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A lesson in exclusion – Iran’s harsh treatment of student activists

As Iran’s academic year begins on 23 September, a large number of students are still unable to attend university.

Many students are still blocked from their studies because of their peaceful human rights or political activism, or on account of their Baha’i faith. Dozens more languish in prison, where they endure harsh interrogations, torture and other ill-treatment, as well as dire prison conditions. Their convictions typically come after unfair trials.

A student’s experience

Rozhin Mohammadi, a 27-year-old student and blogger, knows all too well what these students experience behind bars. She fled Iran in 2011 following years of intimidation by the authorities and recently recounted to Amnesty International her ordeal.

Rozhin Mohammadi was first arrested on 14 November 2011 on her arrival at Tehran’s Imam Khomeini Airport airport after pursuing a course of studies in the Philippines. She was released the next day following payment of a \$20,000 bail but was re-arrested on 23 November and detained for two weeks in Evin Prison where she was subjected to harsh day-long interrogations while blindfolded.

She told Amnesty International that the first day of interrogation was the worst and that her interrogator beat her on the head and face and threatened her with rape.

She was questioned about her activities and was asked to give up information about other activists, including specifically [Hossein Ronaghi Maleki](#), a blogger and prisoner of conscience on whose behalf Amnesty International has campaigned.

Among the things they forced Rozhin to do was to make a videotaped “confession”, including “confessing” that she had sex outside marriage – an offence punishable with flogging in Iran. She told Amnesty International that none of the things she was forced to confess to on camera were true.

Rozhin Mohammadi described how one day, when she was in the interrogation room, the door was open and she could hear someone screaming in the next room. It was her brother. She said that her brother had been suspended from a ceiling for hours and that his shoulders were dislocated, his nose was broken, his ear damaged, and he had bruises all over his body.

She found the experience so traumatic that she had a seizure in prison and suffered from memory loss. She eventually received some medical treatment and was released.

Rozhin Mohammadi’s interrogator continued to harass her and her family by calling them every day and telling her parents that they would rape their daughter and kill her.

Eventually, Rozhin Mohammadi and her brother fled to Turkey to escape the threats.

This was not Rozhin’s first encounter with arbitrary policies. Years before her detention, in 2006, she was a veterinarian student, but had been expelled after only one semester at Tehran

University. Despite having done well in several courses, she received a zero in all of her subjects and the dean of her college told her that it was better for her not to go to university. She was not allowed to register for her second semester and told that it was impossible for her to resume her studies.

Blocked from pursuing her education in Iran, that year Rozhin Mohammadi moved to the Philippines where she decided to study medicine.

In 2009, during a trip back to Iran, she was brought under the scrutiny of Iran's security services, in relation to her involvement with the Green Movement and Mehdi Karroubi's presidential campaign.

Just before she was due to return to the Philippines to resume her studies, she received a call from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and was told that if she continued her activism she would be arrested.

She was eventually allowed to leave five months later in 2010, but only after being forced to sign a pledge not to do anything that might harm the Iranian government.

Rozhin Mohammadi's memories are still hazy, but there are things about her torment that she says will live with her forever. She told Amnesty International that she will never forget her interrogator's voice. She said that she does not remember his face but his voice is always with her.

Even though Rozhin Mohammadi and her brother managed to flee Iran, other students remain imprisoned in Iranian jails solely on account of their political or and human rights activism.

Student activists across the country continue to face arbitrary arrest and interrogation, as well as expulsion and being barred from higher education on account of their faith.

Members of the Baha'i religious minority in Iran are subject to discriminatory laws and regulations because of their faith and students are denied equal rights to higher education in practice. There are over 300,000 Baha'is in Iran, but their religion is not recognized under the Iranian Constitution,

Baha'i students are particularly targeted and "expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is", according to a non-public document of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. The UN expert on human rights in Iran documented the case of four Baha'i students who were offered continued admission if they denied and/or pledged to abandon their religious practices. The students were reportedly expelled for refusing the offer.

Those who seek to provide university education to members of the Baha'i community have also faced prosecution.

Prisoners of conscience

After the contested presidential election of 2009, as the noose around universities and students tightened, campuses were seen as one of the main hubs of dissent. The annual peaceful National Student Day demonstrations, which were held across university campuses, were at times forcibly dispersed and dozens of students were arrested and imprisoned.

Many received "stars" and were subsequently banned from continuing their education. In Iran's universities, disciplinary committees commonly use a discriminatory practice of allocating "stars" – indications on a student's personal file – when they have been found to have taken part in "suspicious" activities, often of a peaceful political or human rights nature. A student handed three "stars" would face an outright ban on further education.

Generations of students have since had their lives shattered, their hopes of getting a degree and a good job crushed, and many had no choice but to flee Iran because, like most students around the world, they engaged in debate, challenged the establishment, and stood up for their rights.

Four years on, Amnesty International continues to [campaign](#) for the release of student prisoners of conscience, some of whom have been imprisoned since 2009 after being convicted of vaguely-worded national security charges..

Among them are: **Majid Tavakkoli**, student leader and winner of the Norwegian Student Peace Prize 2013, who is serving a nine-year prison sentence after he was arrested following a speech he made at a National Student Day demonstration; **Bahareh Hedayat**, student and women's rights activist, is serving a 10-year prison sentence following convictions including "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security"; **Sayed Ziaoddin (Zia) Nabavi**, "starred" student activist and co-founder of the Advocacy Council, is serving a 10-year prison term on the charge of "enmity against God"; **Majid Dorri**, member of the Advocacy Council for the Right to Education, is serving a six and a half year prison sentence after being convicted of charges including "enmity against God"; and **Navid Khanjani**, a member of the Baha'i religious minority and of the Association to Oppose Discrimination in Education (AODE), is serving a 12-year prison sentence for charges relating to his work for human rights organizations.

Amnesty International welcomes the announcement by the Iranian authorities that students who were "starred" and banned from education between 2011 and 2013 will be allowed to enrol in university this academic year. However, the Ministry of Science said that students who were "starred" prior to 2011, including prisoner of conscience Zia Nabavi, would have to re-take the nationwide university entrance exams again before being permitted to enrol.

Amnesty International urges the Iranian authorities to allow all "starred" students to resume their university studies, and to release all students serving prison terms solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Public Document

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