

THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM

In the Here and Now:

CIVIC EDUCATION IN ADVANCE
OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

By Mariam Memarsadeghi



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This working paper was produced for the Legatum Institute's workshop on Educational Reform on 12 November 2012. The workshop was part of 'The Future of Iran' project, which is designed to encourage Iranians to begin thinking about the challenges they will face if, or when, they suddenly find themselves in a position to carry out major political, social and economic reforms.

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Mariam Memarsadeghi is an outspoken advocate for women's rights, civil liberties, civic education and internet freedom, particularly in Islamic contexts. She is co-founder and co-director of the E-Collaborative for Civic Education, whose flagship project, Tavaana: E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society is Iran's open education e-learning initiative. Memarsadeghi's writings have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other publications. She is a frequent speaker at think tanks, on reputed television news programmes and a contributor to NPR. In 2007, Memarsadeghi was recognised by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Marshall Fund as a Transatlantic Young Leader for her promotion of democracy and human rights internationally. Her extensive experience includes three years of post-conflict work in the Balkan region. She also oversaw Freedom House's Middle East and North Africa programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Education, like civil society, is at once distinct from and a guarantor of democratic political institutions. In its liberal form, education builds a citizenry that is free, with a pluralistic sense of polity, democratic knowledge and civic virtues. As such, it is essential to the founding and sustenance of an open society.

People living under repression may be well aware of how their regime controls curricula, pedagogy and school life to manipulate youth's understanding of history and national identity. Those youths, in turn, become docile political subjects used to perpetuate the power and ideology of their rulers. One of the ironies of political repression is that people suffering under it can be far more appreciative and sensitive to the transformative power of education than those living in open societies. They yearn for and cherish the value of open, democratic learning that affirms free thinking and individual rights.

Iranians living under a theocratic totalitarian regime are no exception. As our experience at Tavaana: E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society has shown, Iranians throughout the country and from a diverse demographic have probing, exhaustive critiques of the educational system and an insatiable hunger for intellectual growth, civic values and knowledge about the architecture of democracy and democratic transitions. They yearn to escape rote learning and ideological curricula for stimulating, creative educational methods that affirm them and their individual curiosity, free thought and questioning.

As repressive regimes fall and democratic transitions unfold, significant political developments and social changes happen: from Constitution writing, establishment of Government ministries, free and fair elections, and truth and reconciliation commissions. Effective civic education taps into these universal needs and experiences in many ways. It can provide blueprints, overarching principles and practical guidance for the development of durable and effective democratic institutions, laws, mechanisms and processes. Education also helps in injecting into society new mores and expectations about democratic political life.

TEACHERS, BLACKBOARDS AND BOOKS GONE VIRTUAL (AND UNDERGROUND)

But what can be done for societies not yet embarking on democratic transition? What can be done for societies whose repressive regimes have survived popular movements for democracy, and are further strengthening themselves by consolidating more power, or have morphed into new forms of repressive rule? In the face of these states' on-going repression and corruption, historical predictions about the demise of tyrannical regimes and the development of new, democratic orders have rarely been right. Given that, those interested in the nexus between education and democratic change cannot afford to 'time' democratic transition and lose by making their commitment immediate and early on. Laying the educational groundwork for civic education prior to a democratic transition may, in fact, help to hasten that transition and make it more stable when it does occur.

A series of curricular themes should be considered urgently, as a way to guard against political changes not being inclusive, turning violent, or prone to takeover by extremist

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or radical elements. In short, some civic education must be considered essential for ensuring that transitions away from repression are in fact transitions to democracy, not something else. Providing these curricula post transition may be too late. The Internet allows such provision for an increasing number of repressive regime contexts, and Iran is a shining example of a people who are severely repressed and yet highly engaged in civic discourse and free association, if only in the private sphere and the virtual public realm.

UNLEARNING TYRANNY

To understand what can be done to help spread civic knowledge in Iran even as the repressive regime survives, it is important first to understand how the official school curriculum negates civic consciousness and true learning. From its inception, the Iranian regime, like other totalitarian regimes, took firm control over kindergarten to university curricula. This of course had an effect on the spirit of the school and university at large, as well as the publishing industry and mass media. Over the last three decades, the Iranian regime's stranglehold on thinking and learning has not eased and recently even calcified, particularly where girls' and women's access to education is concerned.

Iranian students are forced, from the earliest grades through university, to show their obedience to the Supreme Leader by way of stale, rote displays of their mandated religiosity. They are taught the inferiority of girls and women, the hatred of the West and Israel, the superiority of Shi'a Islam, and are indoctrinated into a culture of relentless war and martyrdom. Forced segregation of the sexes and mandatory veiling for even young girls make school life physically oppressive. Misinformation and a lack of teaching about

important historical events such as the Tavaana Holocaust, and the Iranian regime's own political history and human rights abuses have had serious effects—generations of Iranians are unaware of massive gaps in their knowledge of national and international developments.

Iranian schools function to create disempowered pupils whose natural curiosity is crushed, who spy on their family and neighbours, who have an inability to relate naturally to peers of the opposite sex, and who lack civic spirit and trust in others. This is not to mention the fact that Iranian children grow up lacking the skills they need to create productive, meaningful lives for themselves and to compete in a global economy increasingly demanding of critical thinking, free questioning, creativity and innovation. The lack of a merit-based economy and the corrupt nature of a rentier state only exacerbate a sense of apathy and desperation created by Iranian schools: depression, suicide and drug abuse are rampant among the young, and often the only goal an inquisitive, high achieving student has is to leave the country.

Clearly these are not the ideal conditions under which civic education and leadership, civic virtues of honesty, trust and the responsibilities of society, can take hold. Leaving aside the parts of society who may be true believers in the Supreme Leader and radical Islam, the usually silent majority are extremely cynical about corruption and carry a lack of faith in being rewarded for doing the right thing.

Yet Tavaana classrooms are full of Iranians from all walks of life eager for an alternative conception of what they and their country can be. As testament to their civic zeal and yearning for democracy, these students routinely volunteer their time to expand Tavaana's reach, and are eager to serve as conduits and trainers to others that, like themselves, seek civic knowledge and openings. In other words, even in repressive present day Iran, the very same people who complain to us of feeling stifled, depressed and impotent, look boldly to serve others seeking civic virtue and responsibility for creating Iran's democratic future—if given the opportunity, without any recognition or compensation beyond their own satisfaction.

EDUCATION IS CARING

The following are some primary values and assumptions that guide our commitment to civic education for Iran pre-transition to democracy:

- Human beings everywhere deserve the right to learn, think and express themselves, not only as instruments to bring down tyrannical regimes, but in their own right—even if their thinking and free expression do not directly result in an end to tyranny;
- The creation of civic education opportunities, including those of civic responsibility and personal virtues, by and for others who live under repression is itself an ethical act of defiance against the immorality of a totalitarian regime. It is an act of personal responsibility but not one of withdrawal from public life and institutions. Hannah Arendt prescribes this as the only ethical option for those living under totalitarian rule: the creation of an alternate, competing liberal public realm. This opportunity has recently increased due to the discursive openings and existential possibilities the internet affords;

- Free thinking, free expression and access to democratic knowledge are likely to contribute to popular movements and political breakthroughs that lead to the toppling of repressive regimes and the development of truly liberal, durable democratic institutions, processes, virtues and civil societies that uphold human rights for the long term;
- Internet-based technologies can be liberating in creating alternative public realms independent of the ideological control of the totalitarian state. The Internet and the alternative public realms to which it gives ground break the tyrannical isolation and the existential moral limits for action imposed on individuals and whole societies living under tyranny;
- Technology, including the internet, satellite television and mobile phones, can be used for one-on-one as well as mass public education. This is as beneficial as that in open societies and better in some respects than traditional teaching settings and approaches. Open access, secure e-learning platforms can be used not just to teach individuals but to foster liberal, scholarly communities committed to civic discourse, associative life, community service and dissenting political action toward a liberal democratic state and politics.

TAVAANA: EMPOWERED CITIZENS

After a failed era of 'reformist' politics, failure of the Green Movement, fall of Communism, 9/11 and the Arab Spring, Iranians can create and sustain dissenting, empowering civic education opportunities even as the repressive regime ruling over them continues to survive by means of the internet revolution.

Our students at Tavaana come from varied locales, socioeconomic status, ethnicities, religions, lifestyles and worldviews. Nearly every day, they connect securely from Iran to anonymous e-classrooms to study a range of subjects useful, either intellectually or practically, to their struggle to overcome repression. Indeed, the bulk of what we do is the provision of live, e-classroom instruction on subjects relating to civil society, ranging from democracy to women's rights, leadership, the separation of religion and state, trauma healing, digital safety, journalism and more.

The live courses typically run over eight or more intense weeks. Tavaana students participate in weekly 1.5 hour live lectures (with interactive power point) and discussion session with the instructor and fellow classmates. In addition, they also complete assignments, quizzes, tests, asynchronous discussion and longer term projects. Our e-learning platform allows for a live video stream for the instructor (student cameras are switched off for security reasons), microphones for all, real time polling and quizzing, interactive exercises via multiple tools on a highly engaging white board, web tours, and multiple ways for students to show their thoughts, questions and feelings via microphones, chat, and emoticons, such as clapping for other students' good ideas.

Students frequently comment, and are often surprised about dialoguing more, doing more work and getting more out of the virtual learning experience than the traditional

classroom experiences they have had. Tavaana students include the country's most prominent civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders as well as clerics, physicians, mental health workers, teachers, professors, community service organisers, musicians and artists.

As a supplement to the classroom learning, we provide e-books, case studies on civic movements for democracy and human rights across the globe, interviews with Iranian and global civic leaders, public service announcements, an annotated resource library, e-mentoring and a TavaanaTech forum devoted to providing timely and reliable advice on technology, notably Iranians' digital safety and internet freedom concerns. We 'push' these resources as well as video and audio recordings of the classroom lectures out on Iranian satellite TV channels as well as social networks, including the Iranian social news aggregator Balatarin and the portal Gooya. In doing so, we bridge the worlds of directed, in-classroom teaching to specific individuals with general audience public education. We are well aware that Tavaana's learning assets are read and retaught in highly constrained small media or non-technological ways and settings. As such, we have made a concerted effort to avoid being overly-technological or 'fancy for fancy's sake' and to simplify downloading and printing of light PDFs. We also provide training resources and support for Tavaana students who go on to be teachers themselves. Perhaps most importantly, we provide incessant encouragement and daily live user support for our students so they return for mentoring and additional learning opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

During our first two years of live teaching over 1,000 Iranian students, we have learned that:

- 1) Civic education in the here and now for Iran is possible and highly popular;
- 2) Nonpartisan, unbiased attention to the full spectrum of civil rights and lifestyle issues builds inclusion and credence from a much beleaguered, distrustful civil society;
- 3) The trust and loyalty we have garnered from our students are our most vital assets, and must be maintained through the consistent provision of quality content and instruction and through secure and on-going care, support and mentoring for our students;
- 4) Free, open access, transparent teaching and dissemination of learning resources are necessary;
- 5) Our strong partnerships with institutions such as the Center for Civic Education/ CIVITAS, Freedom House, the Albert Shanker Institute and the New Tactics Program of the Center for Victims of Torture can leverage proven, internationally tested curricula while our Iranian faculty, many of whom are the country's best but most censored voices, can bring this curricula to life in the Iranian context;
- 6) Our use of technology must be basic and user-friendly such that all manner of people, not only those already highly acclimated to the internet, can seek out our learning opportunities;

- 7) Intensive, live classroom instruction for the most committed students ought to be combined with highly accessible, general audience public education initiatives aired on satellite TV networks and pushed out through social networks;
- 8) We must routinely encourage our students to feel empowered as teachers themselves and to supply them with the skills and resources they need to spread civic knowledge to others in their schools, workplaces, associations, communities and civic networks.

THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT

Moving forward, pre- or post-transition to democracy, we must embark on the creation of a new historical narrative that celebrates differences, is inclusive and affirms universal human rights. Sadly, even some members of the democratic opposition struggle with the principles of equality, inclusion and plurality, and our task, even or perhaps especially amongst ourselves, is not an easy one.

To achieve and sustain a democratic government, the most important civic education priorities for Iran will be to instil in both children and adults deeper understanding and a spirit of questioning about:

- Institutional building blocks of democracy, particularly the separation of powers and an independent judiciary;
- Equality of girls and boys, women and men;
- Separation of religion and state;
- Responsibilities of democratic citizens;
- Transitional justice;
- Fully remembering our past, exploring culpability, honouring victims of state terror, and openly telling our history of gross human rights abuses;
- The role of liberal education and civil society in keeping government accountable and just;
- Democratic principles, tolerance and civility at the family, classroom, communal and national levels;
- Individual and communal skills of free discussion, consensus building and compromise.

The biggest drawback to conducting civic education in the here and now, via virtual platforms and satellite television, is that 100% of the population cannot be included via a systematic, lifelong, nationwide curriculum supported fully by a democratic government. This handicap is significant to be sure but not an excuse to keep us from making the morally obvious choice and investing in Iranian youth and adults yearning to push past the tyrannical confines imposed on them. After all, it is people who make a democracy.

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