



EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AFTER THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

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Annotation: *This article critically examines the structure and ideological orientation of the post-Islamic Revolution education system in Iran. It highlights how, despite producing a considerable number of specialists, the system fails to align with global educational standards, resulting in increasing unemployment among graduates. The analysis underscores the disconnect between Iranian education and the global economic market, arguing that the uniform language policy marginalizes the country's diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. Furthermore, the article explores how the education system reinforces the ideological foundations of Iran's Islamic theocracy and Persian-centric nationalism, thus serving broader socio-political agendas.*

Keywords: *Educational system, reforms, higher education, Islamic revolution, ideological foundation, cultural goals.*

Introduction: Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's education system has undergone significant transformation in both structure and content. While the country has made notable progress in expanding access to education and producing specialists to meet domestic needs, it continues to face critical challenges. Chief among these is the system's limited engagement with international educational standards, which hinders graduates' ability to compete in the global labor market. Furthermore, the centralized and ideologically-driven nature of the curriculum reflects the political and religious priorities of the Islamic Republic, often at the expense of academic freedom and inclusivity. The imposition of a uniform language of instruction, despite Iran's ethnic and linguistic diversity, also raises questions about equity and cultural representation. This article explores how the Iranian education system functions not only as a means of instruction but also as a tool for ideological reinforcement, sustaining the values of Islamic theocracy and Persian nationalism.

Iran is a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, currently governed by a dictatorship of capitalists who follow the ideological forms of Persian chauvinism and Jafari Shia Islam. The Iranian education system reflects the country's political and economic structures, and through a strong ideological influence, it also impacts national politics and the economy. The first aspect of oppression in the education system is related to its educational philosophy. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ultimate goal of education





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is to instill in its people the necessary preparation for reaching the stage of a "perfect human being" through proper worship of God. The sole purpose is to shape individuals who submit to the will of God. In their view, the rulers are God's representatives on earth, and through this idea, people are forced to submit to the political system. Thus, religion holds a special place in education. The principles of education are as follows:

1. To strengthen the moral development of students based on faith in God,
2. Cultural goals – to familiarize students with Islamic teachings and the Persian-Arabic languages,
3. Social goals – to protect family relations according to Islamic teachings and strengthen national unity,
4. Political goals – to enhance the country's defense capabilities by conducting military training in educational institutions,
5. Economic goals – to cultivate a spirit of respect for lawful ownership⁷⁷.

In conclusion, the main aim of these orientations is not to acquaint students with the intellectual and cultural heritage of all humanity, but rather to focus on religious teachings based on Shia Islam. Its key objectives include promoting Persian chauvinist culture, protecting patriarchal Islamic family relations, militarizing the country, and supporting the institution of legal property ownership dominant in the capitalist system. It is important to note that the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) had a significant impact on the goals of the Iranian education system. One of the consequences of this war was the creation of a militarized atmosphere across all levels of education, from secondary schools to higher education institutions. The regime incorporated courses called 'Defense Preparation' into the curriculum. Through these courses, students were taught how to use weapons, military theories, and practical skills. Military organizations were formed, and participation in wartime intelligence operations was made mandatory for students⁷⁸.

The second issue that needs to be addressed is the suppression of all ethnic groups by the dominant Persians. Iran is home to various ethnic groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Baloch, Georgians, Gilaki-Mazandarani, Jews, Kurds, Lurs, Turks, and Turkmens. These minorities have, to varying degrees, struggled to gain political and cultural rights. However, they have been violently repressed by the Islamic regime. According to Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran: "All ethnic minorities are deprived of learning their own languages, and Persian is designated as the only compulsory language." Thus, from the first year of primary school, the Persian

⁷⁷ Mohammad Nasser. A democratic alternative education system for Iran: An historical and critical study. // Simon Fraser University, 2003. –P.72.

⁷⁸ Mohammad Nasser. A democratic alternative education system for Iran: An historical and critical study. // Simon Fraser University, 2003. –P.119.





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language dominates the education system—even though the Qur'an is taught in Arabic. Arabic is primarily introduced in the first or second year of secondary school, and English follows in the second year. The purpose of teaching Arabic is to enable children to read the Qur'an. Despite being denied the right to learn their own languages and cultures, ethnic minority students are forced to learn not only Persian but also Arabic. Yet Arabic is never actually needed in their daily lives.

Beyond language, another imposition on ethnic minorities is Persian culture. This culture, promoted under the state-defined concepts of "Iranian culture," "national culture," and the "Islamic Iranian nation," embodies dominant Persian and Shia cultural norms. The aim behind this is to systematically eliminate the cultures of ethnic minorities through the education system.

Although illiteracy is a widespread issue across all regions of Iran, it is especially prevalent among certain ethnic minorities due to the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. Despite various programs developed to combat illiteracy from the era of Reza Shah to the present day, 19.6% of Iran's population remains illiterate, and these individuals are predominantly from ethnic minority groups. The unequal allocation of educational resources hinders the development of students' talents within these ethnic communities and suppresses their intellectual potential⁷⁹.

The third issue that must be addressed is the eradication of culture within the education system. Iran's educational structure undermines various aspects of human culture and the traditions of ethnic minority groups in different ways and to varying degrees. For example, the teaching of diverse cultural customs, traditions, and ideas is prohibited in the education system. According to Article 13 of the Constitution, "Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only officially recognized religious minorities in Iran, and they may perform their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law." Any religious ceremonies by other minority groups are forbidden⁸⁰.

In the educational environment, students are indoctrinated with the idea that not all peoples are equal, and that Shia Persians are superior to all others. Moreover, individuals from other sects or ethnic minority backgrounds are systematically excluded from holding positions in ministries and government institutions. While education should foster an environment where students can study, think, analyze, criticize, and discuss freely and without fear, in reality, neither teachers nor students dare to express their political or ideological beliefs if they contradict the official system imposed by the regime. If they voice opinions contrary to the regime's stance, they may be expelled, imprisoned, or even killed. These prohibitions have created a culture of hypocrisy among the country's intellectuals and activists.

The goal of the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1980, was to Islamize the education system at all levels. All foreign schools were closed, and academic disciplines

⁷⁹ UNICEF, 2006.

⁸⁰ http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution قانون اساسی جمهوری اسلامی ایران





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deemed contrary to Islamic values were suspended. Government employees suspected of opposing Islam were dismissed. Initially, around 40,000 teachers were either fired or forced into early retirement. However, due to a severe shortage, some of them were reinstated after attending Islamic courses. The Cultural Revolution led to the expulsion of thousands of professors and students, labeled by the Islamic regime as "elements poisoned by the West."

By 1983, the number of university staff had dropped from 8,000 to 6,000, and the number of students decreased from 17,000 to 4,500. Another aspect of the cultural changes in the education system relates to global culture. School curricula do not include information about world cultures. Students are not introduced to the diverse cultures of the world. This profound silence regarding global cultural heritage leads to Iranian students growing up isolated from the wider world. Artistic subjects such as music, dance, and singing are excluded from the curriculum⁸¹.

One of the covert educational practices through which the Islamic regime influences the learning environment is Islamic worship. Although praying in schools and universities is not officially mandatory, students who do not participate in such prayers often find their chances of university admission diminished. The Islamic regime has established political criteria for university admissions. According to these criteria, preference is given to so-called 'devotees of Islam'—including war veterans, families of martyrs, members of literacy campaigns, and revolutionary organizations.

In 1982, all public universities were required to allocate 30% of their admissions to candidates from these categories, a privilege known as the "Revolutionary Quota." Furthermore, the moral and political background of other students who passed the entrance exam was subject to scrutiny. To be admitted to university, candidates had to prove that they were not opposed to Islam or followers of religions banned by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They were also expected to have a strong moral reputation and no affiliation with the former regime or any movements opposed to Islam. This process, combined with pressure from Islamic authorities and educational intelligence services, has compelled many students, teachers, and staff to participate in prayers and other Islamic rituals against their will. As a result, even those who do not believe in Islam are forced to present themselves as devout and to follow religious practices.

The fourth aspect of the Islamic Republic of Iran's education system relates to gender. According to Islamic principles, men are considered superior to women. Al-Razi stated: "A man is more complete than a woman in creativity, intelligence, and in religious matters—such as being suited to serve as a judge and to lead in worship." After the revolution, starting on March 8, 1979, the wearing of the hijab became mandatory for women. According to the 1979 Constitution, women were prohibited

⁸¹ Afshar H. Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian case-study. // New York, 1998. –P.70.





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from becoming president. This gender-based inequality is clearly reflected in Iran's education system.

In order to prevent men from seeing women's hair, female students are required to cover themselves in an Islamic manner. As of June 1979, married girls were banned from attending secondary schools, leading to a decrease in the number of girls receiving secondary education. A gender-specific curriculum was designed for girls, emphasizing subjects related to household management. After the revolution, some university officials even attempted to physically separate male and female students in classrooms using curtains—but this plan ultimately failed.

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, 45% of university courses effectively excluded women. However, due to resistance from women and certain opposition groups, the regime was forced in 1994 to lift all restrictions on women's participation in technical research, engineering, arts, medical, and humanities programs⁸².

Gender disparities were clearly reflected in the literacy rates between 2000 and 2004. During these years, the literacy rate among women was around 70%, while for men it stood at 84%.

The Islamic education system in Iran after 1979 significantly minimized women's opportunities across various forms of education. The idea that men are superior to women was systematically instilled through different educational practices.

The next dimension of Iran's education system relates to social class. Iranian Islamic scholar Mohsenpur (1988), comparing Islamic economics to capitalism, states: "According to Islamic teachings, a Muslim should strive to increase their wealth, but the accumulation of wealth must not lead to separation from God." In reality, Islamic capitalism encourages people to become billionaires while maintaining their devotion to God. Based on the characteristics and practices of capitalism, workers and the middle class are subjected to limitless exploitation by a minority elite.

Iran is a deeply divided country by social classes. A small elite minority primarily controls and shapes the country's economy, while the majority—workers and peasants—live under harsh conditions. Although the middle class possesses some economic and social resources, it is unable to ensure economic stability. The existence of such significant class disparities impacts the education environment in various ways.

The poor lack adequate access to educational opportunities. Many underprivileged students are forced to leave schools and universities due to financial difficulties. Free public education in Iran is insufficient to meet demand. Meanwhile, private schools and universities are flourishing.

⁸² Mohammad Nasser. A democratic alternative education system for Iran: An historical and critical study. // Simon Fraser University, 2003. –P.89.





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Privatization of schools and universities affects education in two main ways: on one hand, it restricts access for underprivileged students to educational institutions; on the other, it benefits the capitalist class and the Islamic rulers. Additionally, through privatization, the theocratic regime tightly controls curricula and instills Islamic values into the education environment. Among private higher education institutions, the Islamic Azad University holds significant importance. Established in 1982, it has 289 branches. According to statistics from 2004-2005, 45% of students studied at public universities, while 55% attended private universities. Private schools are considerably more effective than public schools because they have better management, offer more subjects, and organize various courses. This, in turn, leads to an improved educational environment. However, it also increases the likelihood that children from higher social classes will attend higher education institutions. Thus, the flourishing of private educational institutions in the country significantly reduces educational opportunities for the middle and lower classes and intensifies social inequality.

Another significant change in the education system after the Islamic Revolution occurred in the development and implementation of curricula. The curricula were created in an authoritarian manner and serve to protect the ideology of the ruling group in Iran. According to this, the content of subjects, organizational methods, and the relationships between teachers and students are highly undemocratic and oppressive. Textbooks and lectures are considered the regime's main tools.

From kindergarten to university, students are taught exclusively the Shia Islamic doctrine, which shapes dogmatic views and narrow-mindedness contrary to real life. Religious education is introduced as part of the Persian language curriculum in the first grade, then from the second grade onward, it is taught as a separate subject. From the third grade, Quran courses are included. Furthermore, throughout pre-university education, students are required to thoroughly study courses such as Islamic sciences, ethics, fundamentals of creed, Arabic literature, and basics of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

After the revolution, the increased religious content in the curricula strengthened the authority of teachers. Students are compelled to memorize religious teachings without questioning or doubting them as alien ideas. The hierarchical structure within the education system negatively affects students. Teachers hold real power in the classroom, with the authority to verbally reprimand, punish, and even physically discipline students.

This indicates that verbal and physical violence against students is not uncommon. As a result, fear rather than friendly relations prevails between teachers and students.





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According to the May 27, 1993 issue of the *Jahon-e-Islom* newspaper, the principal of Doroshti Elementary School in Karaj interrogated a student without justification due to disciplinary issues and physically punished him by biting his fingernails⁸³.

Another problem related to education in Iran is the limited availability of necessary texts and resources for students. This scarcity is felt strongly from primary education through to higher education. Such restrictions on educational materials hinder students' intellectual and physical development and limit their creativity.

Conclusion: After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the education system has been producing a sufficient number of specialists for Iranian society. However, the limited adoption of globally recognized educational methodologies has contributed to the rising unemployment rate. Education has been formed in isolation from the global community, and graduates are struggling to integrate into the global market economy. Despite the presence of various ethnic groups and languages in the country, a uniform language of instruction has been imposed on all. Such an education system serves to preserve and deeply instill the ideology of Iran's capitalist system, its Islamic theocracy, and Persian chauvinism.

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⁸³ Mohammad Nasser. A democratic alternative education system for Iran: An historical and critical study. // Simon Fraser University, 2003. –P.100.

