Iranian student activism between authoritarianism and democratization: patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Office for the Strengthening of Unity and the regime

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(Received 15 May 2012; final version received 16 September 2012)

This article examines the role of student activism in enhancing or weakening democratization in authoritarian contexts, focusing on the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It contends that while numerous studies indicate that student activism has been crucial in processes of regime change, insufficient attention has been paid to the circumstances under which it contributes to strengthening authoritarian rule. The case of Iran demonstrates that there are two different ways in which this occurs. First, much like many other civil society actors, student activism can be co-opted and at times willingly so because of a coincidence of material and/or ideological interests. Second, even when student activism genuinely pushes for democratization and becomes independent and autonomous from political power, the authoritarian constraints in place can contribute to marginalize it and defeat it. The Iranian case highlights the problems student activism faces when it attempts to disengage from the dominant structures of authoritarian politics, and in line with Jamal’s findings, demonstrates how authoritarian structural constraints can undermine the democratic aspirations of well-organised groups.

Keywords: student activism; student unions; Iran; democratization; authoritarianism

Introduction

One of the most noticeable aspects of the demonstrations in Iran in the summer of 2009, in the protests against authoritarian regimes across the Arab world two years later and in the “Occupy” movements in the West is the very significant participation of students and young people. This public behaviour strengthened the assumption that young people’s activism and more specifically student activism is inherently or naturally rebellious, confrontational and somewhat anti-system, whatever the actual system in place might be. Along with this argument, some scholars have highlighted that students have peculiar characteristics – they are committed to criticism of the status quo, live in a universe governed by qualitative values where actions are motivated by truth, justice, freedom and transformation of
the world— which in authoritarian settings or developing countries are associated with dissatisfaction with traditional society and efforts to modernize it. Here, students are often at the forefront of pro-democracy demonstrations against regimes of radically different natures, ranging from the anti-communist protesters in Tien-An-Men Square to the Chilean and Argentinean student unions challenging military rule. However, scholars recognize that student movements have an ambiguous relationship with democratization and this article, through an exploration of the Iranian case, highlights such ambiguities and explains the way in which student activism is also shaped by and indebted to authoritarian structures to attain its objectives. This is in line with the findings from other sectors of civil society activism in authoritarian settings whereby broader political goals such as democratization can be sacrificed if sectorial benefits can be achieved through cooperation with and co-optation by authoritarian ruling elites. Student activism in authoritarian settings is under-researched and this article fills an important empirical gap by problematizing the nature of such activism, which still characterizes societies across the globe. Thus, the assumption here is that student activism sometimes promotes democratic rule and sometimes, on the contrary, strengthens authoritarianism. An investigation of the conditions under which these different outcomes occur is both academically important and politically timely given the re-politicization of youth, particularly in the Middle East, but also in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere more generally. In the case of post-revolutionary Iran, scholarship has underlined the role of students in both violently supporting the regime’s policies during the early 1980s and in promoting the pro-democracy programme of the reformist Khatami governments during the late 1990s and 2000s. A number of questions arise from this example: how can we make sense of such a shift? How are patterns of conflict and cooperation between the Iranian regime and the student organization(s) related to the debate on democratization and authoritarian resilience?

This article examines the shift between cooperation and opposition that characterizes the relations between student activist groups and the Iranian regime, but also explores the unintended consequences of student activism whereby even a radical and genuine engagement for democracy can be detrimental to the forces more committed to its realization by contributing to a conservative backlash. This is what happened after 2005 in Iran, when Ahmadinejad won his first presidential term after eight years of reformist rule. In order to shed light on these dynamics, the case of the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat-e Howzeh va Daneshgah (Office for the Strengthening of Unity between Religious Seminars and Universities, DTV) is examined. Although DTV is only one of many student organizations, it has remained the most important one until Ahmadinejad’s explicit hostility and embodies many of the trends that characterized student politics in the country. DTV has enjoyed the attention of politicians for decades, and has been involved in conflicts and cooperation with the ruling establishment more than any other student organization. While it is always difficult to generalize findings from a single-case study,
DTV represents a significant political actor whose actions often reflected broad trends within student activism of all ideological persuasions.

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

Furthermore, even when student activism is radical in its demands for political change and manages to avoid co-optation, it may be incapable of fostering democracy since its radicalism might lead to marginalization. The case study of the relation between DTV and the regime not only shows how changing patterns of cooperation and conflict may work. It also shows that co-optation and control have limitations, such as the path-dependent identity of student movements, based on the idea of students as an uncompromising political actor. The case study also sheds light on the regime’s reaction to these shifts in students’ activism and on the patterns of political marginalization. Avoiding co-optation may greatly reduce the risk of student activism being tamed, but it could undermine its political relevance, leading to political marginality which, in turn, does not help the cause of democratic activism. The mechanisms the authoritarian regime uses to marginalize students when they do not “comply” contribute to explaining why the politics of student activism in Iran might be more complex than superficial analyses about its pro-democratic stance and role suggest. This does not mean that there is what can be called a coincidence of authoritarianism between students, as representatives of society more broadly, and the Iranian regime because democratic values are widespread in many sectors of Iranian society although notably absent within the institutions of the state\textsuperscript{12}. The point is that, at times, it is precisely such democratic traits within society that create the opportunities for authoritarian backlashes.
Unintended consequences of student activism between democratization and authoritarian resilience

The literatures on democratization and authoritarian resilience are not the only ones that examine student politics and activism, but are centrally concerned with the role of students in promoting or undermining democratization. Sociological studies on students and “new social movements” obviously influenced the comparative politics literature focusing on student activism, democratic transition and consolidation. In the context of democratization studies, it is generally postulated that the growth of civil society in authoritarian contexts is per se a positive development because it creates pressure on the regime to progressively give in to the demands of organized and autonomous groups thereby unleashing a liberalizing and then democratizing process.\(^{13}\) Student activism is conceived to be part of such a growing civil society and it is believed to challenge the authoritarianism of the system through its activities.\(^{14}\) One can find examples of this in the leading role that students played for instance in the democratization of South Korea, Mali, Portugal and Indonesia.\(^{15}\) It is here that student activism deserves to be analysed because the role of civil society in processes of democratization is no longer as unproblematic as it used to be.

More recent studies question the centrality of civil society activism in processes of democratization and argue quite convincingly that in authoritarian settings the growth of civil society can also strengthen the authoritarian regime.\(^ {16}\) This approach contends that civil society groups and associations that constitute the “opposition” inevitably tend to play the game the regime has set up and indirectly strengthen it by replicating and using the same authoritarian networks and norms that the regime utilizes. This means that strategies of co-optation and control all prevent civil society from playing the democratizing role that many have assigned to it. This happens in the case of student movements as well.\(^ {17}\) In examining a number of student protests in Africa since the 1960s, John A. Nkinyangi concludes that they created:

> the necessary social and political environment for the military to intervene. Given the present stage in the development of Africa’s social forces, this might very well be the historic role that student activism […] may play for some foreseeable time in the future. The absence of an alternative social force capable of countervailing the existing oligarchy and of wielding State power creates a vacuum, thus making intervention by the military inevitable.\(^ {18}\)

In many ways it is the same problem that Jamal had identified with civil society activism in general. She argued that the crucial differences in civil society activism are not to be found in the actors of civil society themselves and their values or ethos, but in the constraints in place that determine the way in which such groups behave. Thus, there is a considerable difference in “being” a civil society actor where democratic and liberal institutions are in place and “being” one under authoritarian constraints.\(^ {19}\) It is at this junction that sociological studies on
the progressive role of student movements in established democracies tend to obscure the reality of what happens in authoritarian contexts because they apply the same framework they use when dealing with student activism in established democracies.\textsuperscript{20} This framework is based on the idea that student activism is autonomous and independent and that, almost by nature, serves only progressive causes. The problem is that this framework does not really “travel” when it comes to authoritarian countries.

To highlight the “dark side” of activism in authoritarian settings, scholars use the concepts of co-optation, “embedded activism”, and control. In these authoritarian settings universities are embedded in the political system through violent repression (rarely), coercion (at times) and co-optation (often) of activists within the rank-and-file of the regime institutions. The taming of universities passes through reforms\textsuperscript{21} as well as a massive substitution of academic appointees or the cutting of financial support to student activities within the campus.\textsuperscript{22} In the case of Iran, others have shown the relevance, for example, of entrance examinations to influence the student body’s political attitudes.\textsuperscript{23} The Iranian regime’s goals in adopting such measures may be different, ranging from a complete eradication of student activism to its normalization.\textsuperscript{24} Although these operations might normally be carried out against the will of activists, it is important to remember that “normalized” and tamed student organizations may have, in return, access to benefits in terms of political relevance and may be convinced they have better opportunities to voice their discontent if allied to the regime. Interestingly enough, Iranian student politics boosted researchers’ enthusiasm only after Khatami won the election in 1997 and the discourse on civil society and democratization entered the public debate. Students’ mobilization was then one of the elements used to explain Khatami’s success and to predict a transition to democracy.\textsuperscript{25} On the contrary, previous scholarly production on Iranian student politics examined the control the newborn regime exerted on the campuses just after the revolution.

Beyond academia, student activists or former activists have talked up the importance of the student movement, conflating it within the transitology paradigm.\textsuperscript{26} This representation is so strong that many among them support the idea that when the student organizations were helping the regime in strengthening the Islamic state, after the 1979 revolution, “there was no student movement”.\textsuperscript{27}

Nevertheless, despite the failure of the normative perspective on civil society’s activism, this approach has identified correctly the opening up of new spaces of confrontation between the regime and non-state political actors. Although not leading to a process of democratization, this has resulted in a “pluralisation of the power relations with the regime”\textsuperscript{28} and brought about “unintended consequences” of embedded activism. Instead of reproducing subjugation, some social actors have found in this relationship room for some political autonomy and have changed their attitudes towards the regime.\textsuperscript{29} That is why Iranian students’ reactions to the mechanisms of control, domination and co-optation enacted by the regime have varied from cooperation to conflict since the
establishment of the Islamic Republic. In the following section detailed empirical evidence is presented to substantiate the complex relation that DTV, as a significant representative of student activism, has with democratization and authoritarian resilience. In turn this example can shed some light on student activism in other authoritarian states where young people may in fact mobilize in favour of democracy, but obtain the paradoxical outcome of strengthening authoritarianism.

The empirical work was conducted between 2005 and 2012 in Iran, Turkey and Italy, and it is mainly composed of interviews and participant observations. Around 35 in-depth interviews have been conducted with activists, and some have been reiterated a number of times. Around 10 student activists have shared their everyday lives for almost one year, allowing a very close observation of their contacts, discussions and exchange of views with other fellow activists. Not all the interviewees belong to DTV but were/are from other student groups. This variety allowed a non-monolithic perspective on the DTV’s political strategies and choices. Of course, accounts of activists living as political refugees or asylum-seekers outside of Iran may suffer from distortions. This is why 18 elite interviews with people who know the history and politics of student activism in Iran, but are not necessarily activists, were also conducted, allowing us to cross-check the evidence gathered from activists. Some of the elite interviews took place in Italy and Turkey between 2009 and 2012 and others in Iran between 2005 and 2008. Some interviewees had been active in the student movement in the past. Finally, three political meetings of the Islamic Association and of the DTV Commission for Women’s Rights were observed in person at the Faculty of Sociology at Tehran University between May and July 2008.

Student activism in Iran: history, organizations, and politics since the 1979 revolution

Student activism has become a prominent feature of Iranian politics, although higher education is a rather recent phenomenon. It was under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979) that a significant development of third-level education occurred. In addition to building new universities and making access to them easier, he also increased the number of scholarships available to study abroad, a move which ironically helped the anti-Shah students to organize in a freer environment. During the period between 1977 and 1979, when the revolution erupted, every political group established its own headquarters on the campuses, which became the most active political loci in Iran to the point that the then provisional post-revolutionary government was afraid of losing control over them. Due to the chaotic situation across universities following the revolution, in 1980 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for a “Cultural Revolution” to clean up the campuses of Westernized staff and immorality with the rather evident intent of placing his loyalists in charge and to Islamize the universities, considered hotbeds of secularism. In order to achieve this objective, universities were shut down until 1983. By then, the Islamization of the universities was completed through massive purges.
hiring of new faculty members and the admission of new students after proper “political screening”. Thus, when the universities were finally re-opened, a significant process of restructuring had taken place: the Islamist faction of the revolutionary coalition, which had won the struggle against the secular and leftist revolutionary factions to establish an Islamic state, had taken control of the campuses through the DTV. This organization originated from the semi-legal pre-revolutionary Muslim Students Associations, which included the most radical individuals of the Khomeinist faction and the so-called Islamic leftists, a powerful faction within the Islamist winning coalition that stood for social equality and wealth redistribution and with a strong Islamist agenda on cultural and educational issues.

The new DTV is an umbrella organization whose central office coordinates all the Islamic associations in the universities. For many years to come it would constitute the main networking hub for politically active students. Since then and until the early 1990s, the cultural and political hegemony of the Islamic left was established within universities through the DTV, which acted in harmony with the political and institutional establishment of the Islamic Republic, far from any call for a democratic system. This indicates that the issue of authoritarian versus democratic politics is not necessarily the most prominent one for politically active students. They might instead concentrate on fulfilling an ideological, messianic role, such as Islamizing universities, whose benefits, such as the monopoly over students’ activities and a short-cut to the regime’s political and intellectual elite, go well beyond the type of political system in place.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 introduced a new era in Iranian politics and by extension in the universities. A new President of the Republic, Hashemi Rafsanjani, was elected and a new Supreme Leader was nominated, Ayatollah Khamenei. Both men were hostile to the Islamic left. DTV was then the only student organization in the country and since it was strongly linked to the Islamic left the government attempted to weaken it through bureaucratic mechanisms. First, permission was given for other student organizations to be set up, which led to the student bassij units and the Islamic Association of the Student Bassij being established. This obviously challenged DTV’s monopoly of student politics. Second, new guidelines for choosing university councils and presidents were approved, which made it impossible for Islamic leftist students to participate in such councils or to influence the nomination of the highest university officials, who decided on the legal status of student associations. Finally, the Office of Representatives of the Supreme Leader, which has a permanent presence in universities, was established to control student activism and it actively discouraged students from joining DTV. These bureaucratic measures were implemented in a political climate hostile to the Islamic left, with conservative voices calling for the dismantling of DTV altogether because it had fulfilled its historical role of Islamizing universities.

The early 1990s witnessed, therefore, the reconfiguration of student activism and DTV’s own changes reflected the shifting balance of power within the political system. This indicates that student activism not only does not take place in an
autonomous vacuum independent from the political system, as it might happen in established democracies, but it becomes an instrument of power struggles where the mobilization of students in favour of governmental agendas occurs. By the early 1990s, DTV was operating in a hostile context, but remained very much aligned to the Islamic left despite its decreasing political power. The shifting balance of power at the national level with the Islamic left under attack from the conservatives had profound repercussions on campus politics and on DTV. First of all, rather than leading to the marginalization of DTV, the mechanisms to curb it put in place by the conservatives and particularly the presence of rival student organizations encouraged DTV to radicalize its position vis-à-vis the conservative-dominated regime. Where once the DTV held the monopoly of power on campuses and had in the regime a precious ally, in the new “conservative era” this monopoly was broken, leading DTV to become aware of the necessity of competing politically with other organizations for the support of students. Part of this process of differentiation from rival student organizations was for DTV to embrace a discourse that championed political pluralism and democracy that should be reflected at all levels of society, including universities. Up to that moment, the bassij and DTV were not very different: both organizations found in anti-imperialism, religion and social equality their guiding principles, but now DTV “found” that democracy and freedom of expression were inalienable rights too.

This embrace of political pluralism was the result of inter-linked internal and external factors. The most significant external change was the progressive marginalization of the Islamic left from positions of power in political, economic and cultural institutions across the country. This meant that the dismissal from power of prominent Islamic leftists led to a profound rethink among Islamic leftist intellectuals of the values and institutions that should underpin the Islamic Republic. This new intellectual thinking veered towards democratizing the political system and introducing genuine political pluralism. It was inevitable that this important ideological shift within the Islamic left would filter down to the universities and more specifically to DTV. This realization on the part of members of DTV that democracy was a crucial value to promote came largely through the lectures of Abdolkarim Sorroush and Mohsen Kadivar who had been prominent revolutionaries, leading members of the Islamic left and, crucially, professors at University of Tehran and Tarbiat Modarres University respectively. Their calls for Islamic reformation, religious and social tolerance, and the construction of an “open society” enriched the national and international debate on reformism and the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

The second significant external factor to impact on DTV’s ideological shift was the massive increase in the number of students attending university, which had gone from 140,000 in 1977–1978 to 1,150,000 in 1996. This growth was primarily due to the substantial number of females enrolling in university, which meant the introduction of gender politics within the political debate both inside and outside universities. This new cohort of students came with new attitudes
and ideas about politics and how it should be conducted both at the national and university level. New generations brought in new ideas and female students in particular began to make significant contributions to the debate surrounding democracy and individual rights because many of them no longer accepted their role as second-class citizens and legal minors within the institutional and legal framework of the Islamic Republic. The internal mechanism that allowed democracy to be the embraced on the part of DTV was a change in the electoral rules. In 1993 the political screening of both candidates and voters was abandoned, allowing for free elections to the Central Committee of DTV. This meant that DTV started to attract people with different views and opinions, losing the early ideological centralism. Faculty members became more politically diversified too, stimulating the differentiation of student movements.

By the mid-1990s, the universities mirrored broader social and political transformations and affected the way in which student activism took place. The crucial point here is the shift away from the monopoly of power of DTV on campuses and its unconditional support for the regime towards a competitive environment. In such an environment different student organizations battled it out ideologically with a DTV that had embraced political pluralism and democratic tolerance in open contrast with what it had stood for during the 1980s and early 1990s. In this case, the DTV had changed and shifted positions rather rationally, without necessarily following a straight and unchanging ideological line which was neither consistently anti-regime nor pro-regime. Beyond the demographical data and sincere commitment, there is always a degree of political opportunism at play. For instance, DTV’s embracing of pluralism came as a by-product of the “elimination” of the Islamic left from positions of power. Once out of power, political pluralism was invoked to reform the regime that had “fallen” into the hands of the conservatives. In turn this means that with their actions the ruling elites can and do shape what occurs on university campuses. This would become very clear when Khatami decided to run for president in 1997 as the representative of the Islamic left now turned reformist.

**Between cooperation and conflict: student activism in Khatami’s era.**

**Patterns of cooperation between interest and dependency**

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

When Mohammad Khatami launched his presidential campaign in 1996 referring to “democracy”, “civil society” and “rule of law”, students were called to become active through DTV. Activism in favour of Khatami during his
campaign and his first few years in power confirmed the “democratic radicalization” of DTV, whereby students participated in what they believed was the construction of a new political system where genuine pluralism would emerge. This mobilization of students in his favour was extremely useful to Khatami because it provided the backbone of his campaign when it came to logistics. At this stage student activism became very much linked to the discourse of democratization and DTV genuinely believed in Khatami’s democratizing potential. During Khatami’s first mandate and on the occasion of the 2000 parliamentary elections, higher education institutions became a real stronghold of the then government and the reformist coalition Dovvom-e Khordad. At the time, DTV not only offered logistical and propaganda support to the reformist front, but it directly participated in the Dovvom-e Khordad. According to a former member, DTV’s enthusiastic embrace of the reformist rhetoric of democracy, civil society and rule of law was in retrospect seen not as an autonomous choice but simply an alignment with the dominant discourse of the Islamic left – turned reformist.

Despite the fact that this argument may be too critical of the student movement, there is a degree of truth in it. DTV was then dependent on the reformist elite in terms of visibility, leadership and intellectual elaboration, even if soon it would start to develop its own political autonomy on the basis of the reformist political discourse.

During the first years of Khatami’s government, the loyalty DTV showed him was rewarded with a positive attitude towards the students and their demands. Khatami had considerable power in the realm of student politics because the president is also the head of the Council of the Cultural Revolution. This council supervises the nomination of university chancellors, approves curricula, selects student candidates, and finally promotes the ideological and political order on campuses. In this sense, Khatami’s presidency represented an opportunity for DTV and student activism to become more politically relevant. For instance, after the reformists won the 2000 parliamentary election, the pro-reform Moshar- ekat party supported the establishment of a “student faction” within the sixth parliament (2000–2004). This faction was headed by Ali Akbar Moussavi Khomeini, a former DTV leader like the other members: Fatemeh Haqiqatjou, Ali Tajrania, Meysam Saiedi and Reza Yusefian. Furthermore, the shared feeling among many students was that DTV would have enhanced Iran’s democratization by supporting the reformists in their political struggle against the conservatives and the Supreme Leader Khamenei. This honeymoon with Khatami illustrates the mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the DTV. Beyond being simply co-opted by the state, the DTV enhanced its political visibility, while the government had a tight grip on the campuses. If we consider the strength of the dominant discourse on democratization and civil society, it is not a surprise that many scholars defended the idea that student activism leads to democratization. But when such slogans did not become a reality later, members of DTV accused their former fellow activists of having been co-opted, and advocated political independence.
Patterns of conflict between marginalization and path-dependency

Student protests erupted in July 1999 when the conservative-dominated Parliament amended the press legislation. Students considered the new law as an attack on freedom of speech because it was clear that it was meant to target the well-known Islamic leftist newspaper Salam. After days of mobilization, the protests turned violent owing to repression by paramilitary forces. While protesting, the students shouted slogans in favor of Khatami’s government, since the attack against Salam was perceived as a warning from the conservatives to the government. To the surprise of the students, Khatami did not side with them, labeling the protests “an attack on national security”.47 Many other prominent reformists followed Khatami’s line48 and later, in 2000, the reformists put forth the idea of “active calm”, a strategy designed for the students who it was believed should side with the reformists in the government uncritically and avoid turmoil in the streets.49 The July 1999 incident instilled a feeling of betrayal among students and gave rise to a period of self-criticism regarding the role of students in politics. This internal debate took place very much behind the scenes due to DTV’s engagement in the electoral coalition Dovvom-e Khordad for upcoming municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections.50 but in 2002 DTV split into two branches and later into several smaller groups which spanned a huge ideological arc, ranging from conservatism to radical liberalism.51 The Allameh branch, the majority, advocated an independent opposition to the conservatives, beyond the alliance with the reformists. The Allameh students were determined to act as a sort of “watchdog” of the government, which was judged as being unable to foster democracy in Iran.52 The Shiraz branch, the minority, joined the conservative camp. In this new context of opposition to both the conservatives and reformists, considered by now too moderate, the Allameh students extended their connections outside the university because, in their opinion, only an extra-institutional alliance of civil society actors could bring about democratization.53 The students’ attitude towards the reformists hardened over time and they were therefore accused by them of acting illegally,54 of helping the conservative backlash and of lacking a political vision. According to reformists, the students would soon be “swept away like grains of sand, no longer protected by the desert”,55 a metaphor indicating the precarious condition of DTV without factional protection. Contrary to the students, who advocated the need for action and even rupture with the anti-reform elements of the Islamic republic, the reformists felt the responsibility for the sustainability of the system as a whole, which they wanted to transform slowly.

It is no surprise that from 2002 the relationship between DTV as a whole and the government deteriorated. Furthermore, in 2003 the Allameh branch decided officially to abandon the Dovvom-e Khordad front, and since then boycotting elections became its policy. Students no longer trusted the reformists and their role of “democratizers” because they were too embedded in the institutional politics of an authoritarian regime.56 The rupture was so dramatic that Khatami’s visit to the University of Tehran in December 2004, on the occasion of the Students’ Day
celebration, was transformed into an angry rally against him. Abdollah Momeni, a leader of the DTV, declared that “bridges have been broken between us and him since several years ago... we knew that he (Khatami) could not give satisfactory answers to the students”.

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

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

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

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

Paradoxically, the students’ desire for political pluralism and individual rights was quashed when the newly elected Ahmadinejad reinforced the regime’s grip on
universities and student activism. The fear of being the victims of co-optation and instruments of a factional chess game pushed the students away from the reformists to claim an autonomous identity, depriving the reformist government of an important ally and causing further frustration among the students, since the planned student-led role in the country’s democratization did not become a reality. On the contrary, students are described as growing uninterested in politics, apathetic and further marginalized by the new academic policy enacted by Ahmadinejad, which has favoured the bassij student organizations as well as the enrolment of males over females in an attempt to defuse the political challenge coming from educated young women and thereby underscoring the relevance of gender politics in Iran.

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

With Ahmadinejad in power, the campuses became the main stage for the struggle between the pro-government students, organized in bassij units, and the opposition student groups, DTV-Allameh and other minor forces. Despite dissent surviving across campuses, the atmosphere turned oppressive to the point that the younger students feared to be seen with activists. Instead, “being a bassij is seen as more opportune and profitable” due to the governmental support they enjoy thanks to their engagement in pro-Ahmadinejad’s electoral campaigns in 2005 and 2009. Their presence on campus was also reinforced through special quotas for access to university. In 2004, there were 420,000 student bassij in Iranian universities, and in 2007 this increased to 600,000. The introduction of these measures has to some extent changed the composition of the student population, as it is happening with gender quotas as well. In order to deal with the consequences of massive female enrolment during the 1990s, Ahmadinejad’s government introduced entrance quotas in favour of male students. Beyond being the traditional breadwinners of Iranian families, male students join the bassij units in greater numbers than women and therefore contribute to challenging the liberal values that many female students are believed to embrace. The “bassij policy” is important to Ahmadinejad and to the conservatives in the post-Khatami era in order to remove the reformist hegemony over the students and university staff, which has been increasingly purged of “liberal” and
“Western” elements. After Ahmadinejad’s rise to power, the DTV was explicitly targeted by the government and prevented from organizing the election for the Central Committee or its own meetings, which eventually were held off campus. Active students are also targeted by the “starring process”: “being starred” means suffering consequences that span from the inability to enrol to the withdrawal of the right to continue education. Despite the revival of student activism in 2009 and the fact that oppositional or critical forces are present on campuses, as the numerous demonstrations against Ahmadinejad’s visits to universities all over Iran have shown, the continuous repression and tight control have undoubtedly changed the patterns of student activism in Iran.

Conclusion

Far from being “simply” a prominent democratization actor, student activism in authoritarian settings has a much more complex role. While numerous studies indicate that student activism has indeed been crucial in processes of regime change, insufficient attention has been paid to the circumstances under which it contributes to strengthen authoritarian rule. The case of Iran demonstrates that there are two different ways in which this occurs. First, much like many other civil society actors, student activism can be co-opted, and at times willingly so because of a coincidence of material and/or ideological interests. This is certainly the case of DTV from its inception until the late 1990s. Second, even when student activism genuinely pushes for democratization and becomes an anti-system actor that is independent and autonomous from political power, the authoritarian constraints in place can contribute to marginalizing and defeating it, rendering it ineffective. In this last instance, DTV’s case highlights the problems student activism faces when it attempts to disengage from the dominant structures of authoritarian politics and pursue a truly independent and autonomous path.

After the revolution, benefits in cooperating with the regime were obtained by students of DTV in so far as it was the only organization present on campus, enjoying a political monopoly over students’ activities. It is no surprise that many of its leaders were subsequently recruited into the national elite. This type of relationship continued in many ways throughout the 1990s when student organizations were restructured to follow the similar reconfiguration of power within the political system of the Islamic Republic. After Khatami’s election in 1997, some political room opened up for the students thanks to both the rhetoric of civil society empowerment, which cherished student activism, and their support for Khatami’s governments. The students’ political weight increased, so did their visibility and capability of mobilization. In the 2000s, students radicalized their demands for democracy and decided to opt for political autonomy from the then reformist government, which was rhetorically committed to open up the system, but failed to do so causing major disillusionment among the students. However, despite eschewing co-optation and being sincerely committed
to a democratic change, the students’ strategy contributed to a conservative backlash and failed to produce a spilling over of democratic demands in society despite the presence of strong democratic values in certain sectors of Iranian society. This was partly because reformists were left without an important constituency of support and partly because the reformists were afraid of students’ radicalism and marginalized them. In conclusion, even when demands for democratization are genuine, marginalization and political defeat can be the outcome, although the mass demonstrations of 2009 challenge the assumption that there is no democratic constituency in Iran. Generally speaking, in line with Jamal, it can be argued that the structural constraints authoritarianism generates can overcome the democratic intentions of even large organizations. In the case of student politics, the institutional context plays a very important role in determining the characteristics, goals and strategies of student organizations. This has been observed in the cases of authoritarian regimes in 1970s Chile and Latin America, and in Spain and Portugal where, despite the success of democratization and the fact that students strongly contributed to it, student organizations were tamed, co-opted or repressed.

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

Acknowledgements
The authors are grateful to the referees whose comments contributed to strengthening the article and would like to also acknowledge the Gerda Henkel Foundation for supporting this research in the context of the programme on “Islam, the Modern Nation State and Transnational Movements”. Paola Rivetti is grateful to the Irish Research Council for supporting her post-doctoral fellowship.

Notes
1. Joseph Chamie, “A ‘Youth Bulge’ Feeds Arab Discontent,” The Daily Star, 15 April 2011; Giles Tremlett and John Hooper, “Protests in the Med,” The Guardian, 19 May 2011; Faith Karim and Joe Sterling, “Occupy Protests Spread Around the World,” CNN, 15 October 2011.
2. Gouldner, Against Fragmentation, 30–3; Löwy, Georg Lukacs. From Romanticism to Bolshevism, 19 and following; Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America. Specifically for the case of Iran: Hamid Dabashi interview with Ali Afshari, in Week in Green, Episode 25, May 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFzp6oCxGEI&list=UUGNckWmpemdVNLsbbHqtzJw&index=4&feature=plcp; and Tezcu¨r et al., “Support for Democracy in Iran.”
3. Altbach, “Student Politics in the Third World”; Lipset, “Students and Politics in Comparative Perspective”; Zhao, The Power of Tiananmen, 94–7.
4. For China see Wright, The Perils of Protest; for Argentina see Potash, The Army and Politics in Argentina.
5. Dalmasso, “Surfing the Democratic Tsunami”; Fumagalli, “Voice, Not Democracy”; Rivetti, “Coopting Civil Society in Iran.”
6. Valbjørn, “Upgrading Post-democratization Studies.”
7. Razavi, “The Cultural Revolution in Iran.”
8. Mashayekhi, “The Revival of the Student Movement”; Khosrokhavar, “Toward an Anthropology of Democratization in Iran”; Yaghmaian, Social Change in Iran. The reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected President of the Islamic Republic in 1997 and ruled for two mandates, until 2005.
9. Tezcu, Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey.
10. For a positive take on the role of civil society in transitions to democracy see Norton, Civil Society in the Middle East. For a more critical approach to the issue see Liverani, Civil Society in Algeria.
11. Jamal, Barriers to Democracy; Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control”; Hibou, The Force of Obedience.
12. Tezcu et al., “Support for Democracy in Iran.”
13. Kubba, “The Awakening of Civil Society”; Casper and Taylor, Negotiating Democracy; Chehabi and Linz, Sultanistic Regimes; Diamond, Linz and Lipset, Democracy in Developing Countries; Diamond and Plattner, The Global Resurgence of Democracy; O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule.
14. Kim, The Politics of Democratization in Korea; Boix and Stokes, “Endogenous Democratization”; Waterman, “Which Way to Go?”; Sung-Joo, “South Korea in 1987”; Arceo, “The Role of Student and Alumni Associations in the Democratization Process in Spain”; Lee, “Primary Causes of Asian Democratization”; Adekanye, “Structural Adjustment”; Prosic-Dvornic, “Enough! Student Protest ‘92”; Lazić, Protest in Belgrade; Bieber, “The Serbian Opposition and Civil Society”; Bratton and van de Walle, “Popular Protest and Political Reform in Africa”; Vellela, New Voices; Nkomo, Student Culture and Activism in Black South African Universities; Hinton, University Students Protests and Political Change in Sierra Leone.
15. Aspinall, Opposing Suharto; Kay Smith, “From Demons to Democrats”; Kim, “South Korea,” 173–8; Accornero, “Contentious Politics and Student Dissent.” We are grateful to Mohammed Yaghi for pointing us in the right direction.
16. Jamal, Barriers to Democracy.
17. Bachtiar, “Indonesia,” 103–19; Samudavanija, “Thailand,” 197–207.
18. Nkinyangi, “Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 172.
19. For an empirical study of these relations see Cavatorta and Durac, Civil Society Activism and Democratization in the Arab World.
20. An example of this approach is Mashayekhi, “The Revival of the Student Movement,” 285–6. For a critique of the quoted approach, see Zhao, The Power of Tiananmen, 14–15.
21. Kohstall, “La démocratie renversée.”
22. Levy, “Chilean Universities under the Junta,” 95–128. This case is valid for Iran as well.
23. Sakurai, “University Entrance Examination and the Making of an Islamic Society in Iran”; Habibi, “Allocation of Educational and Occupational Opportunities.”
24. Rivetti, “Student Movements in the Islamic Republic.” See also Shervin Malekzadeh, “The Foucault Made Me Do It,” Tehran Bureau, 2 May 2012.
25. Mashayekhi, “The Revival of the Student Movement”; Khosrokhavar, “Toward an Anthropology of Democratization in Iran.”
26. Sadegh Shojaii, “The Universities are Alive,” Gozaar, 11 June 2010; Shojaii, “Thirty Years of Purging Dissident Academics,” Gozaar, 20 May 2012; Mustafa Khosravi,
“The Student Movement’s Approach vis à vis the Green Movement,” *Gozaar*, 2 March 2010; Ibragim Kashefi, “Ali Vaghi: Students Will Not Allow the Fulfillment of the Dreams of Extremists,” *Rooz On Line*, 17 December 2007; Ali Afshari, “Radicalism and the Iranian Student Movement’s Quest for Democracy,” *Gozaar*, 11 (2007): 29–32; Bina, “The Hot Summer of Defiance,” 51.

27. Dabashi and Afshari, *The Week in Green*.
28. Hibou, “Le mouvement du 20 février,” 2.
29. Aarts and Cavatorta, “Civil Society in Syria and Iran.”
30. For pre-revolutionary student activism, Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*.
31. Razavi, “The Cultural Revolution in Iran,” 6.
32. Habibi, “Allocation of Educational and Occupational Opportunities,” 20.
33. Later the organization moved towards more and more critical positions face à face the regime. Its leader, Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, has been in jail since December 2009 (Mahdi, “The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 11).
34. Mahdi, “The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 15–16.
35. Razavi, “The Cultural Revolution in Iran,” 9.
36. Personal interviews with a former member of the DTV, co-founder and former spokesperson of the Pro-democracy Association of Students (Tehran, June–September 2008).
37. Ghobadzadeh and Rahim, “Islamic Reformation Discourse,” 337.
38. The crucial role played by these two intellectuals has been recognized by all the interviewees. Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran*.
39. Kamrava, *New Voices of Islam*.
40. Mahdi, “The Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” 14.
41. Personal interviews with the co-founder and former spokesperson of the Pro-democracy Association of Students (Tehran, June–September 2008), and with a former member of the DTV Central Committee and Mosharekat Party (Tehran, June 2008).
42. Personal interview with two former members of the DTV Central Committee (Tehran, May 2007 and June 2008).
43. Mashayekhi, “The Revival of the Student Movement,” 296.
44. Rivetti and Cavatorta, “The Importance of Being Civil Society.”
45. Personal interview with a former member of the DTV Central Committee and Mosharekat Party (Tehran, June 2008) and a member of the Mosharekat Party Central Committee (May 2008).
46. Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami, “Nameh-ye Komiteh Daneshjuy Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami,” 30–2.
47. *Neshat*, 28 July 1999. Kurzman, “Student Protests and the Stability of Gridlock in Khatami’s Iran,” 41.
48. *Khordad*, 8 June 1999. Behzad Nabavi, reformist deputy, accused the students of creating confusion in the country.
49. For an explanation of the theory of the “active calm,” see the Mujahhedin-e Enqelab-e Islami statement in the magazine *Asr-e Ma*, no. 16, 1379/2000. Willi Samii, “Iran: Youth Movement Has Untapped Potential,” *RFE/RL*, 13 April 2005.
50. Tajrania, “Jarian-e Daneshjuiyan,” 109.
51. Such as the Association of Liberal Students (*anjoman-e daneshjuiyan liberal*), still active in Iran. It is not recognized as a lawful student organization. They have a website, http://cheragheazadi.org.
52. Personal interview with a member of the DTV, Tehran, 2008. Nesvaderani, “Iran’s Youth,” 4.
53. Personal interview with a former member of DTV Central Committee and DTV’s Commission for Women’s Rights (Tehran, June 2008).
54. Mehdi Karroubi had done likewise in 2003, when the DTV organized some protests to contest a tuition fee hike. IRNA (Islamic Republic News Agency), 16 June 2003.
55. Personal interview with a member of the Mosharekat Party Central Committee (May 2008).
56. Ehsani, “Our Letter to Khatami Was a Farewell.”
57. Safa Haeri, “Khatami Takes a Final Bow,” Asia Times, 11 December 2004. The video of the encounter is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrZw-yGlyTk.
58. As quoted in ibid.
59. Howarth, Discourse, 49.
60. Kashefi, “Ali Vaghfi”; and Pouyan Mahmoudian and Majid Tavakoli’s quotations in Shojaii, “The Universities are Alive.”
61. Dana Shahsavari, “Student Movement Continuation of 1997 Movement,” Rooz On Line, 12 July 2006.
62. Fatemeh Haqiqatjoo quoted in Samii, “Analysis: Renewed Unity Among Iranian Students,” RFE/RL, 7 July 2004; and Khosravi, “The Student Movement’s Approach vis à vis the Green Movement.”
63. Paradoxically, as Babak Zamaniha (member of the Islamic Association of the Amir Kabir Politeknic and former member of the central committee of the DTV) put it, this situation was as difficult for the DTV and that “while the situation had not been ideal in the Khatami years, Mr. Ahmadinejad’s anti-reformist campaign...led students to value their previous freedoms” (Nazila Fathi, “Iran President Faces Revival of Students’ Ire,” New York Times, 21 December 2006).
64. Personal interviews with a former member of the DTV, co-founder and former spokesperson of the Pro-democracy Association of Students (Tehran, June–September 2008).
65. Ibid.
66. Golkar, “The Reign of Hard-line Students in Iran’s Universities.”
67. Ibid., 26.
68. “Iran to Set Gender Quotas for University Courses,” Agence France de Presse, 26 February 2008; and Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Are Iranian Women Overeducated?,” Brookings Institution, 5 March 2008.
69. Alireza Eshraghi, “Iranian Students Fight Hard and Soft,” Asia Times online, 2 July 2010.
70. See Francis Harris, “Ahmadinejad Tells Students to Purge Universities of Liberal Professors,” The Telegraph, 6 September 2006.
71. The last general election of the Central Committee of the DTV was held electronically in 2010. Personal interviews with some activist students in Turkey: two former members of DTV Central Committee, a collaborator of the web blog “Cheragh-e Azadi” (Van and Eskisehir, July 2011 and April 2012), a member of the Association of Liberal Students (Van, July 2011), a former member of the Association of Nationalist Students (Eskisehir, February–April 2012) and a former member of the United Front of Students, formerly the Islamic Association of Students/Tabarzadi’s group (Eskisehir, February–March 2012). See also Golkar, “Cultural Engineering Under Authoritarian Regimes.”
72. International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), Punishing Stars.
73. For a preliminary insight on this, Tara Mahtafar, “United Students of Iran,” Tehran Bureau, 17 December 2009. See also Ali Afshari, “The Challenges of the Student Movement in the Post-Reform Era,” Gozaar, 28 January 2008.
74. Levy, “Student Politics in Contemporary Latin America.”
75. Accornero, “Contentious Politics and Student Dissent.”
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