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IRAN

## Students sentenced, academics dismissed over unrest

Shafiqeh Shirazi 19 January 2023

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In addition to hundreds of student arrests, a significant number of academics in Iran have been suspended or expelled from their universities since September 2022 when protests first began on university campuses in response to the death of student Mahsa Amini.

The death of Amini, who was arrested and held by police for not wearing her headscarf according to official regulations, led to **major protests around the country**, including at approximately 150 university campuses. Universities became a focus of dissent after students called for **class boycotts** and **desegregation** of male and female students in classes and in campus public areas, and demanded an end to the strict rules on society imposed by the regime.

To date, almost 700 students have been arrested from 147 universities. A total of 396 of them are yet to be sentenced and are imprisoned without access to lawyers, according to a report released on 11 January by the International Community of Iranian Academics (ICOIA), which is collating statistics on the Iranian regime's crackdown on protesting students and academics, to gauge the extent of the crackdown.

"The Islamic Republic regime has orchestrated daily violent assaults against Iranian campuses and university dormitories across the country," the report said, adding that students' safety and security "have been under severe violent attacks day and night, even inside university buildings, libraries and cafes", with many arrests taking place.

"Some of the arrested students are expected to receive lengthy prison punishments or even execution," said the report which provides details of a number of cases involving students facing the death penalty.

Detained students "have been prevented from contacting their own families, while authorities provide no updates on their cases to the public or families," the report said.

It added that many students have been held in prisons for weeks or months with no access to medical care.

"Many of the students' whereabouts are ... unknown and a number of the arrested students have been subjected to mental and physical abuse and were deprived of medical care in prison. The lives of many are in danger and the emotional and psychological impacts on their class mates are expected to be long-lasting and dramatic," it said, noting that a number of students who were abducted during and after student protests were found dead a few days later.

At the University of Tehran alone, 49 out of 79 arrested students have been imprisoned since September 2022. Many were abducted by security forces and kept illegally in unknown locations for more than 30 days, according to the report.

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### Facing the death penalty

Of those facing a possible death penalty is Mohammad Ahmadvand Shahverdi, a fifth-year medical student at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, who is accused of making a hand-made bomb at his house. His coerced confession was broadcast on television during which “his voice was put on a fake face”, according to the report.

His brother, Shahab Ahmadvand Shahverdi, an electrical engineering masters student, was detained by security forces for the same reason. They have no parents, and they are from Kelehbid village in Malayer, the report notes.

Mahsa Mohammadi, a microbiology student at Sabzevar University, has been charged with blasphemy for “cursing the Prophet”. If convicted, she could face the death penalty. Despite campaigns launched in December 2022 by Australian parliamentarian Monique Ryan, former Belgian senator Georges Dallemagne and Swedish parliamentarian Markus Wiechel, little is known about her situation.

Bita Haghani, a student of graphics at Ghodsieh University in Sari, and a blogger, has been charged with “corruption on earth”, which is punishable by death.

Among the students who have received sentences so far, the report lists 28 who have received prison terms between one and six years, while some have received a whipping as a punishment. Some 435 imprisoned students are yet to be sentenced. Many more students are awaiting trial.

### Academics suspended or expelled

While news about student arrests has filtered out, less well known are details about a number of academics who have been dismissed or suspended from universities since September. Very few professors have openly joined the student protests, fearing they would lose their jobs. In some cases they have been accused of “deliberate silence” by students.

However, it has emerged that many professors have indeed supported students – and have paid the price by being arrested, suspended or expelled from their universities.

The ICOIA report cites information leaked by Black Reward, an anonymous hacker group, obtained from Iran’s official Fars News Agency, about approximately 18 professors who have lost their jobs since the protests, though names were not provided.

Student associations and activist groups as well as some academics themselves have also released news of suspensions and expulsions of a significant number of academics, the report notes.

One of those is Shamsi Abbasali-Zadeh, a faculty member of the obstetrics department at the Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, who was suspended after 30 years of teaching. Abbasali-Zadeh’s suspension followed her sentencing in court for trying to establish the status of some of her students who had been arrested during the protests after the death of another of her students, Ailar Haghi.

At Shahid Beheshti University, Mohammad Ragheb, assistant professor of Persian literature and head of the university’s AFZA centre, was suspended without pay and dismissed from his managerial roles. Negar Zilabi, assistant professor of theology and religion at the same university, was also suspended without pay, while Islam Nazari, associate professor of industrial engineering, was suspended and then expelled from the university.

Niloofar Razavi, assistant professor of architecture and urban planning and head of the central library at the university, was dismissed from her managerial role at the library.

At the University of Tehran, Hossein Mesbahian, associate professor of philosophy, was de facto expelled when the university refused to



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renew his job contract. Reza Omid, assistant professor of social welfare, and Kousha Gorgi Sefat, assistant professor of sociology, were both expelled, while Mojtaba Mojtahedi, assistant professor of mathematics and statistics, was suspended. Azin Movahed, associate professor at the college of fine arts at Tehran University, was suspended without pay.

Elsewhere, at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Ahad Sharafshahi, assistant professor of philosophy, was expelled "in the form of refusal to renew his job contract". This form of expulsion has become common.

Zahra Khoshkjan, assistant professor of political science and sociology at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, was also suspended and renewal of her job contract refused.

Others suspended from their respective universities include Iraj Mehraki, assistant professor of Persian literature at Islamic Azad University of Karaj, and Abolfazl Shayan, head of the department of kinesiology at Jahrom University. Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand, assistant professor of English literature at the University of Mazandaran, was expelled.

Several academic have been arrested. Among them is Fatemeh Mashhadi-Abbas, a professor in pathology at the department of dentistry of Shahid Beheshti University, who was arrested on 19 October. No authority took responsibility for her arrest until an open letter signed by more than 800 of her colleagues led to her being freed on bail after 17 days, the report notes.

Mohammad Sadigh Amiri, professor of accounting at the Islamic Azad University of Sanandaj, was arrested on 7 December and freed after a week.

Behrooz Chamanara, associate professor of Farsi literature at the University of Kurdistan, was kidnapped after he attended a brainstorming meeting about the challenges this university was facing. He was freed on bail after 10 days.

### Student persecution

In early November 2022, over 600 university professors called for the unconditional release of all students arrested during recent protests. ICOIA and other academic groups, including university professors outside Iran, have called for an end to student oppression and violations of university campuses.

According to data collated for the ICOIA report by journalist Milad Eisapour, at around 15 universities, some 5,000 students have to report to disciplinary committees at their universities. These include 230 students at Sharif University of Technology and 140 at Allameh Tabataba'i University.

More than 1,000 students are banned from entering their universities and around 600 students have been suspended from studies.

Many students who are not allowed to enter the universities are unable to write exams and "they are receiving zero as their final marks", the report notes.

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