The Control of Dissent in Iranian Universities
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Introduction

This paper examines the techniques of control enacted towards universities and student activism in Iran. From a theoretical point of view, the paper elaborates on the literature focusing on the social control of dissent. This focus allows the overcoming of the studies on the ‘policing of protests’ for two reasons. First, it focuses on the control that the society as a whole enacts (and not only on the repressive apparatus) to include the techniques of power as theorised by Foucault through the notion of gouvernamentalité. In particular, the paper targets those dynamics of control that are interiorised and produce self-discipline. Second, building on Starr, Fernandez and Scholl (2011) focusing on the social control of dissent allows a broader perspective on those who would dissent but are discouraged to do so by the devices of control that this paper takes into examination and by the society at large. The ‘policing of protest’ studies indeed focus on repression as carried out by the police, the army or other para/military corpse during the protests, whereas the concern here is how dissent is contained and discouraged before, during and after the protests. Scholars have already argued that violent repression is only one means for controlling domestic dissent and dissenter, and that that social control is enacted in subtle ways by all members of a society (Bank and Richter 2010). What is the impact of those dynamics of control on the larger society? How the larger society impacts on potential dissenters?

In the past decade, scholars of Middle East Studies have engaged the issue of control and repression extensively. Studies on the so-called ‘authoritarian resilience’ (Heydemann 2007, Schlumberger 2004, Posusney 2004, Heydemann and Leenders 2011) have flourished and examined a number of issues in politics and society: civil society (Aarts and Cavatorta 2013, Wiktorowicz 2000; Carothers, 2002; Schlumberger

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and Albrecht, 2004; Schlumberger, 2010; Liverani, 2008; Cavatorta and Durac, 2010; Jamal 2007), economy (Haddad 2013, Hibou 2006), the international dimension of authoritarian stability (Cavatorta 2007, Durac and Cavatorta 2010). The military and, more generally, security apparatus have not been at the centre of scholarly interests in the belief that authoritarian rule is sustained by a bigger number of intertwined factors. More recently, due to the important role that the militaries are undertaking in North Africa and the Arab world, a more attentive focus has been addressed toward the military. Anyway, such attention focuses on the examination of the economic and political connections that make militaries this strong: this is valid in particular for Iran, which has been narrated as a ‘military dictatorship’ during the last years, and for Egypt. Few have turned their attention to the repressive techniques adopted by the security forces. One exception is the case of Turkey and the repression against Taskim protest movement (Jadaliyya, Turkey page, 2013).

Despite the righteousness of the assumption about the faceted nature of authoritarian rule, Middle Eastern Studies have neglected the important issues coming with the studies of techniques of control. In particular, two issues have been overlooked. First is the social and enlarged dimension of control. This is of course particularly difficult to assess, in particular in an authoritarian context where fewer civil and social liberties are granted. Anyway, the larger dimension of social control has been largely overlooked or poorly assessed.

Second, attention to specific reforms in the field of social security and military has been missing among the scholars of Middle Eastern Studies. This is because of the over-presence of two seemingly competing paradigms for explaining the political dynamics in the MENA region. In particular, since early 2000, scholars have been focusing on transitology on the one side, and authoritarian resilience on the other. ‘Transitology’ is the science examining the democratization of Middle Eastern countries by ‘spotting democratic enclaves’ in society and highlighting the potential for democratization of government-led liberalizations (Anderson 2006). Transitology has become a ‘science’ as its normative and teleological nature did not leave any room for alternative political development but democratization (Carothers 2002). Transitology built a taxonomy out of democratic transition: the success of democratic reforms was perceived as advancement on the road to a fully democratic system, whereas the failure of
democratic reforms was perceived as a temporary setback, an impasse, on that road. The Middle East has been studied through these lenses for decades, but in early 2000s it became evident that the much awaited democratization was actually not taking place, and that ‘transitology’ had lost its explanatory power. Following from this consideration, a new paradigm developed, embodying a sort of reaction to transitology’s optimism (justified by the examples of Eastern Europe and Latin America). This paradigm had at its core the notion that authoritarian regimes were there to stay and held that the efforts for promoting democracy were actually useless because authoritarians went ‘smart’ and were able to adapt and cope with such efforts. This was the notion of ‘upgrading authoritarianism’ (Heydemann 2007) which was able to explain the persistence of authoritarianism despite liberalization (Hinnebusch 2006). Despite being still enlightening of some dynamics (Heydemann and Leenders 2011), both democratic transition and authoritarian resilience have a degree of rigidity which has prevented scholars to focus on a number of important issues, one of these being reforms and management of public order and internal dissent. Both paradigms, indeed, understand all social and political phenomena as conducive to either democratization or authoritarian strengthening, without focusing specifically on the way social control is enacted; self-discipline is engendered; and public order persevered. Rather, the focus has been on the outcome (democratization vs authoritarian stability) of such measures. Furthermore, the extensive attention on the dynamics of change vs stability has also neglected the fact that the management of social order and dissent is a global phenomenon and such are the technologies and practices adopted. Finally, the presence of many authoritarian regimes in the MENA region has somehow played down the importance of the repressive apparatuses at the researchers’ eyes, and has prevented them to contrast these apparatuses in authoritarian context and those in advanced democracies (Western Europe, Canada and the US). Of course, such limitations (with very few exceptions: Cavatorta 2010; Teti and Mura 2013) have weakened our understanding of a number of issues linked to both transnational and national dynamics of control.

Beyond the field of Middle Eastern Studies, researchers of protest movements, protest-policing and criminology have not turned their attention to Middle Eastern countries. Mainly focusing on the ‘free world,’ authoritarian regimes have been left
behind because of a prejudice (authoritarian regime are repressive. Then what studying their repressive apparatuses for?). However, being this author quite convinced that comparing seemingly opposite contexts is positive and should be done more frequently, the studies on how control is exerted in the free world suggest a number of important findings we shall use in the examination of authoritarian regimes. In particular, Gary Marx’s extensive work on surveillance (1970), Jennifer Earl’s attempt of dissecting movement repression (2003), Karl Opp and Wolfang Roehl’s conceptualisation of ‘micromobilisation’ (1990) as a consequence to repression bring important findings and interesting points. In 1998, Donatella Della Porta and Hebert Reiter edited a two-volume book on policing the protest. The volume determined that negotiation had for the most part replaced escalated force in Western Europe and the US. Eight years later, the same authors plus Abby Peterson revised this finding, questioning its validity (2006). In particular, Peterson suggests that there has been a shift to pre-emptive policing, selective to be sure but not reserved for violent or extremist activists only. In particular, she noticed that protest communities are not recognised as political subjects but are treated as a public-order/security problem or as an ‘emergency issue’ (Peterson et al. 2006). Noakes and Gillham (2006) follow on this argument, determining that neither ‘escalated force’ nor ‘negotiation’ fully captures what is going on. Instead, ‘re-arrangement,’ ‘detention’ and disruption are used to accomplish ‘strategic incapacitation’ particularly of protesters who do not comply with the request of predictable forms of protest or other similar requests. This ‘selective exclusion’ or ‘strategic incapacitation’ is very similar to what many scholars of the Middle East have described as the authoritarian regimes’ strategy in managing political pluralism and political, when under European or American pressure for democratization. The ‘politics of participation’ described by Bank and Richter (2010) is the selective engagement of those civil or political actors who do no challenge the rule of authoritarians (Rivetti 2013). It is however Starr, Fernandez and Scholl (2011) who expand the concept of ‘policing the protest’ to include many pre-emptive tactics such as blocking access, intimidating activists, conducting broad-scales often illegal searches, raids, confiscating or incapacitating protest resources along a diachronic pattern, thus including actions before, during and after the protests. Moreover, the three authors also expand the notion of ‘control’ in order to consider not only violence against the body but also against
social space and minds. Building on Alberto Melucci’s theorisation of the connection between the individual and the social, Starr, Fernanez and Scholl define space as having particular ‘every-day’ institutional qualities that nurture social movements, such as privacy, trust, legal protection (the certainty of law) and independence; and expand the notion of control in order to include ‘society at large’ as exerting such a control on the one side, and ‘would-be protesters’ who are discourage to mobilise because of control on the other side.

This paper tries to bridge such findings with authoritarian resilience in the Middle East, through the examination of control techniques in Iranian universities. Universities indeed are both the locus of dissent par excellence, and the place where values, ideas, beliefs are imposed to the young generations through education via discipline (Masschelein et al. 2006, Fekete 1996). In Iran, higher education is not only socially valuable but is also expanding fast. Anti-regime/anti-government protests have often sparked from the campuses but campuses are also an important center for and of pro-regime activities.

The paper will examine control on Iranian universities following three dimensions of such control. First is the technique of distinguishing the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ through ‘selective inclusion/exclusion’. The second dimension is regime’s infiltration of student groups. This technique has resulted in a turnover of the groups existing on the campuses in Iran, eliminating those who were not accomplishing with the regime’s policies. The third dimension is violence and violent repression. Except for the 2009 crisis, in the last years, the paper contends, the role of violence has been downplayed thanks to the success of infiltration.

**University and higher education system in Iran. Historical and political overview**

Since the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934 by Reza Shah Pahlavi, universities have been an important arena where regimes have tried to forge national identity and form an educated political élite and where at the same time opposition movements have tried to mobilise support. During Reza Shah’s reign, the university population was both rather small and homogeneous, a situation which changed due to the opportunities ushered in by the political opening up that took place between 1941
and 1953. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah, had ambitious plans for the Iranian higher education sector. As he wanted Iran to become one of the most developed countries in the world, he needed well-prepared and educated technicians and intellectuals to lead such a process, and he therefore established more campuses and increased scholarships for studying abroad (Djalili 1974). Ironically this provided the anti-Shah students with the opportunity to meet and organise both domestically and abroad (where approximately 30,000 resided, according to Matin-Asgari 2002) to express their dissent despite the harsh repression (Razavi 2009).

Thus, when the revolution erupted in 1979, the universities were hotbeds of activism. A witness recalls that period as one in which various political groups established their headquarters on the campuses and universities became the most active political arena in society, to the point that the then government was afraid of losing control over the whole anti-Shah student movement. Another witness, who took active part in the management of universities after the revolution, explains that the conflict within campuses came to an end with the Cultural Revolution (1980-1983). The university system was under strong pressure as it was perceived to be a legacy of the former unwanted regime and some clerics saw it as posing a challenge to the religious seminaries (the Howzeh). As he put it: ‘The universities needed control. I was part of the delegation which exposed this problem to Khomeini: it was on that day that the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat was born’. Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat va Daneshgah (Office for the Strengthening of Unity between the Islamic Schools and the Universities, DTV) is an umbrella organisation whose central office coordinates all the Islamic associations in the individual universities. For many years to come it would

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2 In 1941, the Shah Reza Pahlavi was forced to abdicate by the Allies and an opening up of the political system occurred up until 1951-1953, when the coup against Mohammad Mossadeq and the restoration of the Pahlavi regime with the ascension to power of Reza Shah’s son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, took place.

3 Personal interview with an Iranian leading politician, Tehran, June 2007. He held important institutional functions and headed a dissident semi-legal party, the Liberation Movement (Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran). Although seriously ill, he has been recently arrested.

4 Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008. He was a founder-member of the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat and the Islamic Participation Front, which supported Khatami’s government. He was an advisor to Mehdi Karroubi in the 2009 Presidential elections. A journalist at the newspaper Salam, he also writes for the online newspaper Rooz Online (www.roozonline.com).
constitute the main networking hub for politically active students whose engagement in politics took them beyond the world of the campus.\(^5\)

The delegation visiting Khomeini was composed of many soon-to-be main players in Iranian politics such as Seyyed Ali Khamene’i and Abdol Hasan Bani Sadr.\(^6\) The group was not ideologically homogeneous, and it was Mousavi Khomeiniha (member of the ‘so-called’ Islamic Leftist faction) who emerged as the dominant leader: he enjoyed many connections with the Islamic students’ groups, which is why the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979 involved so many students. From that time on, up until the advent of Ahmadinejad, the cultural hegemony of the Islamic left was firmly established within universities and the DTV.

It was Khomeini who called for a cultural revolution, but many others echoed his words. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Islamic leftist prime minister between 1981 and 1989 and later well-known reformist who accused Ahmadinejad of having stolen the 2009 election, stated that ‘universities are not a place for motakhasses (professionals) but are a place for maktabi (pious and engaged religious persons) who at the same time are learning a profession (takhassus). We cannot accept anything other than to have a maktabi university’ (Razavi 2009, p. 4). In those early heady days of the Islamic Republic, Mousavi’s wife described the universities as ‘nests of spies,’ although she herself had headed the Al-Zahra University in Tehran for many years (ibidem). The immediate practical consequence of these accusations was the closing down of all universities from 1980 until 1983 and the Islamisation of the curricula and of the general atmosphere of the universities. In 1980, a special council, the Cultural Revolution Council, was established in order to implement this programme. Among the members of the council were Abdolkarim Soroush (the famous philosopher, who today stands accused by the conservatives of being Western-oriented) and Ali Khamene’i

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\(^5\) Until 1993 only members of the Islamic associations elected the members of the central office. Since that date all students have been able to cast their vote.

\(^6\) Khamene’i is the current Supreme Leader, the Rahbar. Bani Sadr was the first president of the Islamic Republic: he was deposed in 1981 and now lives in exile in Paris. Other members were Mohammad Mousavi Khomeiniha, a leading cleric and founder of the Majma-e Rohaniyoun Mobarez, the Assembly of the Militant Clerics (the Islamic leftist group, supportive of president Khatami); Mojtahed Shabestari is a democratic-reformist Ayatollah; Peiman Habibollah is an influential member of the Religious-Nationalist Alliance; Hasan Habibi served as Minister of Justice and vice-president in both the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations (till 2001).
(currently Supreme Leader). The mission of the council was to supervise the Islamisation of the universities, which was accompanied by massive purges and the hiring of new ‘selected’ faculty members and the admission of new students.

The Cultural Revolution still occupies an important place in the memories of the reformist and democratic students, the present-day members of the DTV. The youngest generation of activists defines those years as a ‘betrayal’ of the then revolutionary ideals of the students. The Cultural Revolution brought about a major change in the student population in universities. Facilities for students from lower-class backgrounds were introduced and, as a result of the faculty purges, a significant number of wealthy and upper-middle class families sent their sons and daughters to universities abroad or to the private Islamic Azad universities. The emphasis on religious adherence and moral rectitude as admission criteria, as well as the introduction of admission quotas for the children or relatives of war veterans and Basij members (a volunteer militia force), changed the character of the student body both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The end of the war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini helped a new era to take shape. At the political level, the Islamic left was pushed aside by the election of Hashemi Rafsanjani as President of the Republic and the nomination of Ayatollah Khamene’i as Supreme Leader of the Revolution. Both these men were hostile to the Islamic left. As the DTV, the only student organisation in the country, was strongly linked to the Islamic left, the government made great efforts to weaken it, by generating factionalism within the campus – a factionalism which mirrored the political divisions within the national political landscape. Student Basij units were introduced in universities and a new student group (the Islamic Association of the Student Basij)

7 Other members were Mostafa Moin (former Minister of Science and staunch reformist, accused today of being too liberal by the conservatives) and Hassan Habibi.
8 According to Abdolkarim Sorouh, 700 out of 12,000 professors and assistants were purged and some 200,000 students were dismissed. See Matin Ghaffarian, One Cultural Revolution was enough: An Interview with Abdolkarim Sorouh, June 2007: available at: www.drsoroush.com. Other sources give much higher figures, and state 8,000 to be the number of assistants and professors purged (Ali Aziminejad cited in Razavi, op. cit. in note 9, p. 6).
9 The private Azad Universities were established in 1982 to offer an alternative to the public universities, which were then closed down.
10 The organisation was headed by Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, and later changed its name to the Union of Islamic Students. Tabarzadi broke with the DTV in 1991 and established this group. The group also published a magazine, ‘Nameh-ye payam daneshjuy-e basij’ ['The message of the Basij student']. However, the group quickly developed increasingly critical positions towards the regime. Tabarzadi has been in jail since December 2009. See Ali Akbar Mahdi, The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis, vol. 15, no. 2, 1999, p. 11.
was established in 1992, under the auspices of the government. The creation of the student *Basij* units was accompanied by a law which introduced a special quota for student *Basij* members to enter universities.

Furthermore, the Cultural Revolution Council passed new guidelines for choosing university councils and presidents. Under these new rules Islamic leftist students were prevented from participating in such councils and influencing the nomination of the highest university functionaries, who decided on the legal status of student associations. A new office was also established, the Office of Representatives of the Supreme Leader, which had a permanent presence in universities.  

Reza Razavi also reports that voices were raised in favour of disbanding the DTV: its formation in the early days of the revolution had been designed to unite all Islamic groups within universities against the opposition, composed mainly of Marxist and liberal parties; since by the 1990s the existence of the Islamic Republic was secured, some conservatives argued, the DTV’s existence made no sense and thus it should be dissolved.

But the introduction from above of new student organisations had unintended consequences: instead of marginalising the DTV, it created a new configuration of political alternatives on the campus, since the DTV became more aware of its own distinctive identity and allegiances. Up to that moment, the *Basij* and the DTV were not ideologically very different, but the arrival of the former on the campuses led to the polarisation of the two organisations. According to a former student: ‘We discovered our difference. The content of that difference was suggested in Dr. Soroush’s and Dr. Mohsen Kadivar’s lectures’. The presence of Abdolkarim Soroush among the lecturers of the University of Tehran is cited as one of the most important factors that helped transform the DTV from a loyal ally of the regime into a critic of the regime’s increasing authoritarianism. It began to call for more democratic accountability and more freedom of expression. In 1997, these positions and its dependence upon the Islamic left, which was itself undergoing a transition from the intransigency of the past to a reformist stance, led the DTV to support Khatami’s presidential candidacy.

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11 See ibid, pp. 8–11.  
12 Reza Razavi, op. cit. in note 9, p. 9.  
13 Personal interview, Tehran, June 2007. Kadivar is an outspoken reformist cleric who now lives in exile in the United States.
From a social point of view, at the beginning of the 1990s the Islamic Republic was confronted with tumultuous change. Having emerged from a decade of war, followed by the death of Khomeini, it now needed to find a way to reintegrate the international political and economic system. In this transition to a post-revolutionary society, the universities of the Islamic Republic lost their former homogeneity as the numbers of students in higher education increased and the students and faculties became more politically diversified, leading to internal diversification of student movements. In this regard the universities mirrored the broader transformation taking place in Iranian society. The number of students rose from 150,000 in 1976 to 1,150,000 in 1996, and this exponential growth was to a large degree due to the increasing number of female students. This particular aspect became a source of concern for the conservatives, since it presented the DTV with new opportunities for recruitment.

Universities are a space for the socialisation of beliefs and values. This can be a threat as well as an opportunity for ruling elites. The expansion of higher education provided the reformists and the Islamic left with a good opportunity to strengthen the alliance with the students. When Mohammad Khatami inaugurated his campaign for the 1997 presidential election, whose keywords were ‘democracy’, ‘civil society’ and ‘rule of law’, the students were urged to become actively involved through the DTV. The special relation that Khatami’s administration was establishing with the DTV, however, went soon under criticism on the part of the students.

The ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ student and infiltration among students groups

This section examines two techniques that have been adopted by two governments with seemingly opposing political orientations. On the one side, Khatami’s government (1997-2005) and on the other side, Ahmadinejad’s administration (2005-2013), whose priorities were anti-imperialism and national independence: even in the higher education system the quest for ‘Islamic science’ has been one of the crucial key-words. Despite this significant difference, many of the techniques adopted in order to contain and control dissent in the universities have been the same. The argument is that co-optation, ‘selective inclusion’ and infiltration have been used by both governments (reformist and moderate vs hard-line and conservative) in order to discourage radical or

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confrontational student activism on the campuses. Such techniques also included the need of discrediting some groups and of creating an unsafe environment on the campuses, in order to break the boundaries of trust among the activists. Of particular interest are the techniques of infiltration among activists. During Ahmadinejad’s government in particular some groups have been strengthened and other weakened.

**Khatami: selective co-optation**

Reformist students have long played an active role in the factional politics of the Islamic Republic, supporting the Islamic left. Universities were a real stronghold of the reformists during Khatami’s first presidential term, and the DTV and Islamic associations of every university were transformed into electoral headquarters for the reformists during Khatami’s presidential campaign and the 2000 parliamentary elections. For many, this showed that the DTV had never had any political independence to begin with. The reformist government headed by Khatami paid this loyalty back by giving favourable treatment to the DTV students and allowing the organisation a great deal of political visibility. Thus Khatami’s presidency represented a new opportunity for the DTV and student activism.

Khatami was central to the promotion of student activism both personally as well as by virtue of the importance of his office in the institutional governing of Iranian universities. As the head of the Council of the Cultural Revolution, the President supervises the nomination of university chancellors, the devising of curricula, the selection of student candidates, and finally promotes the ideological and political order on university campuses.

But the alliance between the DTV and the reformist faction proved to be a precarious one. The first step towards a breakdown was the July 1999 student protests, which were sparked by a factional dispute over newly passed amendments to the press law. Students considered the amendments, approved by a parliament dominated by conservatives, to be yet another restriction on the freedom of speech and the press. Thus

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15 See Mashayekhi, op. cit. in note 4, p. 296 and following pages.
16 The interviewees who were active members of the DTV supported such a view. The interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008 in Iran, and in 2011 in Turkey.
17 For an example of Khatami’s attitude toward university students, see the video of one of his visits to Tehran University in 2002, where he was met with vociferous protests from angry students. The video is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrZw-yGllyTk.
18 See Mahdi, op. cit. in note , pp. 13 and following pages.
when *Salam*, one of the well-known Islamic-leftist newspapers, was closed down as a consequence of this new law, the students staged a peaceful protest. The protest was followed by a bloody attack by paramilitary forces (among which Ansar-e Hezbollah and sections of the *Basij*) on the student dormitory in Amirabad in Tehran. Several people are known to have been killed and many wounded, but precise figures are not available.\(^{19}\) The students asked Khatami to support them, but he described the protests as ‘an attack on national security.’\(^{20}\) Many within the reformist front shared this attitude, probably because they feared an uncontrolled escalation of violence.\(^{21}\)

This led to a major debate on the role of students in politics, but the DTV’s membership in Dovvom-e Khordad, the coalition that was created to support the reformist candidate at the 2000 parliamentary election, delayed a standoff with the regime somewhat.\(^{22}\)

In 2002, however, the debate led to the splitting of the DTV into two branches and the severing of ties with Dovvom-e Khordad. The Allameh branch, the majority, advocated an independent democratic opposition to the conservatives ‘from below’, within society and outside institutions, whereas the Shiraz minority branch joined the conservative camp. The Allameh students were determined to act as a sort of ‘watchdog’ and counterbalance to the government, because they judged the government to be unable to foster a path to democracy for Iran.\(^{23}\) They set up a number of special commissions to establish collaboration with organisations outside the universities, such as women’s NGOs and the bus drivers’ trade union for example: according to the students, an extra-institutional alliance of citizens and ‘civil society’ was much more likely to usher in the much awaited transition to democracy.\(^{24}\)

This independent attitude and critical stance was not welcomed by the reformists, who accused the students of being manipulated by foreign powers – a heinous

\(^{19}\) *Hamshahri* reported 5 dead, 11 July 1999.


\(^{21}\) *Khordad*, 8 June 1999. Behzad Nabavi, a reformist deputy, accused the students of creating confusion in the country.


\(^{23}\) Personal interview with a member of the DTV, Tehran, 2008.

\(^{24}\) Personal interview with a female student member of the Special Commission for Women within the DTV, Tehran, 2008. See also the magazine *Gozaar*, no. 11, 2007 (www.gozaar.org).
accusation in Iran.\textsuperscript{25} The DTV brought this conflict into the public arena, and was marginalised and excluded by the very same government it had supported. To borrow the metaphor of one reformist politician and former leader of the DTV, the students were ‘swept away like grains of sand, no longer protected by the desert;’\textsuperscript{26} factionalism was the only approved model for governing university campuses and the student movement and the independent attitude of the DTV was interpreted as a betrayal and an unacceptable option, eventually leading to their marginalisation.

Thus, one of the outcomes of the shifting relationship between Khatami’s government and the DTV was the disintegration of the unity of the students: hit by ‘friendly fire’, the DTV broke up into several smaller groups which spanned a broad ideological spectrum, ranging from conservatism, as in the Shiraz group, to radical liberalism.\textsuperscript{27} The government’s determination to force the DTV to submit to a factional-reformist allegiance led the student organisation to exit from the political game altogether. Ironically, this was a great boon to Ahmadinejad’s efforts to bring the universities to heel, and detrimental to the reformists who lost an important support base.

The oppressive atmosphere is best described by the students themselves: many of them underline the fact that the youngest students now feared to be seen with activists, to such an extent that even to ‘have a chat is thought of as too dangerous.’\textsuperscript{28} Thanks to governmental support, being a Basi\textsuperscript{i}j is seen as a more rewarding and opportune option than engaging in opposition activities.

**Ahmadinejad: exclusion and the taking over of the campuses**

Regimes and governments of all sorts employ a variety of means to shape the political identity of future citizens while they are still students. In the Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) this means that the student Basi\textsuperscript{i}j units receive financial and political help enabling them to become stronger and bigger. When the student Basi\textsuperscript{i}j units were first created their functions were diverse and consisted mainly of welcoming the new

\textsuperscript{25} Mehdi Karroubi had done likewise in 2003, when the DTV organised protests against a hike in tuition fees. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 16 June 2003.

\textsuperscript{26} Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008.

\textsuperscript{27} Such as the association of liberal students (anjoman-e danesh\textsuperscript{j}uian liberal), still active in Iran. It is not recognised as a lawful student organisation. Some of his members are among the 19 activists who signed a letter calling for isolating the Islamic Republic.

\textsuperscript{28} Personal interview with a former member of the DTV, Tehran, August-September 2008.
students and performing other ‘representational’ duties. Their task was to control and contain the DTV as well, but until Khatami’s victory in 1997 they were not endowed with a role beyond the confines of the universities. It was only after the rise and strengthening of the reform movement that the Basij units became an operational tool in the hands of the conservatives to suppress active reformist groups. The Basij presence on campuses was then reinforced by a law passed in 1998, which changed the Basij units into a military institution and allowed the presence of military units in the universities.29 This ‘new’ role of the Basij units became even clearer during the suppression of the student protests in July 1999. Since the late 1990s, some new regulations for Basij units in universities have been adopted. For example, 40 percent of the total number of places for new students entering the universities every year has been reserved for active Basij students. At the national level, the Student Basij Organisation has grown substantially in recent years: in 2004, the student Basij in Iranian universities numbered some 420,000, and by 2007 they had increased to 600,000.30 These developments have changed the student population. In the state universities, it was only after 2005 that the special quota for Basij was introduced.

The establishment of the Basij in the universities has been important to Ahmadinejad and conservatives in the post-Khatami era since they are a key instrument for challenging the reformists’ domination over the campuses and for suppressing opposition and student dissent. During Ahmadinejad’s first presidential term (2005-2009) there was talk of a projected second cultural revolution, as the government moved to enforce Islamic values and purge universities of ‘liberal’ and ‘Western’ views, introduced thanks to the ‘moral lasciviousness’ of the ‘Rafsanjanists’ and reformists. The Basij units were at the forefront of that project, enjoying some related privileges (e.g. a special university admissions quota, discounts on books and food, access to sports facilities, pilgrimages, travel and entertainment),31 enticements which especially appeal to students (both male and female) from poor and conservative families, whose

29 A move which, according to one of the author’s interviewees, was supported by Said Hajjarian, a former member of the Institute of Security and Strategic Research and a leader of the reformists who, in 1992, launched the ‘Security Plan’, whose purpose was to prevent a possible uprising and protests emanating from the DTV and Iranian society in general. The student Basij units within the universities had this function. Hajjarian is close to Rafsanjani. This information was revealed in a personal interview with a former member of the DTV central committee, Tehran, May 2008.


31 See also Ali Reza Eshraghi, ‘Iranian students fight hard and soft’, Asia Times Online, 2 July 2010.
aspirations to social mobility may, in this way, come to be realised.

Thus after Ahmadinejad’s election, the DTV was explicitly targeted by the government who prevented it from organising the election for the Central Committee or from organising its own meetings, which eventually were held off campus.\(^{32}\) Active student groups were now only tolerated if they had pro-government credentials. As Babak Zamaniha has written, ‘while the situation had not been ideal in the Khatami years, Mr. Ahmadinejad’s anti-reformist campaign … led students to value their previous freedoms.’\(^{33}\) In 2005 the newly appointed dean of the Polytechnic, Alireza Rahai, ordered the demolition of the office of the Islamic Association, the pro-reform group which was the core of political activities on campus. According to students interviewed in 2006 since 2005 more than 100 liberal professors have been forced into retirement, at least 70 students have been suspended for political activities, and some 30 students have been given warnings.\(^{34}\) Obviously these numbers have increased further in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections.

This ‘second cultural revolution’, as it was swiftly dubbed, has seen the firing or forced retirement of teachers regarded as having liberal sympathies and the removal of activists from the universities. The banning of students is also known as the ‘starring of students’ because the files of student with activist backgrounds are rated according to a scale of one to three stars, with students assigned three stars being barred from entering university education. This is a well-known practice, which has been denied by the government, although the issue has been openly debated in the media.\(^{35}\) Those who are ‘starred’ are not able to pursue their enrolment in universities (or to continue their education) because their files are said to be ‘incomplete,’ as the Central Selection Committee of the University and the Ministry of Science prefer to use the term.

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\(^{32}\) Personal communication with a student who escaped from Iran, March 2011. The last general election of the Central Committee of the DTV was held electronically, through the internet, in 2010. According to two of the members of this last Central Committee, the election was not conducted according to the rules. These two former members have left the country, and are today living abroad. Personal interview, July 2011. The political vacuum left by the DTV on the campuses was filled by the Basij mainly, but some Marxist and liberal student groups are also present in universities, although they are rather small and had been only recently been set up. Personal interviews with some students both in Iran (Tehran, September 2008) and abroad (February and March 2011).

\(^{33}\) Babak Zamaniha, quoted in Nazila Fathi’s article, is a former member of the DTV’s Central Committee and student at the Amir Kabir Polytechnic. Nazila Fathi, ‘Iran President faces revival of students’ ire’, *New York Times*, 21 December 2006.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

‘incomplete file’ rather than ‘starred student.’\textsuperscript{36} Those who find themselves in such a situation are given the opportunity to be re-integrated into the academic community through abjuration. They have to sign a letter of regret, and can then register conditionally. The goal of the government is to chasten and to punish ‘bad’ students, not primarily to exclude them, and in this case bureaucracy rather than overt repression is used to obtain students’ compliance. The practice of starring students is the result of a ‘security-driven’ use of bureaucracy, and is a good indicator of the degree of collusion between the Security and Information Ministry and the universities. The real reason for their exclusion, and eventually in some cases expulsion, is not clearly communicated to the students, although those excluded know why they are in this predicament (because of their political activities or ‘incorrect’ religious behaviour). As reported by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, university staff mainly expresses a sense of powerlessness or at best moderate solidarity with the students in this situation.\textsuperscript{37}

**Conclusion**

- Social control as a broad, large notion of control in a given environment
- Many actors exert control
- Importance of measures of control beyond violent confrontation during mass demonstrations
- Importance of comparing across the borders of political regimes types

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 22. According to the ICHRI report, this has been happening since 2009.

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