The Islamic regime in Iran is in crisis, ideologically, economically and politically. A more visible sign of this crisis manifests itself in the factional conflict between the ruling group who support an absolutist theocracy, i.e. the supreme rule of the jurisprudence (velayat-e faqih), and the reformists who are for a sort of Islamic pluralism, democracy and rule of law. But a more subtle and profound dimension of the present crisis is reflected in the growing disillusionment and frustration among the Iranian youth and students upset against the conservative’s repressive policies.

Neither any opposition group, the eight-year war with Iraq, nor the often-blamed ‘Great Satan’ has dealt as serious a blow to the authority and legitimacy of the ruling Islamic Republic in its cultural and ideological projects. Today, two decades after the 1979 Revolution that gave power to the Shi’a clerics in Iran’s name and whose ministers reigned under the Islamic regime, do not identify with its ideology and dictated behavior. Many Iranian youth who have grown up in the Islamic Republic in its cultural and ideological projects has recently manifested itself during two exhibitions of defiance by the youth: the siege of the US embassy and the start of a game between Iranian and American football players in Lyon in June 1998, and the massive nationwide student demonstration against state-run repression in July 1999.

Students have constituted one of the most dynamic forces in the recent history of Iran. They played a major role in the movements that paved the way to the 1979 Revolution and the downfall of the Shah. In the establishment of the Islamic Republic (IR) too, a large segment of the student body played a key role by taking over the American Embassy in 1980 and creating the ‘hostage crisis’. The clerics then effectively manipulated students’ passion and the ‘hostage crisis’ towards the struggle for the state power, eliminating liberals, secularists and leftists from various organs and eventually creating a theocratic rule. In their ‘Cultural Revolution’ campaign, the Islamic Republic pitied Islamic associations against other groups and pursued violent suppression of any student organization supportive of secular and Islamic dissent trends on various campuses. The current attempt to clean up the faculty and administration and begin screening student admissions on the basis of ideological and moral standards as necessary steps towards the Islamization of universities. When this campaign met with resistance, the Revolutionary Council issued an order to all universities for two years beginning on 5 June 1980. The success in suppressing the independent student movement and the subsequent co-optation of students and universities that lasted for over 15 years played a crucial role in the Iran-Iran war and the failure of Shi’a ‘revolution’ (1980–88). These clerics have been keen on closely linking traditional religious seminaries and modern universities, turning for example, the main campus of the Teheran University campus into the site of weekly Friday prayers led by conservative clerics.

In Iran’s initial populist nature and ongoing revolutionary rhetoric, the IR has promoted mobilization of the youth, especially during the war with Iraq. But this politicization of the youth, like that of women, has gradually turned into a double-edged sword for the conservatives, with increasing backfire. The students lost their influence on the direction and nature of student activism. Many Islamic Associations of Students, originally supported and even found-ed by these clerics, have taken on a life of their own, becoming real players in the current power struggle. One can witness a rebirth of dissident student movement in Iran too, a large segment of the student body has gradually turned into a double-edged sword for the conservatives, that of women, has gradually turned into a double-edged sword for the conservatives, that of women, has gradually turned into a double-edged sword for the conservatives, that of students, especially during the war with Iraq. Prior to the 1997 presidential election there were 1,150,000 students in universities and higher education institutions. Since the revolution, the ethnic, class and gender composition of university students in Iran has also changed in important ways. After the 1979 Revolution, the number of rural students has decreased and universities increased tremendously. The exodus of many upper and upper-middle class students to universities in foreign countries, purging of secular students, the admission policy based on moral and ideological standards and admission quotas for war veteran family members, resulted in an increase in the proportion of students from traditional, poorer and provincial backgrounds in universities. Ten years later, the gender composition of the students began to change dramatically. In 1999, for the first time in the history of Iran, university female students outnumbered male students in universities surpassed that of male students by about 20,000 (4%). Since the late 1980s, the gender composition of university students have now come to represent the aspirations and orientations of a new urban middle class, rather than those of the rural or the bazaar subcultures.

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