Iranian student activism between authoritarianism and democratization: Patterns of conflict and cooperation with the regime

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Introduction

One of the most noticeable aspects of the demonstrations in Iran in the summer of 2009, in the protests against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world two years later and in the 'Occupy' movements in the West is the very significant participation of students and young people. This public behavior strengthened the assumption that young people's activism and more specifically student activism is inherently or naturally rebellious, confrontational and somewhat anti-system whatever the actual system in place might be.[1] Along with this argument, some scholars have highlighted that students have peculiar characteristics - they are committed to criticism of the *status quo*, live in a universe governed by qualitative values where actions are motivated by truth, justice, freedom and transformation of the world -[2] which in authoritarian settings or developing countries are associated to the dissatisfaction with traditional society and efforts of modernize it.[3] Here, students are often perceived to be at the forefront of pro-democracy demonstrations against regimes of radically different nature, ranging from the anti-communist protesters in Tien-An-Men Square to the Chilean and Argentinean student unions challenging military rule.[4] However, scholars recognize that student movements have an ambiguous relationship with democratization and this article, through an exploration of the Iranian case, highlights such ambiguities and explains the way in which student activism is also shaped by and indebted to authoritarian structures to attain its objectives. This is in line with the findings from other sectors of civil society activism in authoritarian settings whereby broader political goals such as democratization can be sacrificed if sectorial benefits can be achieved through co-operation with and co-optation by authoritarian ruling elites.[5] Student activism in

authoritarian settings is under-researched and this article fills an important empirical gap by problematising the nature of such activism, which still characterizes societies across the globe. Thus, the assumption here is that student activism sometimes promotes democratic rule and sometimes, on the contrary, strengthens authoritarianism. An investigation of the conditions under which these different outcomes occur is both academically important and politically timely given the re-politicization of youth, particularly in the Middle East, but also in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.[6] In the case of post-revolutionary Iran, the scholarship has underlined the role of the students in both violently supporting the regime's policies during the early 1980s[7] and in promoting the pro-democracy program of the reformist Khatami's governments during the late 1990s and 2000s.[8] A number of questions arise from this example: how can we make sense of such a shift? How patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Iranian regime and the student organization(s) are related to the debate on democratization and authoritarian resilience?

This article aims at shedding light on the shift between cooperation and opposition that characterises the relations between student activist groups and the Iranian regime, but also examines the unintended consequences of student activism whereby even a radical and genuine engagement for democracy can be detrimental to the forces more committed to its realization by helping a conservative backlash.[9] This is what happened after 2005 in Iran, when Ahmadinejad won his first presidential term after eight years of reformist rule.

The seemingly competing literatures on democratisation and authoritarian resilience often highlight the role of civil society movements and actors in closed societies pointing to the different mechanisms and conditions under which they can be

successful promoters of political change or, conversely, how they can become, even unwillingly, pillars of the authoritarian regime.[10] In this context, while the relationship between student activism and democratisation is often examined in the literature, the one between student politics and authoritarianism is less explored, although there is a considerable amount of studies available that deal with the ways in which opposition social and civil movements can be tamed and brought back in line with the authoritarian regime.[11] Using the case of student activism in post-revolutionary Iran, and elaborating on the literature on civil activism under authoritarianism, this study examines the patterns of cooperation and conflict between the regime and the students and how they are related to democratic advancements or authoritarian resilience. In fact student movements in authoritarian settings do not always remain on a fixed position; rather, they often shift between co-optation, cooperation and conflict with the regime. This happens according to a number of variables such as the structure of opportunities, the students' mission and path-dependent evolution, the demographic composition of student groups and factional politics, namely whether the students and the government are loyal to competing or allied factions.

Furthermore, even when student activism is radical in its demands for political change and manages to avoid co-optation, it may be incapable of fostering democracy since its radicalism might lead to marginalization. The case-study of the relation between the Iranian student movement as embodied by the *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat -e Howzeh va Daneshgah* (Office for the Strengthening of Unity between the Islamic Schools and the Universities, DTV) and the regime not only shows how changing patterns of cooperation and conflict may work. It also shows that co-optation and control have limitations, such as the path-dependent identity of student movements,

based on the idea of students as an uncompromising political actor. The case-study also sheds light on the regime's reaction to these shifts in students' activism and on the patterns of political marginalization. Avoiding co-optation may greatly reduce the risk of student activism being tamed, but it could undermine its political relevance, leading to political marginality which, in turn, does not help the cause of democratic activism. The mechanisms the authoritarian regime uses to marginalise students when they do not 'comply' contribute to explain why the politics of student activism in Iran might be more complex than superficial analyses about its pro-democratic stances and role suggest.

Unintended Consequences of Student Activism between Democratization and authoritarian Resilience

The literatures on democratization and authoritarian resilience are not the only ones that examine student politics and activism, but are centrally concerned with the role of students in promoting or weakening democratisation. Sociological studies on students and 'new social movements' obviously influenced the comparative politics literature focusing on student activism, democratic transition and consolidation. In the context of democratization studies, it is generally postulated that the growth of civil society in authoritarian contexts is *per se* a positive development because it creates pressure on the regime to progressively give in to the demands of organised and autonomous groups thereby unleashing a liberalizing and then democratising process.[12] Student activism is conceived to be part of such growing civil society and it is believed to challenge the authoritarianism of the system through its activities.[13] One can find examples of this in the leading role that students played for instance in the

democratization of South Korea, Mali, Portugal and Indonesia.[14] It is here that student activism deserves to be analysed because the role of civil society in processes of democratization is no longer as unproblematic as it used to be.

However, more recent studies question the centrality of civil society activism in processes of democratization and argue quite convincingly that in authoritarian settings the growth of civil society can also strengthen the authoritarian regime.[15] This approach contends that civil society groups and associations that constitute the 'opposition' inevitably tend to play the game the regime has set up and indirectly strengthen it by replicating and using the same authoritarian networks and norms that the regime utilizes. This means that strategies of co-optation and control all prevent civil society from playing the democratizing role that many have assigned to it. This happens in the case of student movements as well.[16] In examining a number of student protests in Africa since the 1960s John A. Nkinyangi concludes that they created:

'the necessary social and political environment for the military to intervene. Given the present stage in the development of Africa's social forces, this might very well be the historic role that student activism […] may play for some foreseeable time in the future. The absence of an alternative social force capable of countervailing the existing oligarchy and of wielding State power creates a vacuum, thus making intervention by the military inevitable.'[17]

In many ways it is the same problem that Jamal had identified with civil society activism in general. She argued that the crucial differences in civil society activism are not to be found in the actors of civil society themselves and their values or ethos, but in the constraints in place that determine the way in which such groups behave. Thus,

there is a considerable difference in 'being' a civil society actor where democratic and liberal institutions are in place and 'being' one under authoritarian constraints.[18] It is at this junction that sociological studies on the progressive role of student movements in established democracies tend to obscure the reality of what happens in authoritarian contexts because they apply the same framework they use when dealing with student activism in established democracies.[19] This framework is based on the idea that student activism is autonomous and independent and that, almost by nature, serves only progressive causes. The problem is that this framework does not really 'travel' when it comes to authoritarian countries.

To highlight the 'dark side' of activism in authoritarian settings, scholars have used the concepts of co-optation, 'embedded activism,' and control. In these authoritarian settings universities are embedded in the political system through violent repression (rarely), coercion (at times), and cooptation (often) of activists within the rank-and-files of the regime institutions. The taming of universities passes through reforms[20] as well as a massive substitution of academic appointees or the cutting of financial support to student activities within the campus.[21] In the case of Iran, others have shown the relevance of entrance examinations to influence the student body's political attitudes.[22] The Iranian regime's goals in adopting such measures may be different, ranging from a complete eradication of student activism to its normalization.[23] Although these operations might normally be carried out against the will of activists, it is important to remember that 'normalised' and tamed student organizations may have, in return, access to benefits in terms of political relevance and may be convinced to have better opportunities to voice their discontent if allied to the regime. Interestingly enough, Iranian student politics boosted researchers' enthusiasm only after Khatami

won the election in 1997 and the discourse on civil society and democratization entered the public debate. Students' mobilization was then one of the elements used to explain Khatami's success and to predict a transition to democracy.[24]

On the contrary, previous scholarly production on Iranian student politics examined the control the newborn regime exerted on the campuses just after the revolution. Beyond academia, student activists or former activists have talked up the importance of the student movement conflating it within the transitology paradigm.[25] This representation is so strong that many among them support the idea that when the student organisations were helping the regime in strengthening the Islamic state, after the 1979 revolution, 'there was no student movement.'[26]

Nevertheless, despite the failure of the normative perspective on civil society's activism, this approach has identified correctly the opening up of new spaces of confrontation between the regime and non-state political actors. Although not leading to a process of democratization, this has resulted in a 'pluralisation of the power relations with the regime'[27] and brought about 'unintended consequences' of embedded activism. Instead of reproducing subjugation, some social actors have found in this relationship room for some political autonomy and have changed their attitudes towards the regime.[28] That is why Iranian students' reactions to the mechanisms of control, domination and co-optation enacted by the regime have varied from co-operation to conflict since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In the following section detailed empirical evidence is presented to substantiate the complex relation that student activism in Iran has with democratization and authoritarian resilience. In turn the Iranian example can shed some light on student activism in other authoritarian states

where young people may in fact mobilize in favor of democracy, but obtain the paradoxical outcome of strengthening authoritarianism.

Student Activism in Iran: History, Organizations, and Politics since the 1979 Revolution

Student activism has become a prominent feature of Iranian politics, although higher education is a rather recent phenomenon. It is under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-79) that a significant development of third-level education occurred. In addition to building new universities and making access to them easier, he also increased the number of scholarships available to study abroad, a move which ironically helped the anti-Shah students to organize in a freer environment.[29] During the period between 1977 and 1979, when the revolution erupted, every political group established its own headquarters on the campuses, which became the most active political *loci* in Iran to the point that the then provisional post-revolutionary government was afraid of losing control over them. Due to the chaotic situation across universities following the revolution, in 1980 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for a 'Cultural Revolution' to clean up the campuses from Westernised staff and immorality with the rather evident intent of placing his loyalists in charge and to Islamise the universities, considered the hotbeds of secularism. In order to achieve this objective, universities were shut down until 1983. By then, the Islamisation of the universities was completed through massive purges,[30] the hiring of new faculty members and the admission of new students after proper 'political screening'.[31] Thus, when the universities were finally re-opened, a significant process of restructuration had taken place: the Islamist faction of the revolutionary coalition, which had won the struggle against the secular and leftist

revolutionary factions to establish an *Islamic* state, had taken control of the campuses through the DTV. This organization originated from the semi-legal pre-revolutionary Muslim Students Associations, which included the most radical individuals of the Khomeinist faction and the so-called Islamic leftists, a powerful faction within the Islamist winning coalition that stood for social equality and wealth redistribution and with a strong Islamist agenda on cultural and educational issues. The new DTV is an umbrella organization whose central office coordinates all the Islamic associations in the universities. For many years to come it would constitute the main networking hub for politically active students. Since then and until the early 1990s, the cultural and political hegemony of the Islamic left was established within universities through the DTV, which acted in harmony with the political and institutional establishment of the Islamic Republic, far from any call for a democratic system. This indicates that the issue of authoritarian versus democratic politics is not necessarily the most prominent one for students. They might instead concentrate on fulfilling an ideological, messianic role, such as Islamising universities, whose benefits, such as the monopoly over students' activities and a short-cut access to the regime's political and intellectual elite, go well beyond the type of political system in place.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 introduced a new era in Iranian politics and by extension in the universities. A new President of the Republic, Hashemi Rafsanjani, was elected and a new Supreme Leader was nominated, Ayatollah Khamenei. Both men were hostile to the Islamic left. DTV was then the only student organisation in the country and since it was strongly linked to the Islamic left the government attempted to weaken it through bureaucratic mechanisms. First was the permission given to other student organisations to be set up,

which led to the student *bassij* units and the Islamic Association of the Student *Bassij*[32] being established. This obviously challenged the monopoly of DTV on student politics. Second, new guidelines for choosing university councils and presidents were approved, which made it impossible for Islamic leftist students to participate in such councils and influence the nomination of the highest university officials, who decided on the legal status of student associations. Finally, the Office of Representatives of the Supreme Leader, which had a permanent presence in universities,[33] was established to control student activism and it actively discouraged students from joining DTV. These bureaucratic measures were implemented in a political climate hostile to the Islamic left with conservative voices calling for the dismantling of DTV altogether because it had fulfilled its historical role of Islamising universities.[34]

The early 1990s witnessed therefore the reconfiguration of student activism and DTV's own changes reflected the shifting balance of power within the political system. This indicates that student activism not only does not take place in an autonomous vacuum independent from the political system as it might happen in established democracies, but it becomes an instrument of power struggles where mobilisation of students in favour of governmental agendas occurs. By the early 1990s, DTV was operating in a very hostile context, but remained very much aligned to the Islamic left despite its decreasing political power. The shifting balance of power at national level with the Islamic left under attack from the conservatives had profound repercussions on campus politics and on DTV. First of all, rather than leading to the marginalization of DTV, the mechanisms to curb it put in place by the conservatives and particularly the presence of rival student organisations encouraged DTV to radicalise its positions *vis à vis* the conservative-dominated regime. Where once the DTV held the monopoly of

power on campuses and had in the regime a precious ally, in the new 'conservative era' this monopoly was broken leading DTV to become aware of the necessity of competing politically with other organisations for the support of students. Part of this process of differentiation from rival student organisations was for DTV to embrace a discourse that championed political pluralism and democracy that should be reflected at all levels of society, including universities. Up to that moment, the *bassij* and DTV were not very different: both organizations found in anti-imperialism, religion and social equality their guiding principles, but now DTV 'found' that democracy and freedom of expression were inalienable rights too.[35] This embrace of political pluralism was the result of inter-linked internal and external factors. The most significant external change was the progressive marginalisation of the Islamic left from positions of power in political, economic and cultural institutions across the country. This meant that the dismissal from power of prominent Islamic leftists led to a profound re-think among Islamic leftist intellectuals of the values and institutions that should underpin the Islamic Republic. This new intellectual thinking veered towards democratising the political system and introducing genuine political pluralism.[36] It was inevitable that this important ideological shift within the Islamic left would filter down to the universities and more specifically to DTV. This realisation on the part of members of DTV that democracy was a crucial value to promote came largely through the lectures of Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar who had been prominent revolutionaries, leading members of the Islamic left and, crucially, professors at University of Tehran and Tarbiat Modarres University respectively.[37] Their calls for Islamic reformation, religious and social tolerance, and the construction of an 'open society' enriched the national and international debate on reformism and the compatibility between Islam and

democracy.[38] The second significant external factor to impact on DTV's ideological shift was the massive increase in the number of students attending university, which had gone from 140,000 in 1977-1978 to 1,150,000 in 1996.[39] This growth was primarily due to the substantial number of females enrolling in university. This new cohort of students came with new attitudes and ideas about politics and how it should be conducted both at the national and university level. New generations brought in new ideas. The internal mechanism that allowed the embrace of democracy on the part of DTV was a change in the electoral rules.[40] In 1993 the political screening of both candidates and voters was abandoned, allowing for free elections to the Central Committee of DTV. This meant that DTV started to attract people with different views and opinions, losing the early ideological centralism.[41] Faculty members became more politically diversified too, stimulating the differentiation of student movements.

By the mid-1990s, the universities mirrored broader social and political transformations and affected the way in which student activism took place. The crucial point here is the shift away from the monopoly of power of DTV on campuses and its unconditional support for the regime towards a competitive environment. In such an environment different student organisations battled it out ideologically with DTV embracing political pluralism and democratic tolerance in open contrast with what it had stood for during the 1980s and early 1990s. In this case, the DTV had changed and shifted positions rather rationally, without necessarily follow a straight and unchanging ideological line which was neither consistently anti-regime nor pro-regime. Beyond the demographical data and sincere commitment, there is always a degree of political opportunism at play. For instance, DTV's embrace of pluralism came as a by-product of the 'elimination' of the Islamic left from positions of power. Once out of power,

political pluralism was invoked to reform the regime that had 'fallen' into the hands of the conservatives. In turn this means that the ruling elites with their actions can and do shape what occurs on university campuses. This would become very clear when Khatami decided to run for President in 1997 as the representative of the Islamic left now turned reformist.

Between Cooperation and Conflict: Student Activism in Khatami's Era. Patterns of Cooperation between Interest and Dependency

The conservatives' attempt to limit the influence of DTV on campuses across Iran was meant to silence the younger cadres of the Islamic left, but in reality, as it turned out, it ended up providing DTV with new ideological tools that could be used to recruit the rising number of university students, particularly females, against the conservatives' project of society. Thus, in the 1990s, expansion of higher education provided the reformists and the Islamic left with the opportunity to strengthen their links with the students.

When Mohammad Khatami launched his presidential campaign in 1996 referring to 'democracy,' 'civil society,' and 'rule of law,' students were called to become active through DTV.[42] The activism in favour of Khatami during his campaign and his first few years in power confirmed the 'democratic radicalization' of DTV, whereby students participated to what they believed was the construction of a new political system where genuine pluralism would emerge. This mobilisation of students in his favour was extremely useful to Khatami because it provided the backbone of his campaign when it came to logistics. At this stage student activism became very much linked to the discourse of democratisation[43] and DTV genuinely believed in Khatami's

democratising potential whereby significant changes would take place within the original revolutionary framework. During Khatami's first mandate and on the occasion of the 2000 Parliamentary elections, higher education institutions became a real stronghold of the then-government and the reformist coalition *Dovvom-e Khordad*. At the time, DTV not only offered logistical and propaganda support to the reformist front, but it directly participated to the *Dovvom-e Khordad*. According a former member, DTV's enthusiastic embrace of the reformist rhetoric of democracy, civil society and rule of law was in retrospect seen not as an autonomous choice but simply an alignment with the dominant discourse of the Islamic left – turned reformist.[44] Despite the fact that this argument may be too critical of the student movement, there is a degree of truth in it. The DTV was then dependent on the reformist elite in terms of visibility, leadership and intellectual elaboration, even if soon it would start to develop its own political autonomy on the basis of the reformist political discourse and electoral base.

During the first years of Khatami's government, the loyalty DTV showed him was rewarded with a positive attitude towards the students and their demands. Khatami had considerable power in the realm of student politics because the president is also the head of the Council of the Cultural Revolution. This Council supervises the nomination of university chancellors, approves *curricula*, selects student candidates, and finally promotes the ideological and political order on campuses. In this sense, Khatami's presidency represented an opportunity for DTV and student activism to become more politically relevant. For instance, after the reformists won the 2000 parliamentary election, the Mosharekat party, Khatami's party, supported the establishment of a 'student faction' within the sixth Parliament (2000–2004). This faction was headed by Ali Akbar Moussavi Khoeini, a former DTV leader like the other members: Fatemeh

Haqiqatjou, Ali Tajrania, Meysam Saidi, and Reza Yusefian.[45] Furthermore, the shared feeling among the students was that DTV would have enhanced Iran's democratization by supporting the reformists in their political struggle against the conservatives and the Supreme leader Khamenei. This honeymoon with Khatami illustrates the mutually beneficial relation between the government and the DTV. Beyond being simply co-opted by the state, the DTV enhanced its political visibility, while the government had a tight grip on the campuses. If we consider the strength of the dominant discourse on democratization and civil society, it is not a surprise that many scholars defended the idea that student activism leads to democratisation. But when such slogans did not become a reality, later, members of DTV accused their fellows of having been co-opted, and advocated political independence.

Patterns of Conflict between Marginalisation and Path-dependency

Student protests erupted in July 1999 when the conservative-dominated Parliament amended the press legislation. Students considered the new law as an attack to freedom of speech because it was clear that it was meant to target the well-known Islamic-leftist newspaper *Salam*. After days of mobilisation, the protests turned violent owing to the repression carried out by paramilitary forces. While protesting, the students shouted slogans in favour of Khatami's government, since the attack against *Salam* was perceived as a warning from the conservatives to the government. To the surprise of the students, Khatami did not side with them, labelling the protests 'an attack on national security.'[46] Many other prominent reformists followed Khatami's line[47] and later in 2000, the reformists put forth the idea of 'active calm,' a strategy designed for the students who should side with the reformists in the government uncritically and by

avoiding turmoil in the streets.[48] The July 1999 incident instilled a feeling of betrayal among students and gave rise to a period of self-criticism regarding the role of students in politics. This internal debate took place very much behind the scenes due to DTV's engagement in the electoral coalition *Dovvom-e Khordad* for upcoming municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections, [49] but in 2002 DTV split in two branches and later in several smaller groups which spanned a huge ideological arc, ranging from conservatism to radical liberalism.[50] The Allameh branch, the majority, advocated an independent opposition to the conservatives, beyond the alliance with the reformists. The Allameh students were determined to act as a sort of 'watchdog' of the government, which was judged as being unable to foster democracy in Iran.[51] The Shiraz branch, the minority, joined the conservative camp. In this new context of opposition to both the conservatives and reformists, considered by now too moderate, the Allameh students extended connections outside the university because, in their opinion, only an extra-institutional alliance of civil society actors could bring about democratization.[52] The students' attitude towards the reformists hardened over time and they were therefore accused by them of acting illegally,[53] helping the conservative backlash and lacking a political vision. According to reformists, the students would soon be 'swept away like grains of sand, no longer protected by the desert,'[54] a metaphor indicating the precarious condition of DTV without factional protection. Contrary to the students, who advocated the need for action and even rupture with the anti-reform elements of the Islamic republic, the reformists felt the responsibility of the sustainability of the system as a whole, which they wanted to transform slowly.

It is no surprise that from 2002 the relationship between DTV as a whole and the government deteriorated. Furthermore, in 2003 the Allameh branch decided officially to

abandon the *Dovvom-e Khordad* front, and since then boycotting elections became its policy. Students no longer trusted the reformists and their role of 'democratizers' because they were too embedded in the institutional politics of an authoritarian regime.[55] The rupture was so dramatic that Khatami's visit at the University of Tehran in December 2004, on the occasion of the Students Day celebration, was transformed into an angry rally against him.[56] Abdollah Momeni, a leader of the DTV, declared that 'bridges have been broken between us and him since several years ago… we knew that he (Khatami) could not give satisfactory answers to the students.'[57]

The interpretation of student politics and civil society as counter-power to the government became widespread among the student groups, who increasingly diversified probably thanks to the relative weakness of the DTV. The rhetoric of civil society and democratisation acquired then a new meaning. They were the pillars of the reformists' discourse and justified students' collaboration: in order to strengthen civil society, supporting the government was a more than acceptable compromise for the students. But this same rhetoric turned into a call for resistance to co-optation after that, according to the students, Khatami proved to be unable to genuinely democratise the system. If this rhetoric had first constituted the discourse of power, through which Khatami was able to gather support for his reform plan, it later embodied the meaning of resistance and counter-power.'[58] This vision was rooted in the 'mythology of student resistance' and perpetual mobilization against authoritarianism, an idea which stimulated students to act according to this (self)-representation. Thus, students began acting as a vanguard of change, progress and democracy, and criticized the government for not doing enough to establish a democratic government in Iran. In an interview Ali Vaqfi, a former leader of the DTV, declared that

'Students are critics. So they are observant about events around them and look at issues in a critical manner […] students are the children of society and, because of their awareness and knowledge, they cannot remain silent or indifferent to what is going on in the nation […] Even when the slogans of the student movement appear to be similar to those of the reformist groups, their ultimate goals are different. The goal of freedom for the students is not aimed at attaining political power. It is based on deep beliefs in human rights, and the dignity of mankind. Let me give you an example. When Khatami talked of civil society, this was the call of the university groups too. But when he attained the presidency, it became clear that his understanding of this notion was different from what the students wanted and believed in.'[59]

Students acted following their supposed nature, that is mobilizing and criticizing the established and institutional power.

Political parties have tried to infiltrate the student movement [...] This has been an obstacle. Reform parties have always wanted the student movement to be following them so that they would devise the strategy for the students. But the student movement gradually became independent [...] distancing itself from power. So today it is in a completely different position, which is closer to its natural point and where it should be. [...] Now that it is separated from power (i.e. the regime) and does not participate in elections, it must have a new strategy.[60]

Paradoxically, the students' desire for political pluralism and individual rights was quashed when the newly-elected Ahmadinejad reinforced the regime's grip on universities and student activism. The fear of being victim of cooptation and

instruments of a factional chess game pushed the students away from the reformists to claim an autonomous identity, depriving the reformist government of an important ally and causing further frustration among the students, since the planned student-led role in the country's democratization did not become a reality. On the contrary, students are described as growingly uninterested in politics, apathetic[61] and further marginalised by the new academic policy enacted by Ahmadinejad.

The independent attitude of DTV was interpreted as a betrayal by the reformists, who feared the loss of their 'transmission belt' of consensus among the youth and the students. The mobilisation resources of DTV were effective and evident: in 1997, 1999 and 2000 the students mobilised a huge portion of society in support of the reformist and against the conservatives' policies. From the point of view of the government, this evolution towards independence was in some way an 'unintended' development of student activism, after two decades of loyalty and collaboration. However, the break-up of the alliance strongly damaged DTV as well because they became a marginal political and social actor. This weakness paved the way for Ahmadinejad, elected president in 2005, to carry out his normalisation project of campuses.[62] Autonomy and demands for political pluralism did not lead to success; quite the contrary, they led to political oblivion.

With Ahmadinejad in power, the campuses became the main stage for the struggle between the pro-government students, organised in *bassij* units, and the opposition student groups, the DTV-Allameh and other minor forces. Despite dissent surviving across campuses, the atmosphere turned oppressive to the point that the younger students feared to be seen with activists.[63] Instead, 'being a *bassij* is seen as more opportune and profitable'[64] thanks to governmental support. Their presence on

campus was also reinforced by the easier access to university they enjoy thanks to the special quotas reserved to *bassij*. In 2004, the student *bassij* in Iranian universities were 420,000, and in 2007 they became 600,000.[65] The introduction of these measures has to some extents changed the composition of the student population. The '*bassij* policy'[66] is important to Ahmadinejad and conservatives in post-Khatami years in order to remove fully the reformist hegemony over the students and university staff, which was further purged of 'liberal' and 'Western' elements.[67] After Ahmadinejad's election, the DTV was explicitly targeted by the government and prevented from organising the election for the Central Committee or its own meetings, which eventually were held off campus.[68] Active students are also targeted by the 'starring process:' 'being starred' means suffering consequences which span from the inability to enrol to the withdrawal of the right to continue education.[69] Despite the revival of student activism in 2009 and the fact that oppositional or critical forces are present on campuses, as the numerous demonstrations against Ahmadinajead's visits to universities all over Iran have shown, the continuous repression and tight control have undoubtedly changed the patterns of student activism in Iran.[70]

Conclusion

Far from being 'simply' a prominent democratization actor, student activism in authoritarian settings has a much more complex role. While numerous studies indicate that student activism has indeed been crucial in processes of regime change, insufficient attention has been paid to the circumstances under which it contributes to strengthen authoritarian rule. The case of Iran demonstrates that there are two different ways in which this occurs. First, much like many other civil society actors, student activism can

be co-opted and at times willingly so because of a coincidence of material and/or ideological interests. This is certainly the case of DTV from its inception until the late 1990s. Second, even when student activism genuinely pushes for democratization and becomes an anti-system actor that is independent and autonomous from political power, the authoritarian constraints in place can contribute to marginalize it and defeat it, rendering ineffective.

The DTV's case highlights the problems student activism faces when it attempts to disengage from the dominant structures of authoritarian politics and pursue a truly independent and autonomous path. After the revolution, benefits in cooperating with the regime were obtained by students of DTV in so far as the only organisation present on campus enjoyed a political monopoly over students' activities and many of its leaders were subsequently recruited into national elite. This type of relationship continues in many ways throughout the 1990s when student organizations are restructured to follow the similar reconfiguration of power within the political system of the Islamic Republic. After Khatami's election in 1997, some political room opened up for the students thanks to both the rhetoric of civil society empowerment, which cherished student activism, and their support to Khatami's governments. The students' political weight increased, so did their visibility and capability of mobilization. In the 2000s, students radicalized their demands for democracy and decided to opt for political autonomy from the then-reformist government, which was rhetorically committed to open up the system, but failed to do so causing major disillusion among the students. However, despite eschewing co-optation and being sincerely committed to a democratic change, the students' strategy contributed to a conservative backlash and failed to produce a spilling over of democratic demands in society. This was partly because reformists were left

without an important constituency of support and partly because the reformists were afraid of students' radicalism and marginalized them. In conclusion, even when demands for democratization are genuine, marginalisation and political defeat can be the outcome. In line with Jamal, it can be argued that structural constraints put forth by authoritarianism overwhelm even the best purposes an organization can make about democracy.

While the Iranian case might be somewhat different from other authoritarian settings in so far as intra-regime divisions are allowed to appear in the public and institutional spheres, it can be argued that it has comparative relevance because it demonstrates how patterns of activism, and in this case of student activism, may not necessarily follow the democratization framework, but can have a much more problematic and complex development.

Notes

[1] Joseph Chamie, 'A "youth bulge" feeds Arab discontent', *The Daily Star*, 15 April 2011; Giles Tremlett, John Hooper, 'Protests in the Med', *The Guardian,* 19 May 2011; Faith Karim, Joe Sterling, 'Occupy Protests spread around the World, *CNN*, 15 October 2011.

[2] Gouldner, *Against Fragmentation*', 30-33; Löwy, *Georg Lukacs. From Romanticism to Bolshevism* 19 and following; Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*. Specifically for the case of Iran: Hamid Dabashi interview with Ali Afshari, in *Week in Green, episode 25*, May 2010 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFzp6oCxGEI&list=UUGNckWrmpemdVNLsbHq tzJw&index=4&feature=plcp).

[3] Altbach, 'Student Politics in the Third World'; Lipset, 'Students and Politics in Comparative Perspective'; Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen*, 94-97.

[4] For China see Wright, *The Perils of Protest*; for Argentina, Potash, *The Army and Politics in Argentina*.

[5] Dalmasso, 'Surfing the democratic Tsunami'; Fumagalli, 'Voice, not democracy'; Rivetti, 'Coopting civil society in Iran'.

[6] Valbjørn, 'Upgrading Post-Democratization.'

[7] Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran.'

[8] Mashayekhi, 'The Revival of the Student Movement'; Khosrokhavar, 'Toward an anthropology of democratization in Iran'; Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran*. The reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected President of the Islamic Republic in 1997 and ruled for two mandates, until 2005.

[9] Tezcur, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey*.

[10] For a positive take on the role of civil society in transitions to democracy see Norton, *Civil society in the Middle East*. For a more critical approach to the issue see Liverani, *Civil society in Algeria*.

[11] Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*; Wiktorowicz, 'Civil Society as Social Control'; Hibou, *The Force of Obedience*.

[12] Kubba, 'The Awakening of Civil Society'; Casper and Taylor, *Negotiating Democracy: Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*; Chehabi and Linz (eds) *Sultanistic Regimes*; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, *Democracy in Developing Countries*; Diamond and Plattner (eds) *The global resurgence of democracy*; O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (eds) *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.

[13] Kim, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea*; Boix and Stokes, 'Endogenous Democratization'; Waterman, 'Which Way to Go? Four Strategies for Democratization in Chinese Intellectual Circles'; Sung-Joo, 'South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratization'; Arceo, 'The role of student and alumni associations in the democratization process in Spain'; Lee, 'Primay Causes of Asian Democratization'; Adekanye, 'Structural Adjustment, Democratization and Rising Ethnic Tensions in Africa'; Prosic-Dvornic, 'Enough! Student Protest '92'; Lazić, *Protest in Belgrade*; Bieber, 'The Serbian Opposition and Civil Society'; Bratton and van de Walle, 'Popular Protest and Political Reform in Africa'; Vellela, *New Voices: Student Political Activism in the 80s and 90s*; Nkomo, *Student Culture and Activism in Black South African Universities*; Hinton, *University Students Protests and Political Change in Sierra Leone*.

[14] Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto*; Smith, 'From Demons to Democrats'; Kim, 'South Korea', 173-8; Accornero, 'Contentious Politics and Student Dissent'. We are grateful to Mohammed Yaghi for pointing us in the right direction.

[15] Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*.

[16] Bachtiar, 'Indonesia,' 103-119; Samudavanija, 'Thailand', 197-207.

[17] Nkinyangi, 'Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa', 172.

[18] For an empirical study of these relations see Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil society activism and democratization in the Arab world*.

[19] An example of this approach is Mashayekhy, 'The Revival of the Student Movement', 285-6. For a critique of the quoted approach, see Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen*, 14-15.

[20] Kohstall, 'La démocratie renversée'.

[21] Levy, 'Chilean Universities under the Junta', 95-128. This case is valid for Iran as

well.

[22] Sakurai, 'University entrance examination and the making of an Islamic society in Iran'; Habibi, 'Allocation of Educational and Occupational Opportunities'.

[23] Rivetti, 'Student movements in the Islamic Republic'.

[24] Mashayekhy, 'The Revival of the Student Movement'; Khosrokhavar, 'Toward an anthropology'.

[25] Sadegh Shojaii, 'The Universities are alive', *Gozaar*, 11 June 2010; Shojaii, 'Thirty years of Purging Dissident Academics', *Gozaar*, 20 May 2012; Mustafa Khosravi, 'The Student Movement's Approach *vis a vis* the Green Movement', *Gozaar*, 2 March 2010; Ibrahim Kashefi, 'Ali Vaghfi: Students Will Not Allow The Fulfillment of The Dreams of Extremists', *Rooz On Line*, 17 December 2007; Ali Afshari, 'Radicalism and the Iranian Student Movement's Quest for Democracy', *Gozaar*, 11 (2007): 29-32; Bina, 'The Hot Summer of Defiance', 51.

[26] Dabashi and Afshari, *The Week in Green*.

[27] Hibou, 'Le mouvement du 20 fevrier', 2.

[28] Aarts and Cavatorta, 'Civil Society in Syria and Iran'.

[29] For pre-revolutionary student activism, Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*.

[30] Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran', 6.

[31] Habibi, 'Allocation of Educational and Occupational Opportunities', 20.

[32] Soon later the organization moved towards more and more critical positions *face à* the regime. Its leader, Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, has been in jail since December 2009. Mahdi, 'The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*',* 11.

[33] Mahdi, 'The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', 15-16.

[34] Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran', 9.

[35] Personal interview with Farid Hashemi.

[36] Ghobadzadeh and Rahim, 'Islamic Reformation Discourse', 337.

[37] The crucial role played by these two intellectuals has been recognized by all the interviewees. Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran*.

[38] Kamrava (ed), *New Voices of Islam*.

[39] Mahdi, 'The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', 14.

[40] Personal interview with Farid Hashemi and Hadi Khahhalzadeh.

[41] Personal interview with Mohammad Hashemi and Mojtaba Bayat.

[42] Mashayekhy, 'The Revival of the Student Movement', 296.

[43] Rivetti and Cavatorta, 'The importance of being civil society'.

[44] Personal interview to Hadi Kahhalzadeh and Abbas Abdi.

[45] Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami, 'Nameh-ye Komiteh Daneshjuy Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami', 30–32.

[46] *Neshat*, 28 July 1999. Kurzman, 'Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran,' 41.

[47] *Khordad*, 8 June 1999. Behzad Nabavi, reformist deputy, accused the students of creating confusion in the country.

[48] For an explanation of the theory of the 'active calm,' see the Mujahhedin-e Enqelab-e Islami statement on the magazine *Asr-e Ma*, no. 16, 1379/2000. Willi Samii, 'Iran: Youth Movement Has Untapped Potential', *RFE/RL*, 13 April 2005.

[49] Tajrania, 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian', 109.

[50] Such as the association of liberal students (*anjoman-e daneshjuian liberal*), still active in Iran. It is not recognized as a lawful student organization. They have a website,

http://cheragheazadi.org. Personal interview with Alireza Moussavi and Siavash Safavi.

[51] Personal interview with a member of the DTV, Tehran, 2008. Nesvaderani, 'Iran's Youth', 4.

[52] Personal interview with Bahareh Hedayat.

[53] Mehdi Karroubi had done likewise in 2003, when the DTV organised some protests to contest a tuition fee hike. IRNA (Islamic Republic News Agency), 16 June 2003.

[54] Personal interview with Abbas Abdi.

[55] Ehsani, 'Our letter to Khatami was a farewell'.

[56] Safa Haeri, 'Khatami takes a final bow', *Asia Times*, 11 December 2004. The video of the encounter is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrZw-yGlyTk

[57] As quoted in Haeri, 'Khatami takes a final bow'.

[58] Howarth, *Discourse*, 49.

[59] Kashefi, 'Ali Vaghfi'.

[60] Dana Shahsavari, 'Student Movement Continuation of 1997 Movement', *Rooz On Line*, 12 July 2006.

[61] Fatemeh Haqiqatjoo quoted in Samii, 'Analysis: Renewed Unity Among Iranian Students', *RFE/RL*, 7 July 2004.

[62] As Babak Zamaniha (member of the Islamic Association of the Amir Kabir Politeknic and former member of the central committee of the DTV) put it, 'while the situation had not been ideal in the Khatami years, Mr. Ahmadinejad's anti-reformist campaign…led students to value their previous freedoms.' (Nazila Fathi, 'Iran President faces revival of students' ire', *New York Times*, 21 December 2006).

[63] Personal interview with Farid Hashemi.

[64] Ibidem.

[65] Golkar, 'The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities', 26.

[66] Alireza Eshraghi, 'Iranian students fight hard and soft', *Asia Times on line*, 2 July 2010.

[67] See Francis Harris, 'Ahmadinejad tells students to purge universities of liberal professors', *The Telegraph*, 6 September 2006.

[68] The last general election of the Central Committee of the DTV was held electronically in 2010. Personal interviews with some students in Turkey (Ahmad Ahmadyan, Siavash Safavy Pari Neshat, Reza Mobayen). See also Golkar, 'Cultural Engineering Under Authoritarian Regimes'.

[69] International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), *Punishing Stars: Systematic Denial of Higher Education in Iran*, 2011.

[70] For a preliminary insight on this, Tara Mahtafar, 'United Students of Iran', *Tehran Bureau*, 17 December 2009. See also Ali Afshari, 'The Challenges of the Student Movement in the Post-Reform Era', *Gozaar*, 28 January 2008.

List of interviews

In the case this manuscript is accepted by the journal, the interviewees' names will be all kept anonymous. For the review process, the names are available in order to provide the reviewers with all significant information about the sources and fieldwork.

Interview with Abbas Abdi (member of the Mosharekat Party and leading reformist), Tehran, May 2008.

Interview with Ahmad Ahmadyan (former member of DTV Central Committee), Van, Turkey, July 2011.

Interview with Mojtaba Bayat (former member of DTV Central Committee), Tehran, June 2008.

Interview with Alireza Moussavi (member of the Association of Liberal Students), Van Turkey, July 2011.

Interview with Amir Salimiha (student activist, barred from education), Tehran, September 2008.

Interview with Bahareh Hedayat (former member of DTV Central Committee and of the Commission for Women's Rights), Tehran, 2008.

Interview with Farid Hashemi (former member of DTV), Tehran, June - September 2008.

Interview with Hadi Kahhalzadeh (former member of DTV Central Committee and member of the Mosharekat Party), Tehran, 2008.

Interview with Mohammad Hashemi (former member of DTV Central Committee), Tehran, May 2007.

Interview with Pari Neshat (activist, Association of Solidarity among Exiles), Eskisehir, Turkey, February and March 2011.

Interview with Reza Mobayen (former member of the United Front of Students, former Islamic Association of Students/Tabarzadi's group), Eskisehir, Turkey, February and March 2011.

Interview with Siavash Safavy (former member of DTV Central Committee nad collaborator of the web-blog 'Cheragh-e Azadi' – Lamp of Freedom), Van, Turkey, July 2011.

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