

# Iran's Third Cultural Revolution

by [Saeid Golkar \(/experts/saeid-golkar\)](/experts/saeid-golkar)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Saeid Golkar \(/experts/saeid-golkar\)](/experts/saeid-golkar)

Saeid Golkar is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science & Public Service at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.



Brief Analysis

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## President Raisi is accelerating Ayatollah Khamenei's plan to Islamize the university system, with apparently little regard for how previous campaigns sent Iran plummeting down the regional rankings for higher education.

In another wave of expulsions during the past few weeks, four more professors have been fired in Iran: Mohammad Fazeli, Reza Omidi, Arash Abazari, and Arezoo Rahimkhani. Their removal essentially rings the bell for the third round of cultural revolution in the Islamic Republic.

Since 1979, Iran has tried to control universities through two previous rounds of cultural revolution, first in 1981-85 under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and second in 2005-09 under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Council for the Islamization of Universities, which is subordinated to the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, has been the main body supervising this project. The expulsion of university students and professors has been practiced since 1979. During the first cultural revolution, almost 50,000 defiant students were expelled from their schools, and more than one-third of faculty members were either fired or emigrated because of political repression.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has facilitated the admission of pro-regime instructors and students by introducing a quota system. Almost 70 percent of university seats go to students with quota qualification, including individuals or family members with ties to the "Isargaran" (devotees to the regime) or the various Basij organizations. In addition, the regime requires gender segregation and enforcement of moral policing, "purification" of textbooks with non-Islamic contents or a materialistic philosophy, and promotion of Quranic studies in all majors.

In 2013, the council approved the "Document of Islamic University" (Sanad-e Daneshgah-e Eslami), which outlined new goals and strategies for the Islamization of universities. However, that document was not fully implemented during Hassan Rouhani's presidency because of the administration's lack of trust in the Islamization project. At one point, for instance, Rouhani mocked the project by stating, "There is no Islamic mathematics, physics, or chemistry...Putting a Quran in a car's glove compartment will not make that an Islamic car." According to council mandates, actively disobedient students must be banned from graduate studies, but in 2019, the Rouhani government sent a bill to parliament facilitating the return of politically excluded students to universities. According to that legislation, the measurement for admission to all levels of education should be academic competence alone,

not a student's political leaning.

When Ebrahim Raisi came to office in 2021, he withdrew the reform bill as the first step to regain control of universities and resume the Islamization project. This shift was part of his platform even during his first campaign for the presidency in 2017. According to Raisi, students should not be separated from faith and ethics. He has therefore asked student organizations, professors, university staff members, and individual students to help the government pursue the Islamization plan.

Raisi also appointed Mohammad Ali Zolfigol as the new minister of science, research, and technology, making him the primary agent for implementing the university project. A professor and Basij militia member, Zolfigol praised the 2013 Document of Islamic University as a beautiful and comprehensive text and promised to "ensure the Islamization of universities will be implemented in this administration." Similarly, Raisi's minister of health and medical education, Bahram Einollahi—an ex-member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), chairman of the medical Basij organization, and manager of all medical schools in Iran—stated that he would "insist" on implementing the document. Since the relative autonomy of universities was revoked, all deans and even their deputies have been appointed by these two new ministers, pending approval by the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution. Coming mainly from the Basij organization for professors, such people usually lack scientific credentials but support the regime's Islamization goal.

One example is Mohammad Moghimi, a professor of management who was appointed as dean of the University of Tehran, the country's oldest and most prestigious university. As an advocate of Islamic management, he was a member of the Council for Transforming Humanities, created in late 2009 after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated the following about humanities and social sciences: "These philosophies consider humans as animals without any responsibility in relation to God. Thus, the teaching of such humanities is akin to providing our youngsters with skepticism and disbelief in Islamic and divine values. This issue is not appropriate."

Like previous waves of cultural revolution, the third wave will witness the firing or expulsion of dissident professors and students along with efforts to encourage the hiring of pro-regime individuals—especially in social sciences and humanities. Using Basiji professors is precisely what the IRGC's political deputy asked from the Raisi administration. According to recent remarks by Brig. Gen. Yadollah Javani, "The Raisi administration provides a golden opportunity for the regime to Islamize universities since our anomalies and problems in the country today are because the universities have not been reformed, and this must be done this time."

Islamizing universities is part of a bigger plan advocated by Khamenei for decades. According to his vision, it is time to fully establish **[an Islamic society \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taking-back-neighborhood-irgc-provincial-guards-mission-re-islamize-iran)** and civilization. Since 2019 and concurrent with the revolution's fortieth anniversary, he has actively catalyzed the creation of an Islamic government by placing his radical and youth followers into non-elected posts such as university representatives. For instance, he appointed one of his young students, Hojatoleslam Mustafa Rostami, as head of the Office of Representation in University to "seriously follow up the implementation" of the Islamization project.

From one standpoint, such moves seem counterproductive given that the previous two waves of cultural revolution destroyed the autonomy of Iranian universities and, subsequently, the quality of education on offer, especially in humanities and social sciences. As a result, Iran's universities consistently rank lower than those of other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. This decline has happened despite a massive increase in the number of Iranian universities (from 22 to more than 600) and students (from 175,000 to approximately 3,200,000) since 1978.

The decline of educational quality and **increased social and political repression**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/protests-and-regime-suppression-post-revolutionary-iran>) have led to a massive emigration of students and professors. As a result, Iran is perceived to have experienced one of the highest rates of brain drain in the world, losing a multitude of educated and skilled people to other countries every year. According to Mohammad Vahidi, the first deputy chairman of the parliament's Education and Research Commission, "Iran is one of the countries with the highest statistics among the 98 countries that lose their elites through emigration." Similarly, the Iran Migration Observatory recently found that 37 percent of the medal holders in the student Olympiads and 25 percent of Elite Foundation members have left the country, along with 15 percent of students who score in the top 1,000 on the national entrance exams.

Raisi's election and his monopolization of power in the hands of hardliners have only increased the desire for emigration. According to a recent report on translation agencies in Iran, "The number of requests for translation of documents has increased a lot in the last year compared to ten to fifteen years ago," referring to identity papers, educational documents, and other materials one would need when relocating. To limit the departure of elites, the state increased fees for translation of official notarized documents. In addition, out of fear of a more rapid brain drain, the regime asked that universities not issue English transcripts for students and encouraged professors not to write recommendation letters for students who plan on applying to foreign universities.

Despite all those restrictive policies, the desire for emigration among students and professors is strong—not only because of political repression, but also because Iranians are losing hope for any meaningful reform and now fear for the future of their country. Learning from the Islamic Republic's history, the third wave of the cultural revolution will fail to create an obedient university system or train ideologically devoted students. Instead, it will cost Iran dearly by expelling the brightest minds from national institutions and convincing them to leave the country.

*Saeid Golkar is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Service at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.* ❖

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