



TRANSITIONS  *forum*

THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM  
**Iran Academia:**  
THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AND HUMANITIES

By Raha Bahreini



# THE FUTURE OF IRAN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM

## Iran Academia:

### THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

*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.*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

##### Raha Bahreini

Raha Bahreini is a co-founder of Iran Academia. It was founded with the overall objective to create and facilitate access to social science education in Iran by enabling Iranian youth to develop and apply critical thinking skills to issues of transitional justice, rule of law, peace-building and gender equality. In addition to her involvement in a wide range of Iran-related human rights projects, she has worked as a caseworker in the Refugee Division of Parkdale Community Legal Services in Toronto and as a public interest fellow at Amnesty International Canada. Raha is currently an L.L.M. in International Human Rights Law candidate at the University of Essex and a senior associate at the University of Essex Human Rights in Iran Unit. Raha is a member of the Law Society of Upper Canada. She completed her J.D. degree at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University and her Honours Bachelor in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto.

#### INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right, essential for the promotion of freedom, civic participation and the formation of democracy. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 however, this fundamental human right with its attendant rights of freedom of thought and expression has been systematically violated in Iran. This has resulted in the stifling of dialogue in the domain of social sciences and the creation of an environment of terror wherein academic and community educators engage in self-censorship to insulate themselves from charges of blasphemy or subversion.<sup>1</sup>

This paper discusses the important role that democratic civic education can play in rectifying the absence of diverse theoretical, political and philosophical perspectives from the social sciences narrative, informing academic programmes in the Islamic Republic of Iran and therefore enhancing Iranian youth knowledge and analysis of subjects pertaining to human rights, democratic governance, gender equality, social justice, civil society and peace-building. In this relation, this paper will focus on the project of Iran Academia, an online university recently founded in the Netherlands with the objective to create access to teaching and learning for students in Iran who have been long denied access to quality education in the area of social sciences and humanities. The paper will discuss the origins of the project, the advancements that it has made to date, and some of the key barriers that it has to overcome if it is to realise its laudable goal of making a sustainable bridge between academically impoverished youth residing in Iran, and the many accomplished Iranian scholars and professors who do critical work on Iran and yet are dispersed in various universities around Europe and North America.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As noted at the outset, academic freedom violations pervade Iran's system of higher education, affecting every major component of university. The origins of these violations can be traced to the Cultural Revolution policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early post-revolutionary era. During this period, hundreds of social science and humanities professors were subjected to harassment, arbitrary dismissal, forced retirement, imprisonment, torture and other forms of ill-treatment. As a consequence, a large number of Iran's academic luminaries fled the country and opted for exile abroad. Similarly, thousands of high school and university students involved in political activism were detained, arrested, tortured, suspended or expelled.<sup>2</sup>

Such abuses continued into the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in the stifling of dialogue in the domain of social sciences and the creation of an environment of terror wherein academic and community educators engaged in self-censorship to insulate themselves from charges of blasphemy or subversion. For this reason, Iranian students have long been denied access to a wide range of critical perspectives and academic resources that

Iran Academia is anchored in the belief, that free educational institutions are essential for the promotion of civic engagement, peace and pluralism.

are crucial to the recovery and wellbeing of any society ravaged by war, conflict, and widespread and systematic violations of the most fundamental of human rights.

In the wake of the 2009 Green Movement and the subsequent repression meted out to civil society groups and human rights defenders, such violations and deficiencies have only intensified.<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Leader of the country, Ayatollah Khamenei, has called for a complete process of Islamisation to cleanse all universities from the scourge of 'decadent' western values<sup>4</sup>. Heeding the call, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration has implemented a multi-phased campaign aimed at eliminating the 'threat' of 'un-Islamic' universities by, among other measures, imposing early retirement on 'undesirable' professors, expelling politically active students from university programs, dissolving student associations and increasing the presence and visibility of pro-government student groups affiliated with the Basij—the paramilitary volunteer militia operating under the rule of the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Republic—on university campuses.<sup>5</sup>

The ensuing loss of confidence in civic engagement, non-violent resistance and political activism following this callous crackdown carries the danger of the Iranian public becoming increasingly isolated from contemporary global discourses on such topics as transitional justice, democratic governance, anti-oppression movements, social, economic and cultural rights, environmental justice, inter-ethnic dialogue and cross-class alliances. It is against this troubling social context that unconventional civic forms of education acquire urgency as history has proven, time and again, that free educational institutions are essential for the promotion of civic engagement, peace and pluralism.

It is needless to say that during the Cultural Revolution in Iran in the early 1980s, preconditions for the formation of civil educational institutions, such as access to online technology and well-organised diaspora networks of political activists and academic scholars did not exist. Today, the Iranian diaspora community has the privilege of having a large number of accomplished and experienced scholars and professors with expertise in Iran, who have developed and delivered courses on a wide range of Iran-related themes. They are, however, dispersed in various universities around Europe and North America and there has not been to date an institutional venue for them to deliver their courses and instructional services to Farsi-speaking students residing in Iran in a systematic and systemic fashion.

**The Supreme Leader of the country, Ayatollah Khamenei,  
has called for a complete process of Islamisation to cleanse all universities  
from the scourge of ‘decadent’ western values.**

Iran Academia was founded in 2011 as an online university with the objective of addressing this niche and with a view to enabling Iranian youth from all political, religious and ethnic backgrounds to access higher education and develop and apply critical thinking skills to a diverse range of social justice, political and human rights issues that are indispensable to Iran’s process of democratisation and yet are excluded from Iran’s higher education curriculum.

### **BECOMING A UNIVERSITY: THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF IRAN ACADEMIA**

The origins of Iran Academia, as an institution for social science and humanities, must be found in the evolving projects and ideals of a group of Iranian students in the Netherlands who had organised themselves since 2009 under the title of Iranian Progressive Youth (IPY). IPY was formed in the aftermath of the Green Movement in Iran with the goal to organise workshops, seminars and discussion groups in the Netherlands on Iran-related human rights and create a democratic and pluralistic space wherein students, scholars and activists could engage in informed dialogue about a wide range of topics spanning human rights law, transitional justice, political economy, social movement studies and resistance art.

While limited to the Netherlands at the beginning, IPY grew overtime to a worldwide network of students and researchers, ranging from Europe to North America to Australia and engaged in collaboration with different international organisations. For IPY members, Iran Academia started as a small community education project, which was to offer online educational modules on topics that were found to be noticeably absent from dominant discourses of the Iranian community. These included social and economic rights, labour rights, sexual orientation and gender identity rights and transitional justice.

The scope and scale of the project began to rapidly grow, however, as IPY engaged in consultations with distinguished members of the Iranian academic community. It soon became apparent that there has long existed a desire within the Iranian community for the creation of an online university, capable of delivering courses and instructional services to Farsi-speaking students residing in Iran in a systematic and organised fashion similar to that found in the social sciences faculties of European or North American universities.

Faced with the enthusiasm and support of members of the Iranian academic community, IPY undertook to change its project into that of creating an online university with a three-year bachelor curriculum in the field of social sciences and humanities. Iran Academia was consequently founded in September 2011 as an independent educational entity separate from the IPY. Since then, dozens of students, activists, university professors, professional fundraisers and web-designers have volunteered their skills and expertise, painstakingly shaping the Institute's educational strategy and bringing the project into fruition.

## RESULTS TO DATE

Iran Academia is still at the early stages of its development and its efforts to date have been in the following areas:

1. Creating a solid academic team: Extensive consultations have been held with many distinguished members of the Iranian academic community and all of them, as noted earlier, have expressed enthusiasm and support for the ambitious plan of the Academia and shared the same sense of urgency and relevance felt by its founding members. Conversations are underway to expand and diversify the organisation's academic network with respect to gender, field of research and theoretical/political orientation.
2. Developing Academia's three-year curriculum and its first semester course calendar: In May 2012, fifteen professors and scholars accomplished in political science, philosophy, history, political economy, sociology, literature, linguistics and gender studies convened in The Hague to discuss the central features of Academia's academic programmes and develop an outline of its three-year curriculum. It was thereby agreed that the Academia will offer eight courses per semester and will always ensure to include courses in the area of women's rights, non-violence, and social justice in the course calendar of each semester. It was further decided that the Academia's first-year curriculum will introduce students to critical thinking and writing, foundational social science theories and social science methodologies, therefore preparing them for an array of upper-year courses in philosophy, political science, sociology, art and literature, political economy, human rights, and gender studies, including case study research courses. Students will be able to enrol in these courses based on their area of interest and regardless of their previous academic record. It is noteworthy that all of the courses will be taught with regard to the current and historical realities of Iran and will require students to engage with the myriad of historical, political and human rights issues and concerns with which they are confronted.

3. Developing a Learning Management System: The Academia has retained a software company with relevant experience to design and develop a dynamic and professional learning management system (LMS). The software programme will provide a virtual learning environment with advanced collaboration and communication tools and is designed to manage the high-volume usage associated with a university.

The Academia recognises that the Iranian government will likely resort to cyber-surveillance techniques to curtail and interfere with students' access to our courses. Therefore, extensive discussions are being held with Internet security experts with respect to this risk and a variety of technological counter-measures are being considered. Appropriate software will be purchased upon receipt of funding.

4. Constructing a website in Farsi and English and creating a promotional video: A professional web-designer has constructed the structure of the Academia's website.<sup>6</sup> Work is underway to develop the website's content. A promotional video clip has been also prepared, which will be widely distributed once the website is launched.<sup>7</sup>

It bears mentioning that the project has not to date secured any source of funding and numerous students and scholars have graciously volunteered their time and resources to bring the project to its current stage.

## CHALLENGES LYING AHEAD

As a young non-governmental institution, funding is Iran Academia's most serious problem. Grant application forms are lengthy and complicated and require a lot of paperwork and references, all of which is very time consuming and difficult when the founders are working as volunteers, are full-time students or employees elsewhere. The Academia has to date submitted several application grants, however it needs continuing professional assistance in the area of grant writing in order for its efforts to bear fruit.

A second challenge relates to securing donations from affluent members of the Iranian community in North America and Europe. A clear fundraising strategy must be devised for this purpose and building trust and confidence is of course essential. Once again, however, Academia will need assistance of experienced individuals, associations and institutions so as to be able to garner financial support as quickly as possible.

Finally, there are Iranian institutions and networks that have developed experience and expertise in the area of unconventional civic education on civil-society related topics. Iran Academia must be able to draw on the lessons learned by these institutions in so far as they can inform and enrich its academic and management plans. Iran Academia, as an online university, can complement the valuable and important work that these institutions do. Workshops and gatherings on educational reform in Iran provide of course an opportune space for such sharing of information, knowledge and expertise.

## CONCLUSION

Iran Academia is anchored in the belief, that free educational institutions are essential for the promotion of civic engagement, peace and pluralism<sup>8</sup>, and it is as such a carefully calculated response to the distressing absence of progressive and pluralistic academic programmes in the Islamic Republic of Iran over the course of the past three decades.

The Academia breaks fresh ground and has the ability to bring about changes in knowledge and thinking through ways and avenues not experienced to date. In sum, it is the first systematic attempt at making a bridge between academically impoverished youth who reside in Iran or have recently fled into exile, and the many accomplished scholars and professors who do critical work on Iran and yet are dispersed in various universities around Europe and North America. Many of these Iranian scholars and professors have developed and delivered courses in languages other than Farsi. There has not been an institutional venue for them, however, to deliver their courses and instructional services to Farsi-speaking students residing in Iran in a systematic fashion.

Iran Academia can provide this opportunity through its free online courses, which will be organised into a three-year bachelor curriculum similar to those found in the social sciences faculties of European or North American universities, and delivered through live lectures and interactive tutorials.

Launching an online university can present key challenges: securing funding lines, recruiting experienced grant writers and fundraisers, and establishing a robust network of professionals built on the pillars of trust and cooperation. Collaborative workshops such as the one organised by the Legatum Institute on the Future of Iran prove, however, that these challenges are not insurmountable.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, 'Interrupted Lives: Portraits of Student Repression in Iran' (ongoing project), available at: [www.iranrights.org/student-exhibit.php](http://www.iranrights.org/student-exhibit.php) (accessed on April 12, 2012). See also Khosrow Sobhe, 'Education in Revolution: Is Iran Duplicating the Chinese Cultural Revolution?' (1982), 18(3) *Comparative Education* 271, available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/3098794](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3098794)
- <sup>2</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, 'Iranian intellectuals: from revolution to dissent' (n.d.), available at: [jahanbegloo.com/articles/dissent.html](http://jahanbegloo.com/articles/dissent.html) (accessed on April 12, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Iran: Escalating Repression of University Students' (7 December 2010), available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/06/iran-escalating-repression-university-students](http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/06/iran-escalating-repression-university-students) (accessed on April 12, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, 'Supreme Leader Stokes Fears of New Cultural Revolution in Iran,' Radio Free Europe (September 3, 2009), available at: [www.rferl.org/content/Fears\\_Of\\_A\\_New\\_Cultural\\_Revolution\\_In\\_Iran/1814207.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Fears_Of_A_New_Cultural_Revolution_In_Iran/1814207.html) (accessed on April 12, 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> See for example, 'Education Minister Kamran Daneshjoo: Pro-Opposition students to be barred from entering universities,' The Green Voice of Freedom (April 4 2012), available at: [en.irangreenvoice.com/article/2012/apr/11/3594](http://en.irangreenvoice.com/article/2012/apr/11/3594) (accessed on April 12, 2012); Farnaz Fassihi, "'Regime Wages a Quiet War on 'Star Students' of Iran,'" Wall Street Journal, available at: [online.wsj.com/article/SB126222013953111071.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126222013953111071.html) (accessed on April 12, 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> <http://iran-academia.com/>
- <sup>7</sup> [youtu.be/unmxQwlor-E](http://youtu.be/unmxQwlor-E)
- <sup>8</sup> See for example, Barro, R, 'Determinants of democracy' (1999) 107 *Journal of Political Economy* 158; Kamens, D. 'Education and democracy: A comparative institutional analysis' (1988) 61 *Sociology of Education* 114; Milligan, K., Moretti, E., & Oreopoulos, P. 'Does education improve citizenship? Evidence from the U.S. and the U.K.' (2004) 88 *Journal of Public Economic* 1667; Papaioannou, E., & Siourounis, G. 'Economic and social factors driving the third wave of democratization' (2005) Mimeo, London Business School.



BUILDING A MORE PROSPEROUS WORLD THROUGH LIBERTY AND RESPONSIBILITY



[www.li.com](http://www.li.com)  
[www.prosperity.com](http://www.prosperity.com)

**LEGATUM INSTITUTE**  
11 Charles Street  
Mayfair  
London W1J 5DW  
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0) 20 7148 5400  
f: +44 (0) 20 7148 5401

<http://twitter.com/LegatumInst>

NOVEMBER 2012