reforms in the face of increasing repression.

1 Introduction

Originally established to safeguard workers' rights, trade unions worldwide, particularly in authoritarian regimes, have increasingly broadened their focus to encompass the promotion of human rights and democratization. This transformation is also evident among teacher trade unions in Iran, many of which played a supportive role in the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests that swept through the country last year. Notably, the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA) – with member organizations in most major Iranian cities – and the Iranian Teacher Organization actively participated in these events.

However, this active engagement has come with severe consequences. In November 2023, the Iranian government arrested teacher activists for activities such as sharing supportive messages on social media and for advocating for the release of students arrested during the demonstrations. They were arrested even for just remembering the casualties of police violence.

A case in point is high school teacher Mehdi Sheibani, [arrested for filming the poignant act of lighting a birthday cake](#) in memory of his former pupil, Abolfazl Adinezadeh.

Seventeen-years-old Adinezadeh skipped school to join anti-government protests on 8 October 2022, but he never returned home, having died from gunfire from state security forces that attacked the protestors.

Like other apprehended educators, Sheibani now faces potential imprisonment, potentially accompanied by corporal punishment such as lashes.

Regrettably, this pattern of arrests is not new for Iran's teacher unions.

Even advocating for improved teacher salaries or marching for more educational equality can lead to detainment. Persistent state surveillance and suppression significantly hinder teacher unions. For instance, despite having obtained formal licenses to operate in the past, various teacher unions have been barred from holding general assemblies for many years.

This report delves deeper into the challenges that teacher unions in Iran face due to state repression and explores potential countermeasures. The central question it seeks to address is: How well are teacher unions faring in Iran vis a vis the challenges they face due to state repression—and what can be done to help them stay resilient?

To address this question comprehensively, the report is divided into three parts. The following chapter provides background information on teacher unions in Iran, examining their role in Iranian society and how their objectives have evolved over time. Subsequently, Chapter Three analyzes governmental actions against activist teachers. The final chapter reflects on the current position of teacher trade unions concerning the state and proposes a way forward.

This report will primarily focus on the Coordinating Council of the Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA) among the various teachers' associations in Iran. This choice is driven by the fact that CCITTA is not only the most powerful teachers' trade union but also operates independently.

2 The evolution of the Iranian teacher movement

This chapter focuses on the development of the teachers trade union movement, both in quantitative terms and its scope of action.

In authoritarian regimes, the effectiveness of trade unions often hinges on the extent of space granted to them by the state. The history of the teacher trade union movement in Iran serves as a testament to this reality.

In the years following the 1979 Revolution, organizations and associations such as the Independent Teachers' Association, the Islamic Society of Teachers, and the Society of Muslim Teachers emerged, but the revolutionary atmosphere left little room for the pursuit of teachers' professional and trade union demands. After the Islamic revolution (1979), the nation plunged into a period of profound upheaval, marked by both internal turmoil and external conflicts. Also, the Iraq-Iran war ensued (1980-1988), exacerbating the already-existing chaos. Simultaneously, internal strife flared up within Iran, characterized by confrontations involving various militias.

The 1980s ended with the start of President Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), who severely limited any form of trade union activity for all segments of society. During Rafsanjani's second term, the Ministry of Education did take some positive steps to address teachers' economic needs by increasing teachers' salaries and by implement reforms in the education system. However, teachers' associations played no role in these reforms, which reflected a development-oriented approach of the government and the Minister of Education.

A turning point in the organization of teachers came in the second half of the 1990s, when a reformist government came to power: Mohammad Khatami. During this period, teachers for the first time took practical steps to define and represent their professional identity and engage in organized activities to pursue their demands more systematically.

The Iranian Teachers' Trade Association was established on 7th of March, 2000 in Tehran and obtained an operating license from the Ministry of the Interior in 2000. Similar teacher trade associations were established around the same time in Isfahan, Khorasan, Fars, and Hamadan provinces. On 8th of March, 2002, these trade associations came together and formed the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA).

Under these associations' charters, only teachers who were permanently employed by the government were allowed to join, and membership was denied to hourly-paid teachers, private school teachers, and contract teachers.

Despite facing severe state repression, which will be elaborated on in the next chapter, CCITTA managed to evolve into one of Iran's most influential trade unions. This growth is evident in its expansion, particularly the increase in its membership. At its inception in 2001, CCITTA initially coordinated only five member organizations. As illustrated in Table 1, by 2019, there were 21 local chapters.

However, its growth wasn't solely quantitative; over time, CCITTA's perspective broadened to encompass increasingly politically charged positions. The second part of this chapter will now delve into a closer examination of the goals that CCITTA has pursued over time.

Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA)

CCITTA is comprised of representatives nominated by the boards of directors of trade associations across the country. These representatives act as a think tank, making decisions about how to improve education standards and follow up on teachers' demands. Their decisions are published on the council's Telegram channel, @kashowra, which is accessible to teachers across Iran.

According to the council's latest report, published in 2019, the council's membership was comprised of 21 trade associations across Iran. However, most of these associations have faced increasing restrictions on their activities in recent years and have been unable to hold general assemblies and free elections.

One of the strengths of CCITTA is its national scope. In Iran, it is not so common to find relatively large, independent, nationally organized trade unions; many powerful trade unions tend to have a more regional focus. For example, a robust union representing bus drivers typically confines its activities to Tehran, while trade unions for oil and gas workers concentrate on regions where these industries are prominent.

Table 1: Coordination Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations members

City level	Province Level
Sanandaj Teachers' Trade Association	Gilan Province Teachers' Trade Association
Shahreza Teachers' Trade Association	Khuzestan Province Teachers' Trade Association
Karaj Teachers' Trade Association	East Azerbaijan Province Teachers' Trade Association
Marivan Teachers' Trade Association	North Khorasan Province Teachers' Trade Association
Hamedan Teachers' Trade Association	Mazandaran Province Teachers' Trade Association
Zanjan Teachers' Trade Association	Fars province Teachers' Trade Association
Khomeyni Shahr Teachers' Trade Association	
Qazvin Teachers' Trade Association	
Bushehr Teachers' Trade Association	
Kermanshah Teachers' Trade Association	
Tehran Teachers' Trade Association	
Torbate Heydariyeh Teachers' Trade Association	
Eslamshahr Teachers' Trade Association	
Isfahan Teachers' Trade Association	
Aligudarz Teachers' Trade Association	



A group of teachers gathered in June 2022 to protest for the implementation of the teacher ranking system, as well as the release of teacher activists in prison.

Teachers' demands

At the time of its foundation, CCITTA mainly focused on conventional worker demands, such as improved salaries and more favorable working conditions in general¹. For years, teachers, among the lowest-paid government employees, had been advocating for increased wages and improved pension benefits². A major concern was also wage inequality stemming from nepotism and favoritism in the workplace, where political connections to the elite occasionally resulted in certain teachers receiving preferential treatment in terms of salary increases and promotions over others. In response, CCITTA supported a call for the implementation of a ranking system, linking salary indications to objectively measurable factors such as work experience, qualifications, and positive reviews at work.

In 2022, this demand was met by the Iranian government when formal salary scales for teachers were introduced. Another focus related to the direct interests of teachers was centered on pensions. Given the high inflation in Iran, teachers pensions' inadequacy in reflecting the true cost of living was a pressing issue. Moreover, in Iran civil servants can retire when they are sixty or have worked at least for 30 years, meaning that this affects a relatively high number of former teachers.

Another reason why the pursuit of better working conditions has remained important is that the Iranian authoritarian regime often failed to fulfill earlier commitments. For that reason, teachers protested in over 50 cities in January 2022, demanding higher pay and urging the government to expedite the implementation of the planned rating system based on experience and performance.

These crucial demands were also stressed in the [latest resolution](#) of the Coordinating Council issued at its 9 May 2023 gathering. These include: the implementation of the Civil Services Management Law³; immediate and complete implementation of the Teachers' Ranking Plan but also increasing the budget for the education sector.

Better education

While the pursuit of better working conditions naturally remains important, over time teacher trade union organizations in Iran started to increasingly focus on wanting to change the educational system in Iran in the interest of their (future) pupils. Many teachers are extremely unhappy with how education is run in Iran. Prime grievances include:

Budget deficits

The surge in the number of young Iranians entering high schools has led to rising costs for the Ministry of

¹ Such as smaller classes.

² Another significant concern is the frequent occurrence of delayed salary payments, adding to the financial challenges faced by teachers.

³ If this law is enforced fully in all government departments including the Ministry of Education, working and retired teachers will also benefit from its salary and wage increments.

Education, already under strain due to Iran's economic crisis. Instead of augmenting the budget and be able to pay teachers and build new schools, the government, since the mid-1990s, has been promoting the establishment of private schools that may impose substantial fees. Consequently, a growing disparity and inequality between children from poor and rich families have emerged. Private schools offer, for instance, access to modern tools, such as computers, and smaller class sizes. The contrast becomes stark in the final year, with only a certain percentage of children educated in state schools successfully passing the university entrance exam in Iran. Also, recent statistics reveal that more than 95% of high achievers in university entrance exams originate from elite Exceptional Talents Schools and private non-profit institutions.

Additionally, state schools increasingly require 'hidden' fees from parents, preventing some children from attending school due to poverty, despite the Iranian constitution promising free education for all up to the age of eighteen. The plight is a cause of frustration for teachers in state schools, a significant number of whom persist in their roles driven by idealism rather than opting for positions in private schools.

Hidden costs

While education is officially free of charge in Iran, state-run schools regularly ask parents for financial help to solve their numerous financial problems. For instance, in some schools, parents are required to make contributions towards the end of the academic year to obtain school reports or enable their children to participate in exams. These hidden costs, coupled with the soaring prices of school supplies, have disproportionately affected families, particularly those with multiple children. Consequently, a growing number of families find themselves unable to afford the costs associated with sending their children to school.

Lack of teachers' participation

The Iranian education system is highly centralized, managed by the Ministry of Education, and geared towards political objectives like national unity and identity reinforcement rather than purely educational goals. The government controls curriculum planning, textbook distribution, teacher training, and related activities, treating education as a political matter. This top-down approach limits the involvement of key stakeholders, including teachers. Teachers have minimal influence on the curriculum, as the government dictates historical narratives and imposes restrictions on professional organizations. Meanwhile, the government's emphasis on a rigid societal view discourages critical thinking, fostering a generation of 'imitators'.

Inadequate human resources management

Iran's education system grapples with a severe shortage of teaching staff, requiring approximately 300,000 new teachers, largely due to retirements and uneven hiring practices. Proposed solutions focus on increasing new recruits, but legal constraints and challenges in teacher training centers hinder progress. Streamlining recruitment and lifting HR restrictions can help, yet mismanagement within the Ministry of Education exacerbates the issue, resulting in an

Educational access in Iran

According to the 2021-22 Ministry of Education almanac, 911,272 not all school-aged children attend school. Absent pupils account for 5.8% of the total student population which exceeds 15.5 million. The dropout rate among girls surpasses that of boys by three to four times, and there is a concerning upward trend in overall school dropout rates.

imbalanced distribution of educational staff, with some regions facing shortages and others experiencing surpluses. The student-to-teacher ratio, ideally 19.2 in elementary schools, has surged to 57.4 in specific areas like Tehran Province cities, as reported by the Parliamentary Research Centre.

Islamification

The sway of political Islam is evident in specific subjects, particularly social sciences, constituting over 25% of content in Iranian textbooks on average⁴. This dominance restricts students' exposure to diverse educational content, excluding alternative perspectives like relativism and essential skills such as critical thinking. Within the school environment, students are taught that religion equates to science, and science must align with religious principles. However, outside school, they soon learn that this approach is highly controversial.

This Islamization extends to classroom practices, enforcing gender segregation and perpetuating stereotypes in textbooks. The emphasis on unity devalues any type of individuality which causes segregation or plurality. Meanwhile, female teachers, like female pupils, must adhere to a compulsory Islamic dress code regardless of personal preference.

To address teacher shortages and align schools with government views, Iran's Ministry of Education heavily relies on the Amin program. This initiative, operational since 2009, seeks to recruit clerics to instill fundamental religious beliefs and behaviors in students. In December 2022, the Coordination Office for Collaborations of Religious Seminaries and the Education Department announced the recruitment of 3,000 clerics for schools. Many teachers fear this move will exacerbate restrictions on freedom of thought in schools.

Ideological constraints

The impact of the Islamic revolution's early years persists in today's educational system, reflecting a practice aimed at purging schools of those with unfavorable political or religious views. This ideological scrutiny restricts teachers, creating an environment where expressing non-conforming thoughts is perceived as suspicious. The consequence is that exceptional teachers may face dismissal based on their views, while those aligning with the regime's discourse enjoy career benefits, even if their teaching quality is subpar. This practice not only hampers the retention of competent teachers but also contributes to discrimination against those with divergent views, potentially forcing them out of the workforce, much to the dismay of many educators.

Exclusion

In border regions, representation issues persist as native identities (e.g. Kurdish, Azerbaijani, Baluchi) are only superficially introduced through text and imagery. Despite constitutional emphasis on mother tongue education, teaching native languages is restricted, leading to disciplinary actions against some teachers⁵.

All in all, teachers have been protesting discrimination and social inequality for years. Since 2010, their platform has evolved to include calls for free education, opposition to privatization in education, resistance against ideological education, promotion of education in the mother tongue, and defense of students' rights in general. Adding to their power, various groups of teachers— including permanently employed teachers,

⁴ Iran ranks third globally when it comes to the inclusion of religious content in educational materials, after Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

⁵ In June 2020, Zahra Mohammadi, a cultural activist and an instructor of the Kurdish Language, was sentenced to 10 years in prison by the judicial authorities of the Islamic Republic in Sanandaj city.

retired teachers, hourly-paid teachers, pre-school educators, teachers in on-the-job training programs, and literacy campaign teaching assistants—have actively engaged in these protests. Dissatisfaction with the state of education has also led teachers, as integral parts of the educational system, to increasingly question and oppose governmental policies over the past two decades.

Democratization and equal rights for women

Given the anti-governmental sentiments that were already present among many (activist) teachers, it is perhaps little surprising that when the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement erupted in Iran in September 2022, it swiftly gained the support of the teacher trade union movement.

For instance, when the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ protest movement called for a national strike to take place on 15 October 2022, CCITTA promptly responded by urging its members to hold sit-ins and strikes⁶. Also, throughout the protests CCITTA posted numerous statements of support for detained protestors, demanding their freedom and condemning the lethal violence perpetrated by state police against the movement’s supporters.

‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement

In late September 2022, thousands of Iranians, particularly women and youth, took to the streets following the death of 22-year-old in police custody on 16 September 2022. Amini was arrested for violating hijab laws, sparking demonstrations in over 160 cities. Initially centered on feminist demands for dress freedom, the movement shifted to broader anti-government protests. According to a report of Iran Human Rights, 537 protesters lost their lives, including 68 children due to violence used by the Iranian police and security forces.

Some teachers were also active individually and participated in the protests. This is reflected by (retiree) teachers’ deaths due to the protests. IranWire [reported](#) that at least five (retired) teachers lost their lives during the protests in late 2022:

- Abdulrahman Bakhtiari, a retired teacher from Saez city, was shot dead by government forces on 17 November in front of his home.
- Teacher Erfan Kakayi was fatally shot by the security forces on the evening of 20 November in Javanrud city, Kurdistan Province.
- Rasoul Haddadi, a resident of Zanjan city who was retired from teaching at technical and vocational colleges, was shot in the neck during a protest commemorating the 40th day of Mahsa Amini’s murder, on 26 October. He passed away in hospital on 24 November.
- According to the Coordinating Council, Zahra Lori, headteacher of Rezvaninejad High School in Kerman, died because excessive stress due to “security threats and the resultant psychological pressures”. The date of her death could not be confirmed.
- Ali Jalili, headteacher of Baradaran Mozaffar Technical College in Tehran, District 4, died of a cardiac arrest mostly likely stemming from the psychological pressures of being repeatedly summoned to the intelligence department and the security office within the Education Department. The date of his death could not be confirmed.

⁶ Other Iranian trade unions, including the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and oil workers’ trade unions, also endorsed the Charter of Minimum Demands. However, CCITTA was the quickest to respond.

Beyond existing anti-government sentiments, (activist) teachers also had other compelling reasons to support the 'Women, Life, Freedom' supporters.

A significant part of the protests unfolded within secondary schools, especially girls' schools. Protesting pupils burned headscarves and tore down the pictures of the founder and the current leader of the Islamic Republic from textbooks or school walls, of which they posted videos on social media. They also organized protests inside schools, and held marches between school and home, chanting slogans aimed at changing the Islamic regime⁷.

Confrontations resulted in disciplinary actions against some students, including barring entry or expulsion, and in extreme cases, physical assault leading to injury or death. In one tragic incident on October 12,

Strategy

Strategic reasons may also have played a role in CCITTA's endorsement of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement. With a significant convergence between the concerns of teachers and the principles advocated by the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, the teachers' movement adeptly aligned its demands with those of the movement, thereby successfully broadening its audience.

2022, at Shahed girls' school in Ardebil city, plain-clothes security forces attacked protesting students, including 15-year-old Asra Hossein-Panahi, [who was severely injured and later died](#) in Ardebil's Fatemi Hospital. While the regime claimed a pre-existing illness as the cause, reports revealed Panahi's health and her achievement as a swimming champion. These actions against students further fueled the anger of many teachers.

All in all, CCITTA took several actions in solidarity with the anti-government movement during the autumn and winter of 2022. These actions included supporting students' right to join street protests; condemning the detention and killing of protesters—especially young students—and condemning legal actions against teachers and trade union activists whilst also protesting employment losses for teachers who had expressed support for the movement. It posted news regarding the detention, summoning, or legal proceedings against (teacher) trade union activists on its Telegram channel, thereby providing information for media coverage of these events. There were also some strikes and sit-ins by teachers following CCITTA's calls for

One example of a teacher who actively supported the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement is Atkeh Rajabi, who was terminated from her teaching position due to her refusal to wear a hijab during a protest video and her active participation in a strike supporting imprisoned teachers. Rajabi, who used to teach in Ahmadabad in northeastern Iran, declared in the video her inability to collaborate with an institution „that allows repressive forces to take away the security and peace of our children.“

This instance not only illustrates the support for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement within (part of) the teachers' community in Iran but also highlights the concerns many teachers, including Rajabi with her poignant statement, had regarding the governmental invasion of their schools*.

* The governmental response to her actions will be discussed in the next chapter.

Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)

⁷ Female pupils also protested practices such as gender segregation, biased textbooks and other ways the education system limits their opportunities and perpetuates gender inequality.

- Two calls for strike actions: one on 5 October 2022 for World Teachers' Day and another on 23 and 24 October 2022 condemning the detention and killing of youths and students during the nationwide protests.
- Four Twitterstorms condemning the killing and detention of youths during the 2022 popular protests.
- More than 35 statements covering various issues, including support for the nationwide protests, condemnation of arrests, killings, and execution of protestors, criticism of judicial prosecutions, prison sentences, and job punishments, commemoration of International Workers' Day and Iranian Teachers' Day, and objection to the Hijab Bill.
- Two calls for gatherings: one on 7 March 2023, protesting chemical attacks on girls' schools, and another on 9 May 2023, commemorating Teachers' Day in Iran.

a strike in October and November 2022, mainly in cities such as Sanandaj, Saez, and Marivan⁸. The text box above gives more details on some of the measures taken by CCITTA in support of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement.

Meanwhile, CCITTA also collaborated with other dissident organizations within Iran. Together with other trade associations and civil society organizations it issued a statement on the eve of February 11, 2023, the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution victory, titled „The Charter of Minimum Demands.“ The altogether 20 endorsing organizations outlined fundamental demands, including the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, freedom of thought, belief, expression, and the press, freedom of association and assembly, the right to industrial action, and freedom to be active in social media⁹.

Furthermore, the Coordinating Council documented daily reports of the protests in schools when these were still ongoing and compiled lists of high school students who were detained or killed during the protests. Additionally, it documented chemical attacks on girls' schools once they commenced. Its statements on social media were augmented by media reports on this issue. Finally, in early March 2023, CCITTA [issued calls](#)



Teacher trade unions have increasingly positioned themselves as agents of change, a stance that has heightened their controversy within the Iranian government. Picture from protests in Bushehr, 13 December 2021- [Hamshahronline.ir](https://hamshahronline.ir)

⁸ Overall, follow-up actions remained limited due to severe governmental threats and repression, a topic that will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

⁹ The full text can be found [here](#).

[for protests](#) on the 7th of March regarding the chemical attacks on (girls') schools, emphasizing how "the authorities and perpetrators involved in these incidents must know that students are the teachers' red line."

Altogether, over the past decade, Iran's trade union movement has increasingly taken a political stance. While trade union activities aimed at creating better working conditions for teachers continue to be important, the Iranian teacher movement has asserted itself as a force for social change. Initially centered on addressing issues within the education system, as well as the state arrests of activist teachers, by September 2023, it evolved to advocate for democracy and regime change. As a result of both its numerical growth and the broadening of its scope, state attempts to dismantle the teacher trade union movement also intensified, however. The next chapter offers more of an insight into this issue.



Picture from: [SalamPix/ABACA/picture alliance](#)

Chemical attacks

In late 2022, chemical attacks made headlines, affecting 350 schools for five months, predominantly girls' schools. Foul-smelling gas caused physical and psychological harm, believed to be orchestrated by government-affiliated extremist groups in retaliation against the women-led protest movement, including participating female pupils and teachers. Concerned parents protested, but top officials only condemned the attacks in early March after arrests were made. Journalists covering the incidents were also charged. Perpetrators remain at large.

The picture above shows a student affected by a chemical attack in her school being taken away by ambulance staff. Affected students suffered symptoms like sore eyes and throats, difficulty breathing, headaches, stomach aches, low blood pressure, weak legs and heart palpitations. Altogether, around 5000 students were affected.

3 Governmental responses and repression

This chapter offers an overview of the governmental suppression of the teachers' trade union movement in Iran, with a specific focus on CCITTA. It identifies the different phases in which governmental responses can be categorized, placing a heightened emphasis on the preceding two years.

Despite obtaining operating licenses towards the end of the Nineties/start of the 2000s, trade union groups like CCITTA soon discovered that this, regrettably, did not secure their future freedom of operation. In reality, the spectrum of activities available to trade unions was markedly shaped by the ideologies and political interests of the incumbent government. Meanwhile, the growing politicization of the teachers trade union movement created its own dynamics. Altogether, four distinct periods can be identified concerning the destiny of teacher trade unions in relation to state-induced suppression.

Enablement and emerging restrictions (1997- 2004)

As highlighted in the preceding chapter, the late 1990s to early 2000s saw the emergence of various trade unions, including CCITTA, as reformists assumed power and championed the role of a vibrant civil society. Despite encountering some limitations due to opposition from more hardline factions within the government, civil and trade union organizations found room to operate during Muhammad Khatami's presidency, often referred to as the reform era. During this period, trade union activists, including those advocating for teachers' rights, successfully organized, engaged with policymakers, cabinet ministers, and their deputies, and articulated their demands. However, this initial wave of reforms gradually receded.

The first signs of resistance appeared in 2001. In an unprecedented incident, intelligence agency forces and the police violently dispersed a teachers' protest outside the presidential offices on Pasteur Street, where teachers had peacefully been gathering for months, advocating for higher wages. By the summer of 2004, after organizing various sit-ins and gatherings, three board members of the Tehran Teachers Trade Association found themselves in custody.

Another constraint also emerged for teacher activists during this period. The Article 10 Commission of the Parties Act, responsible for overseeing CCITTA, declined to renew the operating licenses of CCITTA's member associations after their expiration in 2003. Consequently, these teachers' trade associations were denied the right to legally operate for an extended period.

Suppression (2005 - 2013)

During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, the government's stance towards trade associations and teachers' protests underwent a rapid and stark transformation. They were now viewed as security threats, prompting a militarized response to trade union and civil activities. The government initiated severe crackdowns with the aim of dissolving associations or imposing stringent restrictions on their operations.

On 14 March 2007, a gathering of teachers was violently attacked and [nearly 500 teachers](#) were arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. The year 2009, especially the aftermath of the mass protests by the [Green Movement](#) against the disputed presidential elections, marked the pinnacle of securitization. Heightened security measures, accompanied by the widespread arrests of political and civil activists, extended to teachers' rights activists, who were detained and – for the first time– handed long prison terms. In this highly repressive environment post-2009, trade union activities were stifled until the conclusion of President Ahmadinejad's term in 2013. Following the crackdown, many associations remained prohibited from convening their general assemblies.

Revival amidst restrictions (2013 - 2021)

As reformist President Hassan Rouhani took office and formed his government in August 2013, government officials voiced support for trade union activity in public statements and in the media. In practice, however, there were various obstacles. Despite concerted efforts by many associations since 2013 to convene their annual general meetings, it wasn't until 2016 that the Ministry of the Interior granted permission to 16 teachers' trade associations for their assemblies. However, the Ministry of Interior took a long time to ratify the decisions made at the assembly meetings, making it difficult for the associations to operate. Moreover, the approval of their new charters, aiming to extend membership to all teachers and not just permanent ones, faced obstacles.

There were also persecutions. For instance, on 9 November 2016, mathematics teacher and former secretary of the Iranian Teachers Trade Association Mr. Esmail Abdi, was imprisoned after the Tehran Appeals Court affirmed a six-year sentence, citing charges related to his peaceful trade union activities. In 2015, Abdi was [arrested](#) after he tried to obtain a visa to attend the Education International World Congress in Canada.

Nevertheless, protests persisted. In 2014, teachers across the nation congregated to push for pay increases and the enforcement of the Civil Services Management Law, sustaining these efforts through 2017.

During President Rouhani's second term, the Teachers Ranking Plan was proposed in Parliament. At the same time, however, many teachers and activists, including board members of the associations, were [arrested](#), prosecuted, and [sentenced](#) to years in prison for taking part in protests and strikes.

This phase also witnessed teacher activists undergoing a redefinition of their social status and professional identity. While many teachers had previously identified themselves within the middle class, now they started to embrace a more working-class ethos. This shift was intrinsically linked to their economic struggles and subsequent impoverishment, a decline economists duly noted.

In December 2017, widespread popular protests triggered increased government surveillance and general restrictions.

Nevertheless, this period witnessed the expansion and deepening of trade union activities within the teaching community. Notably, the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations organized [sit-ins](#) in schools during 2018 and 2019, advocating for the release of imprisoned teachers, improved pay,

Popular protests – 2017

In December 2017, widespread protests erupted across Iran, starting in Mashhad and Tehran, and spreading to cities like Neyshabour, Kashmar, Yazd, and Shahroud. Coordinated through social media, demonstrators voiced economic grievances, expanding to opposition against Iranian involvement in the Middle East and dissatisfaction with the government. The protests continued into Friday, reaching major cities and resulting in detentions. On December 30, escalating tensions led to three fatalities and multiple injuries. Pro-government rallies on Saturday marked the 2009 pro-government rally's anniversary, while anti-government unrest reached Tehran for the first time, notably at Tehran University, with students chanting dissenting slogans before dispersal by riot police. Also, posters of Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei were torn down at Tehran University. Internet access was restricted in various parts of the country, including significant areas in Tehran.

and the right to form unions. Strategic use of the internet, particularly social media, played an important role in this transformation.

The [surge of the Iranian workers' movement](#) in the latter half of 2018 also significantly influenced teachers' actions. Throughout this tumultuous period, teachers nationwide actively participated in frequent and widespread strikes, consolidating their stance and increasing their influence. From 2018 to 2021, employed and retired teachers—including contract and permanent workers, pre-school educators, and literacy campaign teaching assistants—also repeatedly gathered in front of government offices across the nation to voice their demands.

In this period, CCITTA also sought the collaboration of other parties. In May 2021, driven by frustration with the government's COVID-19 policy, CCITTA and 14 fellow Iranian worker unions spanning various economic sectors, pensioners' organizations, and civil society organizations issued [the May Day statement](#). In this collective expression, it was emphasized that: „The absence of an efficient health policy, coupled with the ever-increasing living costs imposed by the administration's decisions, has plunged the critical living situation of the working class of Iran into an unprecedented catastrophe.“ The statement also criticized the political elite for „deliberately refusing to provide vaccines“ other than „domestically produced ones.“

Protests and crackdown (2021 – present)

Since Ibrahim Raisi came to power in August 2021, the relationship between teacher activists and the authorities has deteriorated, driven by the perception that trade union activities pose a security threat, a perspective dominant in the new administration. In 2021, teachers were assaulted during protest gatherings in Fars, Gilan, Khuzestan, Alborz, and Tehran provinces, with several individuals being arrested at each event. Still, protests continued, and December 2021 was a watershed moment, when several thousand teachers assembled in Shiraz. These gatherings, which demanded the long-overdue implementation of the ranking law and the standardization of retirement pensions, continued nonstop until early May 2022, despite occasional clashes with security forces.

The pinnacle of the confrontation by security forces occurred in late April and May 2022, just before the national Teachers' Day celebrations on May 2nd. More than 70 teachers were [arrested](#) in Tehran alone. These confrontations with security forces were unique in their scope and because several female activists were arrested as well. This was the first major protest of teachers after the Iranian new year (Iranian year starts at the beginning of spring in March), with demonstrations in over 51 cities.

On the 1st of May 2022, there was a large outpour of protesting teachers in, among others, Tehran. Authorities responded swiftly and mercilessly, apprehending numerous prominent labor activists. Significantly, to preempt the situation, several had already been detained before Labor Day. [In the words of Education International](#)¹⁰, an organization with which CCITTA is affiliated, numerous teacher union leaders were „unjustifiably arrested, detained, and subjected to torture“ for simply seeking to engage in „peaceful trade union activities authorized by national and international laws.“ These included seasoned labor activists Reza Shahabi and Hassan Saeedi who were arrested in respectively May and June 2022 following their involvement in strikes on Labor Day. In early November 2022, the Tehran Revolutionary court sentenced them to 6 years imprisonment each (of which 5 years active) for having allegedly engaged in 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran', and 'assembly and conspiracy with the intent to commit a crime against national security'. Also, they were moved to Evin Prison, Iran's most notorious prison in the Evin

¹⁰ Education International is a Global Union Federation that brings together organisations of teachers and other education employees from across the world.

neighborhood of Tehran, which is home to many political prisoners.

Altogether, Raisi's rule has greatly heightened suppression of teacher activists¹¹. As of September 2023, at least 173 teachers and trade union activists are in prison or released temporarily on bail—19 of whom are awaiting a verdict in their case—while 47 have been sentenced to imprisonment and 108 were in custody or released temporarily on bail. Administrative disciplinary orders, such as salary decreases and forced early retirements, have also risen dramatically. Nearly 250 teachers have been excluded from the benefits of Teachers Ranking Plan merely for their activism, despite years of collective efforts of teachers to have this plan implemented. Some current officials in the Ministry of Education and the thirteenth administration consider trade union activists as "anti-revolutionary", highlighting the dominance of the security approach to trade union activity.

It is evident that, amidst all types of labor activists, teacher activists bore the brunt of the Iranian government's attention. For example, of all the labor union activists that were arbitrarily arrested by the end of September/ the beginning of October 2022, nearly all were teacher activists, [as data of the Center for Human Rights in Iran indicate](#). Below are the names, dates of arrest, and locations of these arrested teacher activists in September and early October:

In 2022, the Iranian government also sentenced some labor activists to long prison sentences, for the most part teachers. For instance, teachers' association key activists Mohammad Habibi, Jafar Ebrahimi and Rasool Bodaghi were each sentenced to 15 years in prison in November 2022 by the Tehran Revolutionary Court.

Arrested Labor Rights Activists in September/early October 2022

Leila Abbasi, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
 Jafar Valadkhan, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
 Ms. Ghelichkhani, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
 Mohammad Reza Nosrati, teachers' rights activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
 Melika Kavand, teachers' activist, September 21st, Bijar, western Iran
 Mozaffar Salehnia, Free Workers Union of Iran board member, September 21st, Sanandaj
 Shadi Aslani, teacher, September 21st, Sanandaj

Their court case was linked to the earlier arrests of French school teachers' union official Cécile Kohler and her partner Jacques Paris. Kohler and Paris' forced confessions, aired on Iranian state tv on the 8th of October 2022, stated that they had collaborated with Iranian teacher activists to pave the way for revolution and riots in Iran. Pointing to these 'admissions', the Iranian government, by means of the Tehran Revolutionary Court, subsequently issued long-term prison sentences for Habibi, Ebrahimi and Bodaghi.

¹¹ Esmail Abdi, a teachers' union leader who has been in prison since 2015 substantiated these observations in a message from jail in August 2023. In expressing gratitude to his supporters for their efforts to secure his release, Abdi underscored the widening scope of repression against teachers, highlighting that the challenges faced by educators have notably escalated in recent years.

Statistics on teachers arrested between May 2022 and September 2023

Volunteer Activists has conducted a comprehensive data gathering exercise to monitor the crackdown on the teacher movement in Iran. This involved collating information from a diverse range of sources, including official media outlets, independent organizations within Iran, and our extensive network. Presented herein is a summarized overview of the key statistics derived from the collected data. It is important to note that while we strive for thoroughness, the nature of our rigorous validation process for each data entry may mean that the dataset is not exhaustive.

220 teachers

were arrested in total

46

were released within
hours to days

108

are in custody or released
temporarily on bail

19

are waiting
court verdict

47

have been sentenced
to imprisonment

183

years of imprisonment
in total for 47 teachers

172/48

male/female ratio of
arrested teachers

From 41

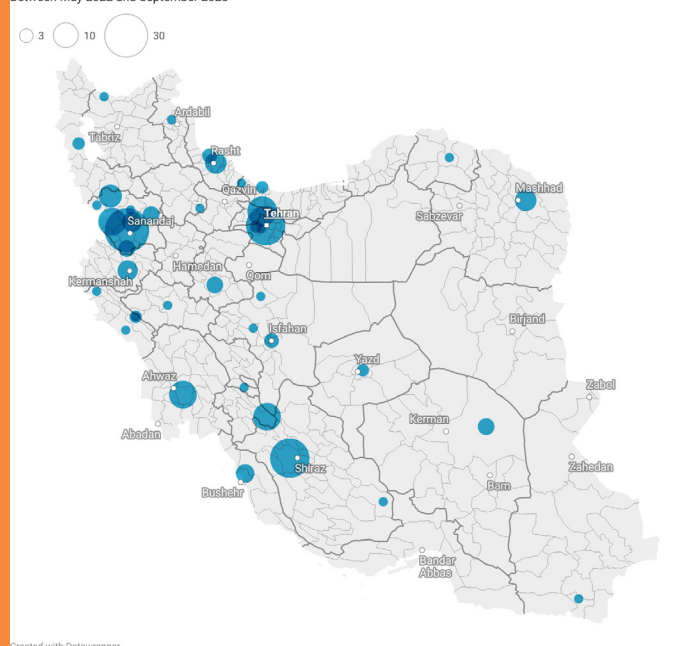
different cities

Top 10 cities where highest number of teachers were arrested between May 2022 and September 2023

Sanandaj	32
Tehran	25
Shiraz	25
Karaj	14
Marivan	12
Ahvaz	12
Yasooj	12
Saghez	8
Mashhad	7
Rasht	7

Number of teachers arrested per city

Between May 2022 and September 2023



Created with Datawrapper

Geographical dispersion of teachers being arrested.

Excessive bail costs

Meanwhile, arrested teacher activists were also hard hit financially, because of the relatively high bail that the Iranian judiciary demanded in exchange for their release. For instance, more than 150 billion Iranian Rial (~300,000 USD) was charged by the Iranian judiciary in the second half of 2022 for the release of 26 arbitrarily detained teachers. Such high bail sentences easily cause financial ruin. As CCITTA stated: "It puts extreme pressure on these trade union activists and their families and colleagues who have to put their homes and belongings up as collateral in lieu of cash."

Arbitrary arrests – 2023

The systematic and disproportionate targeting of teacher activist continued in 2023. The CCITTA's distinctive enthusiasm in supporting the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement is likely to have played a role in further escalating levels of state scrutiny and repression. The intertwining dynamics of a potent teacher trade union movement and active support for broader social movements evidently made teacher activists a focal point for the Iranian government's suppressive measures.

This is visible in governmental responses to the protests against the chemical attacks on (girls') schools in Iran on the 7th of March. Following CCITTA's call for action, protests unfolded in over 30 cities across Iran, with both teachers and parents expressing frustration at governmental inaction regarding the gas attacks, which are widely seen as a revenge for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests. However, teacher turnout was relatively low, and those who did participate often faced attacks by security forces. For instance, during a rally in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan province, [two teachers were injured](#), and state security agents arrested five others. At various other protests, notably in Rasht, Shiraz, Mashhad, and Karaj, there was also [a formidable state security presence](#), and subsequently, the protests there were also suppressed.

Another case in point is the violent arrest of Atekeh Rajabi on 9 May 2023, [for merely attending an assembly organized by CCITTA](#) to protest the deliberate poisoning of schoolgirls across Iran. She was sentenced to prison for six months on 21 August 2023, after she had already lost her job.

The intensified repression against teacher activists throughout 2022-2023 is also exemplified by Mohsen Omrani, a board member of the Iranian Teachers Trade Association in Bushehr province. Omrani was apprehended by security agents at his residence while on furlough from a previous sentence linked to his advocacy for pay for teachers and increased budgets for schools in Iran. In October 2023, this teacher activist found himself [facing his third trial](#) in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court in the city of Bushehr. The charges against him included „propaganda against the state“, after he had earlier been accused of posing 'a security threat' for merely peaceful protests. Meanwhile, the start of the school year in September 2023, was accompanied by [many new arrests](#).

Meanwhile, at least 47 teachers faced convictions and imprisonment in 2022 and 2023, showing the continued hard hand of the government. These convictions often resulted from trials that were sham proceedings, characterized by a severe absence of internationally recognized standards of due process, as indicated by [research conducted by CHRI](#). Their sole „crime“ was participating in peaceful protests against repressive state policies.

Eyewitness report

A teacher who had joined in the March 7 protests in Sanandaj [told](#) the Center for Human Rights in Iran how protesters had wanted to gather in front of the education department, but how: "Since the morning, riot police and security forces were present on both sides of the street. The protest began with slogans of 'Death to the Taliban, in Afghanistan and Iran,' and 'School safety is our undeniable right,' but soon security forces fired tear gas. Two of our retired colleagues, Mr. Bahaoddin Maleki and Varya Karimi, were detained. Plainclothes and uniformed officers were among the crowd, insulting teachers. Mr. Kamal Fakourian, Jabbar Pakzad, and Abed Ahmadi later went to the security police to follow up on the status of the detainees, and they were also taken into custody."

Table 2: List of 47 teacher activists who have been sentenced to prison or are in prison between May 2022 and September 2023. This information has been validated by Volunteer Activists.

Name	Gender	City	Extra information
Javad Lal Mohammadi	Male	Mashhad	Javad Lal Mohammadi is a teacher and civil activist. On August 9, 2022, he was sentenced to 8 years in prison by the Revolutionary Court of Mashhad. He is one of the 14 people who signed the letter requesting the resignation of the Supreme Leader. He has been sentenced to 21 years in prison in total with two court cases, part of which must be served. He is currently in prison.
Ali Hossein Shamayeli	Male	Kermanshah	Sentenced to 11 years and 10 months imprisonment for propaganda against the regime, inciting and seducing people.
Kiyumars Vaezi	Male	Kermanshah	Sentenced to 11 years and 10 months imprisonment for propaganda against the regime, inciting and seducing people.
Sattar Zareyee	Male	Khomeini Shahr	Sentenced to 4 months of imprisonment .
Hamid Mojiri	Male	Khomeynishahr	Sentenced to 7 months of imprisonment . After the completion of his sentence, he faced 3 months of dismissal from service, and an administrative violations of early retirement.
Farzaneh Nazeranpoor	Female	Tehran	Sentenced to 10 months imprisonment .
Abdul Razzagh Amiri	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment .
Zahra Esfandiyari	Female	Shiraz	Sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment .
Iraj Rahnama	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment .
Afshin Razmjoo	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment .
Mozhgan Bagheri	Female	Shiraz	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment .
Mohammad Ali Zahmatkesh	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for participating at a teachers rally.
Gholamreza Gholami Kandazei	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for participating at a teachers rally.
Zeynab Hamrang	Female	Tehran	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment on the charge of „association and collusion“.
Ahmad Alizadeh	Male	Ilam	Sentenced to 6 years and 1 day imprisonment for participating in union meetings, forming groups and groups of more than two people, and 7 Months and 16 days imprisonment for propaganda against regime. Furthermore, he has been dismissed from service for 2 years , and sentenced to 2 years of exile to the city of Fanuj at province of Sistan and Baluchistan, while also being banned from banned from activism online.

Name	Gender	City	Extra information
Aziz Ghasemzadeh	Male	Roodsar	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“. Ghasemzadeh is currently serving his sentence.
Anoosh Adeli	Male	Rasht	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“. Adeli is currently serving his sentence.
Mahmoud Sedighipoor	Male	Rasht	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“. Sedighipoor is currently serving his sentence.
Pirooz Nami	Male	Ahvaz	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment for „propaganda against the regime“, and 3 months suspension from service and removal of his rating. Furthermore, he is being charged for campaigning against the regime, association and collusion with the intention of disrupting internal security, and membership in groups whose purpose it is to disrupt the country's security.
Hossein Ramezanpoor	Male	Bejnurd	Previously sentenced to 6 months imprisonment , and 76 lashes for the crime of disturbing the public mind and propaganda against the regime. Now he is sentenced to 2 years imprisonment for being a board member of an illegal trade union group Farhangiyan North Khorasan, and he is currently serving his sentence.
Asghar Amirzadegan	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 8 months of imprisonment for „propaganda against the regime“.
Rohullah Mardani	Male	Karaj	Sentenced to 6 months of imprisonment
Salah Azadi	Male	Marivan	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment in the first branch of the Revolutionary Court of Marivan city for „propaganda against the regime“.
Seyvan Ibrahim	Male	Sanandaj	Sentenced to one year of penal servitude, exile to Dizelabad Prison in Kermanshah and 40 lashes on the charge of „disturbing public order“ by Sanandaj Criminal Court Branch 106. Another case has been filed against this civil activist in the first branch of Sanandaj Revolutionary Court on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“.
Omid Shah Mohammadi	Male	Bijar	Sentenced to four years of suspended imprisonment and one year of imprisonment . After serving half of his sentence until July 2022, he was released from Bijar prison, and the rest of his sentence will be served with electronic shackles.

Name	Gender	City	Extra information
Ismail Abdi	Male	Tehran	In 2015, Abdi was arrested in his personal home in Islamshahr, Tehran, and was sentenced to six years of penal servitude by Branch 36 of the Court of Appeals of Tehran province, and he has been in prison since that date. In May 2019 when he went to the Evin Prosecutor's Office to extend his leave leading to his release, he was arrested again and sent back to prison. He was charged with „propaganda against the regime“ (one year of imprisonment) and „disclosure of security information“ (9 years imprisonment).
Nahid Shir Bisheh	Female	Karaj	She is a teacher and one of the mothers of a plaintiff, who was arrested in November 2019. Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Karaj sentenced her to 5 years of imprisonment on September 30, 2022. She is now in prison.
Sara Siyahpoor	Female	Tehran	Sentenced to 6 years imprisonment, 2 years barred from leaving the country and 2 years of exclusion from professional and legal activities
Mohammad Habibi	Male	Tehran	Sentenced to 4 years and 7 months of imprisonment , for „propaganda against the regime“ and „collusion against the country's security with obscenity and vulgar words“
Hiva Ghoreishi	Female	Sanandaj	Sentenced to 5 years imprisonment for „acting against national security“
Atekeh Rajabi	Female	Mashhad	Sentenced to 6 months of imprisonment , for „propaganda against the regime“
Masoud Farhikhteh	Male	Tehran	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment and 74 lashes on the charge of „participating in illegal gatherings“.
Mohsen Omrani	Male	Bushehr	Sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment on the charge of „actions against national security, disruption of public order and peace, and resisting on-duty officers“.
Shaban Mohammadi	Male	Marivan	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran, insulting officials, and being a member of the opposition groups of the regime“.
Ahmad Taghavi	Male	Abhar	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“.

Name	Gender	City	Extra information
Mahmoud Melaki	Male	Bushehr	Sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment on the charge of „actions against national security, disruption of public order and peace, and resisting on-duty officers“.
Abdolreza Amanifard	Male	Bushehr	Sentenced to 4 months of imprisonment on the charge of „actions against national security, disruption of public order and peace, and resisting on-duty officers“.
Asghar Hajeb	Male	Bushehr	Sentenced to 4 months of imprisonment on the charge of „actions against national security, disruption of public order and peace, and resisting on-duty officers“.
Soleiman Abdi	Male	Saghez	Sentenced to 8 months of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“.
Rasool Bodaghi	Male	Tehran	Sentenced to 4 years and 6 months of imprisonment on the charge of „actions against national security, disruption of public order and peace, and resisting on-duty officers“.
Jafar Ibrahimi	Male	Tehran	Sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment on the charge of „assembly and collusion against national security“ and 2 years of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the regime“.
Hamid Jafari Nasrabadi	Male	Yasooj	Sentenced to 22 months of imprisonment in October 2022. In January 2023, Nasrabadi sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment on the charge of „spreading falsehood“ and 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „the contempt of judicial authority's order“.
Rahim Sarkar	Male	Ghazvin	Sentenced to 1 year of imprisonment on the charge of „propaganda against the state “ and „publishing falsehoods“.
Kaveh Mohammadzadeh	Male	Sanandaj	Sentenced to 5 years of suspended imprisonment on the charge of „action against national security“.
Keivan Mohtadi	Male	Tehran	Sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment on the charge of „assembling and colluding to act against national security“.
Hashem Khastar	Male	Mashhad	Sentenced to an additional 2 years and 6 months of imprisonment on the charge of „insulting the Supreme Leader of Iran“, while serving a 16 years of imprisonment sentence from 2019.
Mehdi Fathi	Male	Shiraz	Sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment on the charge of „assembly and collusion against national security,“ „propaganda against the regime,“ and „insulting the former and current Supreme Leader“.

Table 3: List of 19 teacher activists awaiting a court verdict in September 2023.

Name	Gender	City	Name	Gender	City
Abdul Reza Amanifar	Male	Bushehr	Kokab Bedaghi Pegah	Female	Ahvaz
Asghar Hajeb	Male	Bushehr	Siyamak Chehrazai	Male	Ahvaz
Ismail Khodayari	Male	Ghazvin	Ali Korushat	Male	Ahvaz
Mohammad Ghanati	Male	Arak	Moien Zargan	Male	Ahvaz
Masoud Wafayee	Male	Sanandaj	Shahriyar Shirvani	Male	Ahvaz
Seyvan Soleimani	Male	Marivan	Ighbal Tamoradi	Male	Ahvaz
Aram Mohammadi	Female	Marivan	Sadegh Naseri	Male	Ahvaz
Aram Ghaderi	Female	Marivan	Behniya Bahmaninezhad	Male	Ahvaz
Tahsin Mostafa	Male	Marivan	Emad Rafie	Male	Ahvaz
Zohreh Bakhtiyari	Female	Ahvaz			

Table 4: List of 108 teacher activists in custody or released on bail by September 2023.

Name	Name	Name	Name	Name
Somayeh Masumi	Latif Roozikhah	Ahmad Changizi	Hamid Jafari Nasr Abadi	Mohammad Sadegh Fahimi
Fariba Zand Karimi	Ammar Maraghi	Fariba Moieni	Leila Abbasi	Hamid Rahmati
Mohammad Sadeghi	Hamideh Zareie	Mohammad Ali Arabi	Hamid Reza Alikhani	Farhad Rahmani
Farzad Safikhanpoor	Siyamak Sedeghi	Mohammad Farzan	Aram Ibrahimi	Variya Ghaderiyan
Ahmad Heidari	Farhad Mirzaie	Mohammad Reza Moradi	Hamid Ghandi	Pari Aghaie
Zhaleh Roohzadeh	Naser Moosavi	Evazullah Safari	Ali Hasan Bahamin	Ammar Yari
Mohammad Alishvandi	Behnam Mohammadi	Kashkooli	Reihaneh Ansari Nezhad	Zhila Kheyr
Safa Maleki	Soheila Khaledi	Avat Razavi	Asal Mohammadi	Nilloofar Fathi
Sanaz Shoohani	Fatimeh Bahmani	Taher Hamedei	Hirad Pir Bedaghi	Abdullah Rezaie
Mohammad Inanloo	Mahdi Tafsiri	Loghmanullah Moradi	Anisa Asadullahi	Ameneh Zamani
Osman Rezaie	Iraj Tobeh Eyha	Ahmad Ghaderi	Sarvenaz Ahmadi	Mohammad Hasan Dawoodi
Mohammad Reza Behnam Nezhad	Hossein Ashrafi	Keyvan Ahmadi	Kamiyar Fakoor	Mohammad Saeedi
Morad Noshadi	Abolfazl Khoran	Khaled Sheikhi	Hasan Chetrabi	Abu Ishaghi
Ramezan Abu Nasri	Bahauddin Maleki	Salah Hosseini	Aldooz Hashemi	Maryam Jalalhosseini
Heshmati Rad	Zahed Soleimani	Zahed Moradi	Gholamreza Asghari	
Kobra Jabbari	Hossein Mahdipoor	Amanej Amini	Shahram Heidari	
Mohammad Taghi Falahi	Yaghub Zare	Hossein Mohammadi	Salah Sorkhi	
Sadegh Sedaghat	Rahim Zare	Salah Haj Mirzaie	Fatimeh Zand Karimi	
Osman Ismaili	Hajir Hojjati	Hesamuddin Mazloomi	Reza Moradi	
Fateh Osmani	Khadijeh Mobaraki	Parwiz Eyni	Kamran Asa	
Fatimeh Tadrissi	Behnam Asefja	Mohsen Shokuhi	Keyvan Mohtada	
Marziyeh Janipoor	Kourosh Jalil	Kamil Fatahi	Heidar Daraie	
Rasool Bedaghi	Saeedi Taheri		Shiva Amelirad	
	Soraya Aghaie		Milad Rabie	
	Sasan Zaghampoor		Ali Ameri	
	Hossein Ebadiyan			



Some of the teachers currently in prison due to their participation in protests or their CCITTA membership.

Source: [CCITTA Telegram channel](#)

Workplace retaliation

The governmental clampdown on teacher activists in 2022-23 is also visible in other measures. Besides arresting, torturing and/or incarcerating activist teachers¹² through revolutionary courts and disciplinary tribunals, the Iranian government increasingly employs workplace discrimination to silence dissident teacher voices. Punishments include dismissal, forced retirement, internal exile to remote areas in Iran with zero career prospects and wage cuts.

In addition, dissident teachers find themselves increasingly excluded from the benefits of the Teachers Ranking Law, designed to enhance wages and benefits. This law came into effect in the autumn of 2022, a decade after its initial proposal. [Reports](#) indicate that more than 250 educators have been denied the advantages outlined in this law, with the Iranian Teachers' Union Telegram channel identifying 67 individuals affected. Disturbingly, this exclusion appears to be directly linked to their participation in union and civil activities. Even though those covered by the ranking system experience a watered-down version of the original scheme (see text box), being part of the ranking system still offers more advantages than not being part of it.

Activists within the teachers' union argue that the government has, in essence, kept teachers' union rights hostage through a now discriminatory ranking system. This system seems to favor individuals who refrain from union activism or expressing objections to the existing conditions. It conveys a message that, despite the government's previous reluctance to implement ranking systems, it is now penalizing the most engaged and vigilant educators who were behind the ranking system's emergence, by depriving them of their rights—an action seemingly intended to serve as a deterrent to others who are considering activist ways.

Teacher ranking system concerns

Under the original Ranking Plan, teachers were supposed to receive the equivalent of 80% of the base salary of academic faculty members. However, during the ratification process, various notes and clauses were added, significantly diminishing the expected salary increase, especially in the face of soaring inflation rates. Consequently, teachers have become increasingly dissatisfied with the execution of the Ranking Plan. According to an opinion poll involving 4,080 teachers, a staggering 97% expressed unhappiness with the way the plan was being implemented.

¹² Meanwhile, electronic tagging is sometimes also used to monitor and intimidate activist teachers.

Hijab Bill

Finally, according to Clause 3 of Article 10 of the Hijab and Chastity Bill, which the Parliament approved for a three-year implementation in their public session on 20 September 2023, the Ministry of Education will now prepare „separate proper dress code guidelines for students, teachers, and staff based on Islamic culture tailored to age, regional, and geographical conditions, especially for rural and tribal areas“. And article 4 of the bill stipulates that the Ministry of Education is required to „apply continuous vetting from the beginning of recruitment and maintain the same standards of selection throughout the years of service, and to monitor the compliance with the ‚culture of chastity and hijab‘ for all teachers, teacher-students, and employees, whether permanent, probationary, contractual, or service-purchase staff“. This planned intensified and ongoing monitoring throughout their employment is yet another way of silencing and suppressing teachers.

Obstacles to Teacher Union Meetings in Iran

In an effort to frustrate the operation of trade associations affiliated with the council, the Iranian government also employs legal cases against activists involved in collective action, accusing them of compromising ‚national security.‘ These pending accusations have made it nearly impossible for teacher unions to hold legally allowed meetings, such as general assemblies, to connect with their supporters. Only a few associations, such as the Bushehr Teachers’ Trade Association, the Kurdistan Teachers’ Trade Association (Sanandaj and Kalatrazan branch), the Bijar Teachers’ Society, the Kurdistan Teachers’ Trade Association (Divandareh branch), and the Fars Teachers’ Trade Association, have managed to revive their associations, despite restrictions and legal cases against activists. Connecting with its supporters is, of course, crucial for trade unions to be able to function.

Consequences

The governmental policies aimed at suppressing Iranian teacher trade unions have, thus far, proven to be fairly successful. The heightened governmental repression throughout 2022-23 has acted as a deterrent, significantly impacting teacher organization and participation. For example, while numerous gatherings and protests took place at the beginning of 2022, attracting thousands of teachers, minimal teacher participation was observed when CCITTA called for strikes during the ‚Women, Life, Freedom‘ uprising. Calls for protests in March and May 2023 drew limited participants and faced severe suppression by security and police forces, particularly in Tehran. Overall, the severity of governmental suppression has placed the teacher movement at risk of fizzling out.

Petition Denied

The government’s determination to muzzle CCITTA is also evident in a recent occurrence. Approximately 1,200 teachers’ rights activists endorsed a petition urging the liberation of detained teachers and an end to the prosecution of activists in the first week of July 2023. However, the Iranian president and the head of the judiciary rejected the petition sent through the post, asserting that it represented only 1% of the teaching population. In response, CCITTA [launched a renewed effort on 14 July 2023](#), urging both active and retired teachers, totaling more than 1.8 million, to sign a new petition, emphasizing the collective nature of this appeal within the teaching profession. By September 2023, over 36,000 teachers had signed the new petition. Nevertheless, the authorities declined to accept this latest petition as well, reflecting continued resistance and hostility to acknowledge the collective voice of the teaching community.

4 Conclusion & Way Forward

The Iranian teachers' trade union movement has traditionally faced considerable governmental pressure and crackdowns. In spite of these pressures, it rose to become Iran's most powerful trade union. The fact that it operates nationwide, and has branches in all major Iranian cities, is, alongside its ability to innovate, an important reason. However, since May 2021, the conditions in which it operates have significantly deteriorated. The conservative administration of president Ebrahim Raisi has systematically tightened its grip, hindering the space for advocacy. To this end, the government employs a repertoire of tactics, including arrests, torture and workplace retaliation, amplifying the oppression.

An important reason for this tighter governmental grip is the expanding scope of CCITTA. Starting off as a union focused solely on teachers' rights, CCITTA soon turned to its education itself as well. Still, as such it kept its activities confined to the professional world of teachers. While this in itself already evoked the anger of the Iranian authorities to the point that the movement was quieting down, the fact that CCITTA soon joined and supported the calls of the Women, Life, Liberty movement and sought to support high school students joining this revolt, led to even more governmental wrath.

All in all, the teachers' trade union movement operates in increasingly challenging conditions within Iran and conditions continue to deteriorate. It is imperative that CCITTA can not only withstand the increasing repression from the Iranian state but, ideally, operate more robustly and even flourish. Several compelling reasons support this imperative. Firstly, from a moral standpoint, ensuring that teachers receive fair and sustainable compensation, and that education remains universally accessible is crucial. CCITTA stands as a vital advocate for realizing these ethical objectives.

Secondly, being one of the most influential unions in Iran, CCITTA serves as a beacon for smaller, less influential unions or civil society organizations. The potential decline of this trade union movement could reverberate negatively within broader activist circles in Iran, impacting morale and effectiveness.

Lastly, positioned as a moderate force deeply rooted in society, CCITTA has the potential to play a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation amid potential future conflicts in Iran. It could bring various parties together and foster a constructive approach to resolving societal challenges.

All in all, it is imperative that CCITTA can continue to exist and be effective. To maximize the chances for this, the following measures could be taken:

By CCITTA:

Revive trade associations through holding general assemblies and elections: The teachers' movement must reengage with its constituents through holding general assemblies and elections. Otherwise, teachers have no way to exhibit their power of representation in the face of the education system and the state. This strategy of stakeholder engagement is key as the regime represses any type of field action and has increased the cost of radicalized activism. If face-to-face meetings are not a possibility due to security risks, online meetings could be considered.

Raise awareness of trade association activities: Trade associations should hold online workshops and provide access to updated information online, contributing to a higher level of awareness among their (prospective) members.

Optimize social network communications: Despite extensive governmental filtering, social networks and

social media provide excellent platforms for liaising between associations, teachers, and other stakeholders such as students and their parents. The teachers' trade movement could further expand its use of these tools to broaden its network and better disseminate its message.

Form alliances and coalitions with similar activist groups: The teachers' trade union movement is a progressive movement and was organized to represent demands of all teachers while connecting them with the socioeconomic concerns of the middle and working classes. To complete this mission successfully, the movement should continue to cooperate and form coalitions with others trade rights activist groups around mutual interests, regardless of ideological predispositions. This form of cooperation can also be extended to other independent civil organizations.

By the International Community:

Promote Resilience through Training: Invest in the development of targeted training programs, including online initiatives, for besieged Iranian teacher activists. These programs could, for instance, focus on increasing mental resilience and on the acquisition of essential ICT skills to enhance online safety.

Promote Resilience through Exchange: Invest in programs that facilitate connections between Iranian teacher trade unionists and colleagues worldwide. This exchange will enable mutual learning and support.

Enhance Publicity: The international community, including labor rights groups, policymakers, and activists, should leverage their extensive communication platforms to echo and amplify the voices of Iranian teachers and activists. Raise awareness of violations of the rights to freedom of association and assembly in Iran. Engage with journalists to gauge their interest in covering this critical topic.

Use Diplomacy: raise awareness of the plight of Iranian teachers at international forums: International organizations, policymakers, and activists should exert pressure on Iran to uphold international treaties on human rights. Specifically, demand the immediate release of all trade unionists detained in connection with their union activities and ensure the right to freedom of association and assembly for all citizens.

Raise Iranian Teachers' Demands at ILO: International unions should bring attention to the plight of Iranian teachers and other independent labor associations at the International Labour Organization (ILO). Urge Iranian authorities to ratify Conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and collective bargaining. Challenge Iran's role as head and coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Group (ASPAG) within the ILO, given its systematic violation of workers' rights, including the right to free assembly.

Hold Iran accountable through other U.N. mechanisms: The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association should document, investigate, and publicly highlight the demands of teacher associations and the regime's ongoing crackdown on the teacher movement.

The **Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran**, created by the U.N.'s Human Rights Council in November 2022, should investigate and document the crackdown on the teachers' trade movement. Highlight these findings in its final report in March 2024.

The release of CCITTA spokesman Mohammad Habibi on February 8, 2023 underscores the impactful consequences of both international publicity and diplomacy. His case garnered widespread international attention, with extensive coverage from the media, and drew significant focus from organizations such as Amnesty International. However, numerous other teacher activists continue to be incarcerated.

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.

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