

CHAPTER 5

Student movements in the Islamic Republic: shaping Iran's politics through the campus

Paola Rivetti

Part of this chapter relies on fieldwork supported by the 'Master dei Talenti' programme funded by the Department of Political Studies, University of Turin and Cassa di Risparmio di Torino (Italy). The identity of the individuals interviewed by the author has deliberately been kept anonymous.

Introduction

Universities and student activism have proven to be central to Iranian politics. Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, university students actively participated in the political life of the country, sometimes backing the ruling governments, sometimes violently contesting them. It is, however, important to remember that students organised in political associations and voiced opposition to the government well before the 1979 revolution. Student opposition to the ruling powers in Iran goes back to the early twentieth century, with the student movement achieving international credibility and becoming the vanguard of opposition to the monarchy in the 1960s.¹ Then as now, after the 2009 presidential election when the country was shaken by large demonstrations demanding fair elections, student protests have received extensive international attention.

The notion of universities being centres of political activism and dissent is particularly pertinent in Iran given the history of the student movement's opposition to the Shah and their subsequent resistance to the authoritarian developments of the Islamic Republic.²

This chapter, however, seeks to qualify this view of students as naturally keen to engage in opposition and protests – although this is often true. It rather tries to investigate 'the other side of the coin', focusing on the continuity and linkage between student activism and state institutions,

1. See Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2001), *passim*, in particular chapters one and three.
2. See Mehrdad Mashayekhi, 'The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2001; Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002). There is also a rich literature in Persian on this topic. See below in the text and, for example, Morad Saghafi, 'Daneshjoo, Dowlat va Enqelab' ['Students, Government and Revolution'], *Goftogu*, no. 5, 1994, pp. 9-26 and 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian, chalesha va rahkarha. Goftogu ba Ali Tajranian' ['Student movement, challenges and solutions. A discussion with Ali Tajranian'], *Cheshmandaz-e Iran*, no. 26, (1383/2004), pp. 107-11.

going beyond the idea of university as an autonomous site of opposition against the state. While it may be that universities are, as a site and system of higher education, the locus of dissent *par excellence*, they are also institutions where co-optation and social and professional identities are forged. Universities are the crucible where a sense of patriotism is instilled in students and the future political elite is educated and socialised into politics. This importance is reflected in the attention that governments give to universities: the campus is the first context of political education, where loyalties and political affiliations – which may have future implications beyond the campus – are established. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the connections between Iranian institutional politics and the university campus as a site for recruitment, political mobilisation and power distribution among the competing political factions of the Islamic Republic.

The chapter focuses on two main aspects. First, the interactions between the regime and student movements³ in terms of factionalism, political recruitment and power distribution: this perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of Iranian domestic politics. In addition, as many dissident students have fled the country due to the clampdown on political activity in the last few years, the potential influence that this diaspora can exert from abroad on the political situation in Iran is the second element that is taken into consideration.

Universities are inherently political institutions, and their internal dynamics need to be understood in order to acquire a deeper insight into political developments in Iran: a study of the struggle for the control of an important cultural and economic resource for the Islamic state, as represented by universities, sheds substantial light on the factional struggles that are such a salient feature of Iranian politics. Furthermore, it provides a barometer of the state's level of tolerance for freedom of speech and civil rights and also of the likelihood of change in the Islamic Republic – a scenario which may also be linked to the high number of activists living outside of the country. This chapter covers all these issues, attempting to provide an assessment of the current situation and some suggestions for the future.

Historical background: student politics and the revolution

The student movement in Iran has deep historical roots. Since the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934 by Reza Shah Pahlavi, universities have been an important arena where the regimes have tried to forge national identity and form an educated political elite and

3. Although Iranian universities are home to a large number of student organisations, which are quite ideologically diverse, for the purposes of this chapter the focus is on the main organisations.

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 1953.⁴ 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.⁵ Ironically this provided the anti-Shah students with the opportunity to meet and organise both domestically and abroad – where approximately 200,000 resided⁶ – to express their dissent despite the harsh repression.⁷

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.⁸ Another witness, who took active part in the management of universities after the revolution,⁹ 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-e Howzeh 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 constitute the main networking hub for politically active students whose engagement in politics took them beyond the world of the campus.¹⁰

The delegation visiting Khomeini was composed of many soon-to-be main players in Iranian politics such as Seyyed Ali Khamene'i (the present *Rahbar* – Leader – of the Islamic Republic) and Abdol Hasan Bani Sadr. Bani Sadr became the first president of the Islamic Republic only to be deposed in 1981 and now lives in exile in Paris. Other members were: Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha, 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) and of the newspaper *Salam*; Mojtabeh Shabestari, a pro-democracy reformist Ayatollah; Peiman Habibollah, a member of the Socialist Islamic Party who is today is an influential member of the Religious-Nationalist Alliance, an oppositional group outside of Iran; Hasan Habibi, a leading

4. 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.
5. Mohammad Reza Djalili, 'Les relations culturelles internationales de l'Iran', *Revue iranienne des relations internationales*, no. 2, 1974-75, pp. 107-26.
6. Mark Graham and Shahram Khosravi, 'Reordering Public and Private in Iranian Cyberspace: Identity, Politics, and Mobilization', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, p. 223.
7. Reza Razavi, 'The Cultural Revolution in Iran, with Close Regard to the Universities, and its Impact on the Student Movement', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, January 2009, p. 1.
8. 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.
9. 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 *Roaz Online* (www.roozonline.com).
10. 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.

politician who served as Minister of Justice and vice-president in both the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations (until 2001).

The group was not ideologically homogeneous, and it was Mousavi Khoeiiniha 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.¹¹ 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 professionals (*motakhasses*) but are a place for pious and engaged religious persons (*maktabi*) who at the same time are learning a profession (*takhassus*). We cannot accept anything other than to have a *maktabi* university.'¹² 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.¹³ 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 (currently Supreme Leader).¹⁴ The mission of the council was to supervise the Islamisation of the universities, which was accompanied by massive purges¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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* (a volunteer militia force) members, changed the character of the student body both qualitatively and quantitatively.

11. Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008 (see footnote 8).

12. Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 4.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Other members were Mostafa Moin (former Minister of Science and staunch reformist, accused today of being too liberal by the conservatives) and Hassan Habibi.

15. According to Abdolkarim Soroush, 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 Soroush*, June 2007; available at: www.drsoroush.com. Other sources give much higher figures, and put the number of assistants and professors purged at 8,000; see Ali Aziminejad cited in Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 6.

16. The private Azad Universities were established in 1982 to offer an alternative to the public universities, which had been closed down.

The end of the war and Ayatollah Khomeini's death 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*)¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Reza Razavi also reports that voices were raised in favour of dismantling 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 stability of the Islamic Republic was secured, some conservatives argued, the DTV's existence made no sense and thus it should be dissolved.¹⁹

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'.²⁰ The presence of Abdolkarim Soroush among the lecturers of the University of Tehran is cited as one of the most important factors that helped to 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. This change can be seen as the result of a reaction of the young generation against the political models set by their predecessors. In the words of a political

17. 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.

18. See *ibid.*, pp. 8–11.

19. Reza Razavi, *op. cit.* in note 7, p. 9.

20. Personal interview, Tehran, June 2007. Kadivar is an outspoken reformist cleric who now lives in exile in the United States.

veteran of the Islamic Republic: 'if the father is a monarchist, then the son is a radical Islamist, while the grandson is a liberal and a democrat', suggesting a rather simplistic but effective dialectic that can explain the dynamics of change within Iranian society.²¹ But there is another element which explains the transformation of the DTV from a stronghold of the regime into one of its most vociferous critics, namely the introduction of free elections for the Central Committee in 1993. The whole student body chose the members of the Central Committee, and many restrictions on candidacy were abandoned. The DTV started to attract people with different views and opinions, becoming a relatively 'free harbour for political activists,' as one interviewee observed, moving away from its early ideological moorings, characterised by an uncritical loyalty to the Islamic left and later on to the reformists.²²

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: 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 1996,²³ 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. This increase in numbers was accompanied by a change in students' attitudes towards politics and life in general. As Ahmad Rajabzadeh shows, in 2004 a decrease in traditional religious beliefs was detectable among the students, and a corresponding adherence to rationalism, a more scientific approach to life, began to prevail. In particular, the authority of the clergy to prescribe the correct interpretation of religion came under a great deal of criticism.²⁴

Universities are a space for the socialisation of beliefs and values. This can be a threat as well as an opportunity for ruling élites. The situation in the late 1990s was very similar to the pre-revolution context, when Mohammad Reza Shah expanded the higher education system. Although he thought he was initiating a process of building a new and loyal élite, in reality he was creating optimal conditions for an oppositional movement to develop. Similarly 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

21. Personal interview with a well-known journalist, Tehran, July 2008. He was editor-in-chief of many reformist newspapers and journals. He worked for the regime propaganda organisation in Beirut, Lebanon, between 1983 and 1985. During Khatami's presidency he was a supporter of the reforms and a vociferous critic of the authoritarian elements of the Iranian regime.

22. Personal interview with a former student and member of the central committee of the DTV, Tehran, May 2007.

23. Mahdi, *op. cit.* in note 17, p. 14.

24. Ahmad Rajabzadeh, 'University and Religion in Iran: A Survey on the State Universities of Tehran', *Discourse*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2004, pp. 107-38.

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. Still dominant on the campuses, the DTV had undergone major internal changes caused by the massive influx of new members with different political viewpoints: this engendered its growing ambition to become independent from institutional politics, an unexpected development for the reformist governments.

Universities as the site of power and factional struggle

Khatami: promotion of and transformations in student activism

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.²⁵ For many, this showed that the DTV had never had any political independence to begin with.²⁶ The reformist government headed by Khatami repaid this loyalty 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ Students considered the amendments, approved by a parliament dominated by the conservatives, to be yet another restriction on the freedom of speech and the press. Thus when *Salam*, one of the well-known Islamic-leftist newspapers, was closed down as a consequence of this new law, the students staged

25. See Mashayekhi, op. cit. in note 2, p. 296 and following pages.

26. 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.

27. 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-yGlyTk>.

28. See Mahdi, op. cit. in note 17, pp. 13 and following pages.

29. *Hamshahri* reported 5 dead, 11 July 1999.
30. Neshat, 28 July 1999. Charles Kurzman, 'Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami's Iran', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, XXV, 1, 2001, p. 41.
31. *Khordad*, 8 June 1999. Behzad Nabavi, a reformist deputy, accused the students of creating confusion in the country.
32. 'Jarian-e Daneshjuian, chaleshha va rahkarha. Goftogu ba Ali Tajrania' ['Student movement, challenges and solutions. A discussion with Ali Tajrania'], *Cheshmandaz-e Iran*, no. 26 (1383/2004), p. 190.
33. Personal interview with a member of the DTV, Tehran, 2008.
34. 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).
35. 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.
36. Personal interview with a leading Iranian politician, Tehran, May 2008 (see footnote 8).
37. Such as the association of liberal students (*anjoman-e daneshjuian liberal*), still active in Iran. It is not recognised as a lawful student organisation. Its website is: <http://cheragheazadi.org>. Some of its members are among the 19 activists who signed a letter calling for isolating the Islamic Republic (see below, note 66).

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.²⁹ The students asked Khatami to support them, but he described the protests as 'an attack on national security'.³⁰ Many within the reformist front shared this attitude, probably because they feared an uncontrolled escalation of violence.³¹ The dormitory incident occupies a special place in the memories of Iranian students, as it generated a profound feeling of betrayal. The incident also constitutes a precedent for the latest attacks against the students' dormitories that took place in 2009. It led to a major debate on the role of students in politics, although 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.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴

This independent attitude and critical stance was not welcomed by the reformists, who accused the students of being manipulated by foreign powers – a heinous accusation in Iran.³⁵ 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'.³⁶ Factionalism was the only approved model for governing university campuses and the student movement, and the DTV's independent attitude 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.³⁷ 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.

After Ahmadinejad's ascension to the presidency in 2005 the campuses again turned into battlefields between the pro-government students (mainly organised in *Basij* units) and the opposition student groups (brought together in the DTV-Allameh and other minor forces). The repression of reformist students and the promotion of *Basij* units in turn led to the strengthening of connections between these marginalised students and external reformist organisations (women's movements, workers' movements etc.)

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.'³⁸ Thanks to governmental support, being a *Basij* is seen as a more rewarding and opportune option than engaging in opposition activities. This altered political landscape on the campuses does not mean that the spirit of dissent among the students has disappeared: only that it has moved underground, or outside the country.

Ahmadinejad: universities as a means to attain domination

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 this means that the student *Basij* units receive financial and political help enabling them to become stronger and bigger. When the student *Basij* units were first created their functions were diverse and consisted mainly of welcoming the new 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.³⁹ 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

38. Personal interview with a former member of the DTV, Tehran, August-September 2008.

39. 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.

have 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 600,000.⁴⁰ 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),⁴¹ enticements which especially appeal to students (both male and female) from poor and conservative families, whose 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.⁴² Active student groups were now only tolerated if they had pro-government credentials and the subsequent political vacuum left by the DTV was mainly filled by the *Basij*. Some Marxist and liberal student groups were also present in universities, although they were rather small and had been only recently been set up. As Babak Zamanian has stated, 'while the situation had not been ideal in the Khatami years, Mr. Ahmadinejad's anti-reformist campaign ... led students to value their previous freedoms.'⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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 students with activist backgrounds are rated according to a scale of one to three stars, with students assigned three stars being barred from

40. Saeid Golkar, 'The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran's Universities. How the Student *Basij* Serve the Regime's Purposes', *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2010, p. 26.

41. See also Ali Reza Eshraghi, 'Iranian students fight hard and soft', *Asia Times Online*, 2 July 2010.

42. 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.

43. Babak Zamanian, quoted in Nazila Fathi's article, 'Iranian students fight hard and soft', *New York Times*, 21 December 2006.

44. Ibid.

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.⁴⁵ 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 'incomplete file' rather than 'starred student.'⁴⁶ 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 express a sense of powerlessness or at best moderate solidarity with the students in this situation.⁴⁷ But this exclusionary practice is not the only tool used by the regime to bring university students to heel: recruitment and factionalism are other tools used to control the campuses. An examination of these latter issues can help towards a better understanding of the origins and evolution of domestic conflicts in Iran.

Universities as the recruitment pool of competing state elite factions

The elite system of the Islamic Republic is characterised by strong factionalism, whose boundaries have shifted over the years, and whose origins may often be traced back to political allegiances forged by politicians when they were student activists.⁴⁸ Retracing a politician's past is useful for understanding their political frame of reference as well as their actions; furthermore, this kind of analysis may be of great help when factional disputes emerge, as it can clarify individual political loyalties and stances. There are networks of 'special connections' within the system of the Islamic Republic, which forge political identities. A case in point is the inter-connectedness of politics, universities and the military sector by means of the *Basij* and *Sepah-e Pasdaran*, the revolutionary guards. This relation is not particular to Ahmadinejad's era; the link between the intelligence service, the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* and the *Basij* – which are today one military corps – has been a constant feature of the political history of the Islamic Republic. It is in the ranks of these organisations that many present-day politicians started their careers.

45. In 2007-2008, Iranian newspapers debated the issue at length. See *Punishing Stars: Systematic Denial of Higher Education in Iran*, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), 2011, pp. 41-51.

46. Ibid, p. 22. According to the ICHRI report, this has been happening since 2009.

47. ICHRI (2011), p. 37. In October 2011, the Science Minister Kamran Daneshjoo announced that students who participated in the post-2009 election protests will not receive any grant or financial help for studying. 'Protesters Won't Get Grants: Iran's Minister of Science', *Payvand News*, 24 October 2011.

48. See Bahman Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran. The Institutionalisation of Factional Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996): 'factionocracy' is a fluid quasi-party system, where loyalty and belonging are defined by many aspects, not only ideological; Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002); and Farideh Farhi's chapter in this *Chaillot Paper*.

From an historical point of view, membership of the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* or the *Basij* should not be understood as a clear sign of a pro-Ahmadinejad or conservative political orientation. For instance, in the first decade after the revolution, the (para)military sector was strongly influenced by the Islamic left – which turned reformist in the 1990s. This is because these institutions are central to the whole system and have been conceived as a shared political lineage across the political spectrum of the Islamic Republic for many years. Nevertheless, today they are influenced by pro-Ahmadinejad forces. But their main loyalty is to the *Rahbar*, Khamenei, as the recent disputes between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei have shown.

Among Ahmadinejad's collaborators, it is easy to find persons who have a past in the ranks of the *Basij* and *Pasdaran* serving on university campuses. This is the case for Alireza Zakani, a parliamentary deputy and former head of the Student *Basij* Organisation, the coordinating authority of all the student *Basij* units.⁴⁹ Mehrdad Bazrpash is the former head of the *Basij* unit at Sharif University of Technology and was the Head of the National Youth Organisation until October 2010.⁵⁰ A rather interesting case is that of Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, who is considered one of Ahmadinejad's closest collaborators and friends. He organised and managed Ahmadinejad's 2009 electoral campaign, was appointed as deputy Interior Minister in 2007 (a key position for the supervision of electoral procedures) and has numerous relatives and close friends who have been awarded government appointments. Mohamad Javad Bahonar, an experienced deputy and former Speaker of the Parliament, is Samareh's maternal uncle. Samareh's two brothers also have important posts in the Ministry of Oil and Energy.⁵¹ He is very close to the ultra-conservative Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who has been seen as Ahmadinejad's mentor and who advocated the use of violence to suppress the reform movement in the 1990s.⁵² The relation between Ahmadinejad and Samareh is a *primus inter pares* relationship. In the past, Samareh helped the President with his political career, and now Ahmadinejad is returning the favour. Like Ahmadinejad, Samareh studied at Tehran's University of Science and Technology (popularly known as Elm-o Sanat), where the two started their shared history of engagement and activism. In the first student national election in 1979 Samareh was elected as the first representative from Elm-o Sanat, and Ahmadinejad as his deputy.⁵³

There are close links between the Tehran University of Science and Technology and Ahmadinejad's government, and there is a high concentration of its alumni among the president's entourage. They include many ministers of the current presidential cabinet: Ali Akbar Salehi, who lectured at Elm-o Sanat, former head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation, is the current Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁴ He also served for many years as the Chancellor of the Sharif University of Technology,

49. Zakani became famous as he criticised Ahmadinejad's harsh repression of the protests in December 2009.

50. Golkar, op. cit. in note 40, p. 26.

51. Muhammad Sahimi, 'Ahmadinejad and Family take on "new" Foreign Policy', Tehran Bureau, 2 September 2009.

52. Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), pp. 162, 168. See also Babak Ganji, 'Iranian Strategy: Factionalism and Leadership Politics', Defence Analysis of the United Kingdom, London 2007, p. 7.

53. Interview with a leading politician (see footnote 8).

54. Salehi's loyalty to Ahmadinejad is evidenced by the position the Minister took in the context of the recent dispute between Ahmadinejad and Khamene'i – and in particular on the occasion of the dismissal of the Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Sharif Malekzadeh. See Najmeh Bozorgmehr, 'Iranian deputy foreign minister dismissed', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2011.

the most prestigious technological university in Tehran. Mehdi Ghazanfari is the Minister of Commerce, Industries and Mines, Ali Akbar Mehrabian was the Minister of Mines as well as being Ahmadinejad's nephew,⁵⁵ and Hamid Behbehani, a lecturer in transportation at Tehran's University of Science and Technology, was Ahmadinejad's mentor at university and Minister of Transportation. Behbehani was impeached by the *Majlis* in February 2011. The move against the Minister was endorsed by the Expediency Council too. Since Ahmadinejad is close to the impeached minister and the Expediency Council is headed by Rafsanjani, many have seen this dispute as a reflection of the rivalry between Rafsanjani and the current president.⁵⁶

Among Khatami's collaborators, too, many received their political education within the ranks of the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* or revolutionary *nezam* (system). These included the following: Akbar Ganji, a dissident journalist, who today lives in the United States, and who is one of the most well-known figures of the dissident Iranian diaspora; Mohsen Armin, a leading member of the Mojahedin of the Islamic revolution, a radical-Islamic leftist faction turned reformist faction, who is currently in jail; Mohsen Sazegara, a well-known dissident who was a leading politician in Iran and a close collaborator of Mousavi during the first decade after the revolution – he supported Khatami's government but in 2003 he moved to Europe and later the United States, and currently collaborates with a number of dissident websites and newspapers; Said Hajjarian, who was a key figure in the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic, before becoming the most influential strategist in the reformist camp. He survived an assassination attempt in the year 2000 but was left paralysed. In the aftermath of the presidential elections in June 2009 he was imprisoned. Ganji, Hajjarian, Armin and Sazegara were among the founders and leading commanders of the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* during the 1980s and 1990s

Later, as a result of the change in the domestic political scene during the 1990s, many turned to the world of culture, journalism and academia.⁵⁷ The strength of the link between institutional politics and student activism within the Islamic leftist-reformist circles is also demonstrated by the DTV's membership of the *Dovvom-e Khordad* Front. After the reformists won the 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 Mousavi Khoeini and several members were former DTV leaders,⁵⁸ who stood as reformist candidates in the 2000 election and were subsequently banned from standing for re-election in 2004 by the Guardian Council.⁵⁹

The above-described cases illustrate how factionalism within the institutions originates in universities, underlining the centrality of this institution to a deeper understanding of Iranian politics. But factionalism

55. Mehrabian lost his portfolio to Ghazanfari when the two ministries (Mines on the one side, and Industries and Commerce on the other) were unified. See 'Ahmadinejad chahar vazir pishnahady-e khodra beh Majlis mo'arefi kard' [Ahmadinejad presented his four proposed ministers], Fars News, 29 August 2011, available at <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=9005050180>. See also Ali Alfoneh, 'All Ahmadinejad's Men', *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2011, p. 83.
56. See Kayvan Bozorgmehr, 'Expediency Council Issues a Warning to Ahmadinejad after he Disregards Even Impeachment', Rooz Online via Payvand News, 7 February 2011, available at <http://www.payvand.com>.
57. This is the case for people such as Abbas Abdi, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, Hamid Jalapour, Hashemi Aghajari and Said Hajjarian, who became intellectuals closely associated with reformist political circles after having built up the system of propaganda and intelligence services shortly after the revolution. They all share a long history of engagement in student activism and universities.
58. Among them were Fatemeh Haqiqatjou, Ali Tajernia, Meisam Saidi and Reza Yusefian.
59. See the presentation of the student faction at the first national convention of the Islamic Iran's Participation Front, *Nameh-ye Komiteh Daneshjuy Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami beh monasebat-e entekhabha-ye jadid shura-ye markaz-e jam'e eslami daneshjuyan-e sar-o sar keshvar* [Letter from the student committee of the IIPF on the occasion of new national elections of the central council of the IIPF], *Ta Kongre dovjom. Biancha va movase Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami* [Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Islamic Iran's Participation Front], 2000, pp. 30–32.

is not only the outcome of the way universities are governed, it is also adopted as the model for governing universities. This is the case of the governmental efforts to control the private Azad universities: another battlefield where the political factional dispute has recently moved. The Azad universities were established in 1982 and today have more than a million fee-paying students all over the country. They were established by Hashemi Rafsanjani, towards whom both the Supreme Leader Khamene'i and the President are hostile for many reasons, the most recent being that Rafsanjani is suspected of being a supporter of the Green Movement.⁶⁰ Since the summer of 2010 a factional struggle has developed to gain control of the assets of the Azad universities: Ahmadinejad has repeatedly denounced the management of the Azad Universities as corrupt and immoral. At the height of the dispute, which was reached in late June 2010, Khamene'i stepped in too, indicating the importance of the struggle.⁶¹

The factional struggle between the 'Rafsanjanists' and moderate conservatives versus the government revolved around Rafsanjani's announcement that the Azad universities were to be converted into a religious endowment – making the Azad universities a totally private institution, theoretically immune from governmental control – and the issue of who has the power to nominate the next Chancellor. The incumbent, Abdallah Jasbi, has been a member of the traditional conservative Islamic Coalition Society, which supported Rafsanjani's presidential candidature in 2005, and backed Mousavi's candidacy in 2009. Khamene'i's intervention has on the one hand thwarted Ahmadinejad's ambition to control the Board of Trustees and the appointment of the Chancellor,⁶² but on the other hand prevented Rafsanjani from transforming the Azad University's properties into an endowment, leaving the door open for Ahmadinejad to try another assault. If, as many believe, Khamene'i's move aims to reinforce the image of a Leader who keeps the system and factions in balance,⁶³ the whole controversy proves the central importance of the university as a 'war chest' for Khamene'i and his circle. It also indicates the lengths to which elite factions are prepared to go in order to achieve their ambitions – by reproducing the factional structure of the political sphere on the university campuses.

60. See Nazanin Kamdar, 'Iran's Azad University, Coming Battleground Against Rafsanjani', *Rooz Online*, 5 October 2010.

61. *Payan-e ghole-ye daneshgah Azad bah nameh-ye rahbari?*, *Rah-e Sabz*, 13 tir 1389 [4 July 2010]. See also Babak, 'The Battle over Islamic Azad University', *Foreign Policy*, 12 July 2010 (available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/12/the_battle_over_islamic_azad_university), and also Raha Tahami, 'Battle of Wills Over Top Iranian University', *Payvand News*, 29 July 2010.

62. The names of the members of the current Board of Trustees are: Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mousavi Ardebili, Abdollah Jasbi, Ali-Akbar Velayati, Hassan Habibi, Hasan Khomeini, Mohsen Ghomi and Hamid Mirzadeh.

63. Babak (pseudonym), 'Khamenei Sides with Parliament and against Ahmadinejad in Fight over Islamic Azad University', *InsideIran.org*, 8 July 2010. This may reveal the competition between Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad too, which in recent months has become more and more acute.

Politics from abroad? The post-2009 electoral crisis, migration and regime stability

Ahmadinejad's policy of containing student activism and clamping down on anti-government organisations on university campuses has achieved its goals, namely the effective exclusion of democratic-reformist student activism. Those who attempt to continue engaging in such activism are expelled from the universities. But even prior to this recent policy, going back to 2002, the students' increased estrangement from institutional politics has been compensated by their proximity to other social forces. The reformist student movement has networked outside the campus in order to reach out to society at large, beyond the state-controlled institutions, and build a social movement strong enough to lead a democratic transition: as one student has put it, 'our idea was that Khatami's government couldn't lead the country to democracy. The students must therefore create a social movement in order to achieve that.'⁶⁴

Almost ten years later, the 2009 protests have proven that universities are no longer the pulsating heart of the political struggle that they were in July 1999. 'It is fair to say that the 2009 protests were more broad-based. In fact the protests didn't start in the universities. Although students constituted an important segment of the movement, they were not its vanguard.'⁶⁵ Contrary to what happened in 1999, when the students were at the core of the protests and were leading them, in 2009 the student movement proved to be alive, but also to be divided into small and poorly organised groups.⁶⁶ On the one hand, this has allowed students to dissociate themselves from factionalism, and they have been able to enjoy more independence and revitalise the campuses politically. On the other hand, the pro-democratic students are handicapped by the fact that they have no direct links to the institutional politics of the Islamic Republic, since all the most important reformist figures are today either under arrest, serving jail sentences or have fled abroad.⁶⁷

This situation has furthermore created unsafe conditions and very weak political protection for activists: due to this, many have decided to leave Iran. The process leading to this decision follows an established path: arrest, detention, lack of money and employment, or expulsion from university. In such circumstances emigration appears as the logical option, all the more so as it is now part of the Iranian collective psyche due to the historical experience of emigration. According to the statistics of the Iranian Refugees' Alliance, in 2009 almost 16,000 Iranians applied for asylum worldwide and in 2010 they

64. Personal interview with a female student member of the Special Commission for Women within the DTV, Tehran, 2008.

65. Personal interview with a former student who left Iran, March 2011.

66. A recent example of this is the controversy sparked by a letter to the President of the US calling for the diplomatic isolation of Iran. Ali Golizadeh, a student activist linked to the DTV, dismissed it as shameful and not representative of the general will of the student population. See 'Nouzdah faoll-e saheq va faoll-e daneshjui Iran be Obama: beh momoshat be diktatorha paian dahid' ['19 Iranian former and current student activists to Obama: stop flirting with dictators'], 3 November 2011 (www.daneshjooonews.com), and Ali Golizadeh, 'Nameh-i sharmovar' ['Shameful letter'], 7 November 2011 (www.roozonline.com). Another letter was written in reply to both the previous texts, signed by some 150 activists, who called for the halting of the nuclear programme and a peaceful and cooperative approach to Iran (<http://online.wsj.com>).

67. See Ali Honari, 'Daneshjuyan va tajrobeh jonbesh-e sabz' ['Students and the experience of the green movement'], July 2011 (available at: www.jomhourikhahi.com), and 'Jonbesh-e daneshjuiian: az johme ya bar johme? Taqdi jonbesh-e daneshjuii, fazay ejtemahi va sakhtar qodrat-e siyasi' ['Assessing the student movements' relationship to society and political power structure'], *Goftogu*, no. 50, January 2008, pp. 165-79; Mustafa Khosravi, 'The student movement's approach vis-à-vis the green movement', *Gozaar*, 1 March 2010 (www.gozaar.org); and Sadegh Shojai, 'The Universities are Alive: Students and the Green Movement', *Gozaar*, 11 June 2010.

were 19,000.⁶⁸ In 2010, some 6,700 Iranians had applied for asylum in EU Member States,⁶⁹ where some 150,000 Iranian refugees and asylum-seekers are already living.⁷⁰ The numbers are even higher in Turkey, where Iranians can immigrate illegally with a smaller amount of money and where they constitute the highest number of asylum applicants; unofficial statistics estimate the number of Iranians currently living in Turkey as somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000.⁷¹ Generally, those leaving Iran are well-educated, politically active and young.⁷² The question is whether such a huge population abroad will act in the same way as did the Iranian student diaspora during the reign of the Shah, when it played an important role in drawing international attention to the situation in Iran, or whether the recent exodus will simply end up impoverishing the ranks of the internal opposition, condemning Iran to become a closed and stagnant society. It would be naïve to assume that the majority of young Iranians abroad are willing to continue their past political engagement;⁷³ but considering the special relationship of student politics to factionalism and the centrality of their 'home institution,' namely the university, to national debate, they could be important voices for the international community to pay attention to as an indicator of emerging political trends.

The probability of such an outcome depends on the feasibility of a united opposition front to the Islamic Republic being established. In this regard, there are some distinctive characteristics of the Iranian exilic diaspora that must be taken into consideration. Because of an often overly-simplistic depiction of the context of the post-2009 electoral crisis, there is a common perception that all Iranians, whether in exile or not, are activists or anti-regime oriented. Although the vast majority of Iranians residing abroad and seeking asylum are very critical of the regime, not all among them are activists nor do they necessarily see political engagement as their priority for the future.

In fact many are just looking for opportunities to study and build a professional career abroad, where they can enjoy better conditions and fewer social restrictions. Many others are preoccupied with claiming their rights as asylum-seekers or refugees, as this is their most immediate need. In the case of asylum seekers, in some cases they may pretend to be much more active than they actually were back home in Iran, since political asylum ensures the applicants with social and economic aid – unlike the conditions endured by 'ordinary' migrants who are not legally entitled to any special treatment.⁷⁴

Apart from the question of individual political commitment, the diversification of the Iranian opposition in exile and the many conflicts between the existing groups make the establishment of a credible and united voice difficult. The success of 'pressure from abroad' is conditioned

68. Iranian Refugees' Alliance, 'Statistical Sheet: Statistical Data on Iranian Asylum Seekers and Refugees in 2009', 2009. Available at www.irainc.org.

69. Iranian Refugees' Alliance, 'Statistical Data On Iranian Refugees and asylum seekers', 2011, available at <http://www.irainc.org/iranref/statistics.php>. See also Anthony Albertinelli, 'Asylum applicants and first instance decisions on asylum applications in Q1 2010', *Eurostat Data in Focus*, 32/2010, p. 6.

70. Sebnem Koser Akcapar estimates the number of Iranians in European countries or North America in 2003 at 132,544. See S. K. Akcapar, 'Rethinking migrants' networks and social capital: a case-study of Iranians in Turkey', *International Migration*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2010, p. 165.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

72. OMID Advocates for Human Rights, *Report on the situation of Iranian Refugees in Turkey. Post June 12th 2009: one year later*, Berkeley, June 2010, pp. 11-15.

73. This is one of the conclusions of the author's ongoing fieldwork in Italy (since March 2010) and Turkey (July and August, November 2011).

74. This has been widely observed during the fieldwork undertaken by the author in Italy (since May 2010) and Turkey (July, August and November 2011).

on access to political circles in the country of residence for the various Iranian groups in exile. Achieving such access, however, does not necessarily reflect or engender real influence or appreciation inside Iran. Groups are often at odds with each other both for ideological reasons and due to competition for political credibility or governments' attention.

Another pressing structural problem among the different strands of the Iranian opposition abroad is the lack of reciprocal trust; this is weak even among single individuals who participate in oppositional activities. Several cases of secret agents sent by the Islamic Republic to infiltrate groups and associations have been reported. Spreading false news in order to create confusion and destroy the credibility of outspoken critics of the Islamic Republic is one of the techniques used by the regime in order to weaken the opposition.

Despite these constraints, the exodus of young Iranians who have left the country in the past few years may profoundly refashion the political landscape of the Iranian opposition abroad. A sense of solidarity with, and support for, the Green Movement is shared by all the Iranian political groups in exile. Efforts made by some associations, whose constituency originates in student politics, to re-unite the different strands of the Iranian opposition are an important step in the direction of establishing a credible voice that can be taken seriously by the international community. Activists share a common past in the ranks of the Green Movement, and are linked through political activities or membership in organisations since the time they lived in Iran. These connections can be maintained thanks to access to technologies which are forbidden in the Islamic Republic. In particular, many political refugees or asylum-seekers who actively supported one of the two reformist candidates in the last presidential elections, and who were prominent in reformists' political circles and in the media, still represent a crucial reference point for many of the activists outside Iran.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the sharing of common difficulties linked to their legal status as asylum-seekers and refugees reinforces their sense of solidarity: it does not, however, mean that the various groups have overcome their ideological differences thanks to the common experience of exile.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Student politics is a crucial sphere that deserves the careful attention of Iran analysts: understanding what is going on within university campuses allows a much broader perspective on Iran's domestic politics and its factional conflicts. Factional conflicts appear more comprehensible when individual connections and political allegiances, which often date back to the various actors' past as university students, are taken into

75. This is attested by the role played by the websites Jaras (Rah-e sabz), The Green Voice of Freedom, Rooz Online, Zadio Zamaneh, and the like.

76. For example, this is the case of the organisation called *Hambastegi faollin tabhidi* (Solidarity among activists in exile), whose call for solidarity and participation has appealed to diversified strands of Iranian oppositional groups abroad. Recently, the Green Congress of the Democrats (*Kongres demokrasi khandan-e sabz*) is also playing an interesting role, connecting individuals and groups from ideologically diverse backgrounds.

consideration. This is especially true in the case of an authoritarian regime such as Iran, where educational institutions have a particularly important role in maintaining ideological and cultural hegemony. Many Iranian politicians were student activists in their youth and it is no coincidence that the universities have always been one of the first places to be 'colonised' by 'new' powers when major political upheavals (such as the revolution itself, Khomeini's death and the end of the war, Khatami's election and later Ahmadinejad's) have taken place. This has been the case throughout Iran's post-revolutionary history, regardless of the ideological orientation of these 'new' powers.

Observing the situation on the campuses makes it easier to gauge the state of play with regard to factional struggles and to gain a clearer understanding of domestic politics. But universities are important as sites of rights advocacy and contestation as well. Keeping a focus on the university campuses means being able to assess the political domestic situation in terms of the prospects for social peace or conflict, the likelihood of change, and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current politics of an important segment of the country's population.

Given the current situation and the large numbers of Iranians who have been leaving the country in recent years, communities residing abroad are increasing in size and political relevance. Although it is important to recognise and acknowledge the differences among the various strands and groups of the opposition, some interesting efforts to reunite Iranians residing abroad are currently taking place. It is of great importance that such experiments are supported since they could, in time, nurture the emergence of a fresh and reliable Iranian political voice that needs to be taken into consideration by Western policy-makers.

In the case of Iran, student politics has often been regarded as synonymous with dissidence and perceived as intimately bound up with other salient issues, such as the building of the Islamic state (since the universities were among the first institutions to be Islamised with the cooperation of the student associations), the reformists' effort to 'democratise' Iran, or Ahmadinejad's recent authoritarian entrenchment. With the election of Khatami in 1997 the perspective on student activism changed and the students were seen as harbingers of a democratisation process, which conformed to the general perception of student activism as inherently progressive. As evidenced in this chapter, this over-emphasis on democratisation has prevented analysts from explaining how the dynamics of student politics might be connected to, and interact with, the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. In order to make sense of the role of universities and student activism in Iran they should thus be viewed as organically (in a Gramscian sense) connected to the ideological and political system of the Islamic Republic.

As this chapter has made clear, universities lie at the heart of politics in the Islamic Republic, having a significance that goes beyond specific trends of democratisation (or lack thereof), and revealing important features of the wider political environment such as factionalism, resource distribution and élite selection.

The rifts within Iranian society and the factionalism that characterises its elite and pervades the state bureaucracies will hence continue to play themselves out on the campuses of Iranian universities. In this students are both actors and victims, and their actions and reactions cannot necessarily be understood in terms of schematic progressive versus reactionary dichotomies.