

# Black Crow to Barbie Changing Student Norms in Iran

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Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran the regime sought to Islamize universities to engender social change.<sup>1</sup> Some new institutions were established, many teachers were expelled or retired, texts were changed, and new Islamic curricula were added to produce "Islamic" students. As Ayatollah Khomeini announced in his criticism of the universities of the former regime, "Our universities cultivate the western (*gharbzadeh*) people, ...our young don't have the Islamic manner, ...our universities must change fundamentally and be rebuilt again. We need universities that cultivate (the) Islamic student."

With the assistance of the moral police and on-campus "order" committees, the regime set out to inculcate university students with a sense of Islamic civility and to generate in them Islamic discipline (*tarbiat Islami*). Yet twenty-five years after the revolution universities in Iran have failed to "Islamize" the student body. The regime's aim of producing an "Islamic generation" has in fact yielded contrary manifestations as the universities have become contested—and some would say hostile—spaces for the regime. By the time they reach their graduation many students are entirely different from the desired ideals of the Islamic system. Even at Imam Sadiq University which was established by religious conservatives in 1982 to train new Islamic governmental elites and emphasizes high Islamic moral standards as selection criteria, many students are against the state's conservatism and right wing policies. Some among them "celebrate" the end of certain courses on

**Iranian universities underwent a systematic process of Islamization after the country's 1979 revolution. Today, a quarter of a century later, rather than inculcating youth towards modes of Islamic civility universities often appear more as sites where large portions of students express hostility to the regime and experiment with global urban youth cultures.**

Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Arabic by burning study texts and dancing around the fire.

One of the elements of Islamic civility as defined by the state is the dress code. The state promotes modesty in dressing and attempts to enforce clothing for male and female students that is wide (*ghoshad*) and does not cling to

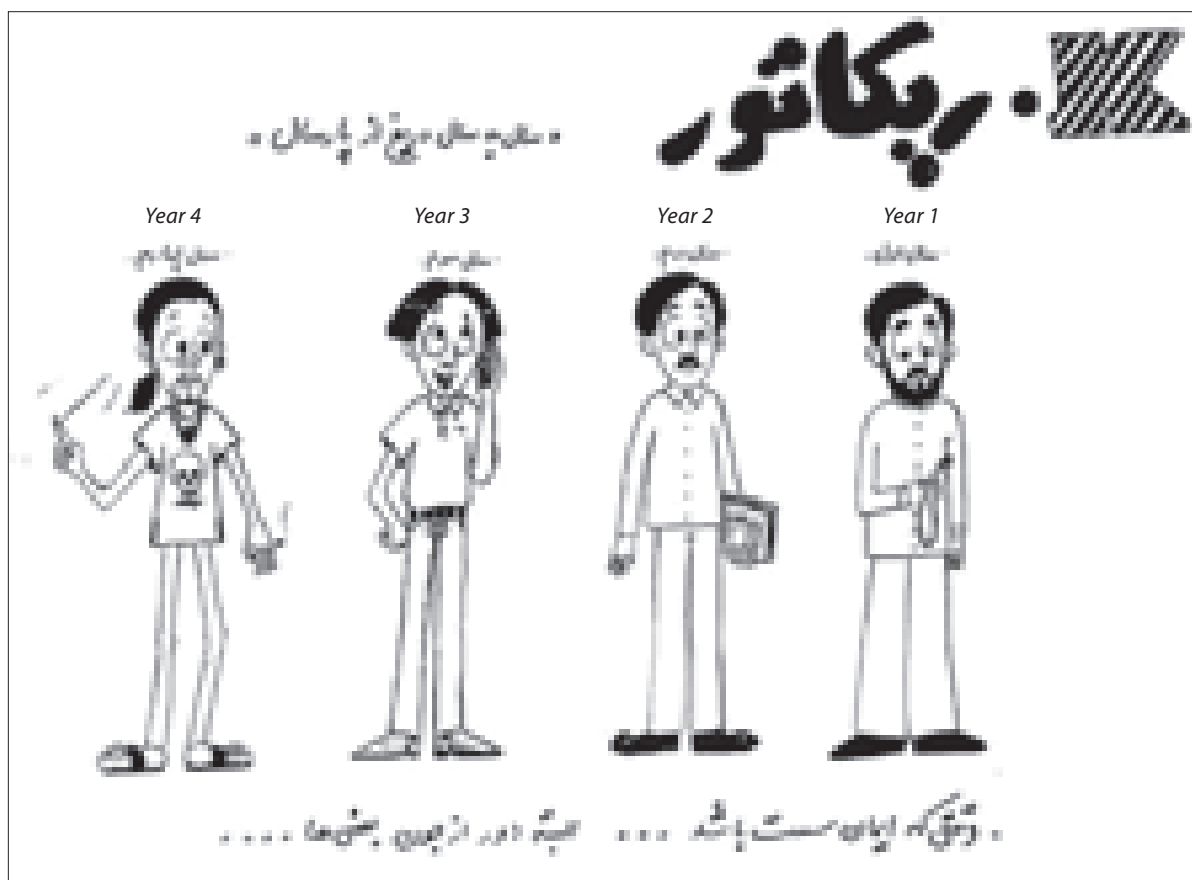
the body so that the contours of the body are not visible to strangers. The preferred colour for men is usually white and for women it is black. The term "hizbullahi style" (*teapae hizbualhi*) is used to refer to "Islamically attired" men, while the term "black crow" (*kalagh -e siyah*) refers to those women who cover themselves from head to toe in black. In the current period such attire is mostly found among women who work for university institutions that check moral behaviour on campuses. Irrespective of such moral surveillance, Iranian students' mode of dressing has changed drastically in the last several years. When I entered university myself in the early 1990s I was not allowed to wear jeans and t-shirts, but today they are a common sight.

### Cartoons and youth politics

The changing style trends among Iranian university students have been well documented in popular media, including that of cartoons. Cartoons (*karicature*) are a powerful and sometimes highly political media in Iran; every newspaper and magazine allocates a special space to them and many popular websites carry cartoons.<sup>2</sup>

One particular Persian language website (<http://www.niksalehi.net/fun/daneshjoo.htm>) frequented by the Iranian youth collects cartoons, pictures, and songs and is visited by more than 2500 people daily, 63% of whom are from inside Iran. A set of cartoons, one depicting women and the other depicting men, show how students undergo an identity transformation in the four years spanning from university entrance to graduation.

Cartoon # 1



Cartoon #1 portrays, on the far right, the ideal type of student in an Islamic discipline. He dons a beard and a moustache, symbols of Islamic maleness. His hairstyle (short and usually cut from one side), dress (the simple wide *goshad* with the shirt hanging outside the trousers), and rosary represent a pious person who prays regularly. His eyes are cast downwards, which is considered good manners since avoiding eye contact with the opposite sex helps to avoid sinful thoughts. In my own experience as a first year student in Tehran University I recall our clergyman professor who taught a course on Islamic knowledge. His gaze was always down-

ward to avoid eye contact with female students who sat in the first row. One day when a majority of students were napping during a boring lecture, the professor exclaimed loudly to a female student whose pant leg was creeping slightly up her leg as she slouched in her sleeping position, "Ms. Ahmadi, Please take off your trousers!" (Meaning instead to pull the trouser down). The class roared with laughter to such an extent that the teacher could not continue the class and left.

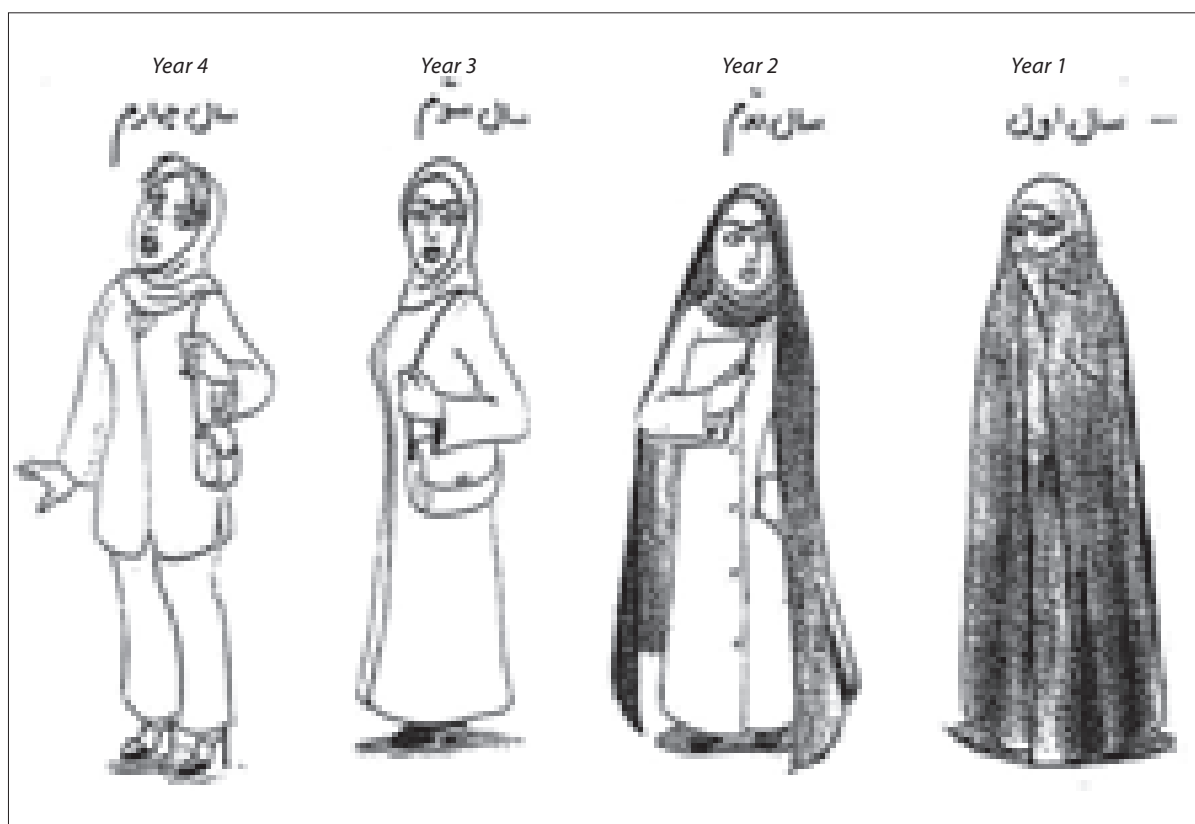
By the second year in the university the male student slowly changes. He has cut his beard but not his moustache, his dress is narrower but remains simple, and the rosary has been replaced by a book; a symbol of independent thinking and learning. By the third year the student has further deviated from the Islamic Republic ideal. His hair (parted in the middle) and dress (short shirt with jeans and shoes) are symbols of becoming part of a globalized western youth culture (*gharbzadeh*). The mobile phone indicates a relationship between the student and the outside

world or with a female friend. In Iran, as in other societies, the mobile phone enhances the possibility of having a relationship with the opposite sex without familial control. Finally, the last picture in the frame shows the student in his final year, with his punk look, bare feet, cigarette, and long hair, having completely deviated from the model of the proper Islamic student.

In the early 1990s few dared to sport jeans and t-shirts or to wear their hair long because if they did they would have to answer to the Islamic associations and the discipline committees in universities. Nowadays even the members of Islamic associations wear jeans and t-shirts and have girlfriends, even though the latter is said to be especially immoral. Last year, in a bold move by the standards of Iranian cultural politics, some students and one member of an Islamic association in the Faculty of Law and Political Science wore a tie, that iconic symbol of west-struckness (*gharbzadigi*).

Women undergo a similar transformative experience at the university. Cartoon #2 shows how, in the first year (the far right), the woman wears a complete head to toe hijab as promoted by the government. This attire represents the student who refrains from wearing makeup and speaking to boys. In the first year of my studies in 1992 male and female students did not know how to address each other and were even unsure about using terms like "brother," "sister," "Mr.," "Ms.," and "Mademoiselle." Not knowing the appropriate form of address hindered communication and was a source of anxiety for the students. On today's campuses collegial relationships between the sexes are far more common, and students study in small groups and address each other on a first name basis, even though it might be frowned upon by the older generation.

Like her male counterpart, the second year female student carries a book. She appears more confident and is less careful about covering herself. By the third year the student replaces the long chador with the more convenient and fashionable "manteau," a form of dress that is unacceptable in high government positions. During the sixth parliament of Iran, for example, some reformist women wore the manteau and created a serious reaction by conservatives and Islamists. The student's



manteau in the cartoon is long and tight (*tang*), revealing her figure. The last frame is of a final year student sporting a short manteau, high heel shoes, and makeup. This style of dressing is called the "Barbi model," and is very popular among young women.

Both of these cartoons amuse us with their depiction of the transformation of student behaviour, manner, and thought. Hence, despite the Islamic system's desire to Islamize and control the students and cultivate them as a new Islamic generation, the students have become a headache for the moral policies of the government. It is not an exaggeration to assert that during their four years in a university, students go through a process that has the opposite effect of what the formal system intends. The reasons for this transformation can be explained by the everyday resistance of youth against the imposed, "Islamic system" into their everyday lives. They often do whatever the Islamic system refuses and reject whatever it promotes. If the Islamic system promotes the chador as the best form of covering for females, the students opt for wearing the short manteau; if it rejects makeup in public space, they wear excessive makeup. Their resistance is also a resistance against the previous generation. But these represent only partial explanations for the choices of youths. The university is a place for learning new ideas and ways of being. It is an opening to a

new world. The more the student learns, the more s/he strays far from the Islamic system's desired path. Despite the Islamic system's efforts to change and "purify" the type of knowledge students encounter by censoring texts and adding copious Islamic subjects to university syllabi, it cannot prevent students from gaining knowledge and forming and experiencing a new world.

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Cartoon #2

**Notes**

1. I would like to thank my friend Kamran Asdar Ali for his help in preparing this essay.
2. It is commonly known that Iranian cartoonists have been jailed for their political cartoons. For example, Nikahang Koser was arrested because he drew a cartoon ridiculing a conservative clergyman, Mesbah Yazdi. In addition, one of the editors of *Hayat-e-No* newspaper was arrested for publishing a cartoon that depicted Imam Khomeini.