

# Iranian students add to a long history of brave protests

Iranian student demonstrations were met with violence. It has happened before.

Perspective by Ida Yalzadeh

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October 13, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

On Oct. 2, state security forces verbally and physically attacked a group of peacefully protesting students at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, even using rubber bullets. The students were joining national demonstrations for women's and national rights in Iran that have been ongoing since the state killing of Mahsa (Zhina/Jina) Amini. The 22-year-old Kurdish woman was arrested by the Islamic Republic of Iran's morality police for not properly wearing the hijab in September. The violent crackdown, which the students refer to as "Ruz-e Khunin" or "A Bloody Day," is not an isolated incident of state violence against Iranian student protesters.

University student opposition in Iran is only one part of a larger movement of Iranians — labor unions, teachers, bus drivers and factory workers — who are collectively organizing and fighting for liberation against patriarchal rule and economic strife in their country. But Ruz-e Khunin is one case that links the current moment to a legacy of student protest, both within the country and abroad, against the repressive regimes of Iran during the 20th century. In fact, this fight for women's rights is intimately tied to a longer history of Iranian struggle for the right of national self-determination.

Students have been an important part in the fight for Iran's self-determination for decades, and they emerged globally as a strong organizing force after World War II. As the United States emerged as a dominant global power, it replaced the United Kingdom as the main foreign presence in Iran. The United States sought to maintain Iran as a dependent ally during the Cold War because of its oil-rich land, geographic proximity to the U.S.S.R. and its potential to expand U.S. consumer markets.

In 1951, Mohammad Mossadeq became Iran's prime minister and began the project of nationalizing Iran's oil in an effort to gain independence from Western powers. In 1953, the United States and the United Kingdom orchestrated a coup that ousted Mossadeq to maintain their imperial influence over the country. As the U.S.-backed Shah (King) Mohammad Reza Pahlavi took the helm of the nation after Mossadeq's toppling, U.S. imperial interests maintained the shah's rule over the country as a dictator.

During the Cold War, U.S. policymakers argued that what became known as the shah's "White Revolution" fostered economic advancement and cultural reform, although Iran was actually being run as a police state under the shah. SAVAK, the shah's CIA-trained secret police, arrested and tortured political dissidents as the economic gap between rich and poor in Iran continued to widen.

By the end of the 1950s, student opposition groups against the shah became active in Iran, as well as among Iranians studying abroad in Europe and the United States. Students helped form three political organizations in 1960: the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS) in Europe, the Iranian Students Association in the United States (ISAUS) and the Second National Front in Iran.

Connected by a well-organized network of publications and correspondence, these organizations worked together to educate the wider public outside Iran about the realities of state violence happening within its borders. They also worked to inform people that the shah was being maintained and supported by U.S. financial aid and arms sales. As was the case for many other liberation movements against Western imperial powers during the mid-20th century, Iranian students demonstrated for their right to national self-determination.

Iranian students, both within and outside Iran, were mostly from the upper- and middle-classes, as Iran had a 30 percent national literacy rate at the time. In fact, many families from which these students came benefited from the shah's rule. However, these students were conscious of their fellow compatriots who were suffering under the shah's rule, as well as the harm of U.S. interests to Iran's future as an independent nation.

These student activists were met with state violence — both in Iran and abroad. An ISAUS pamphlet from 1973 documented the police shooting of 28 students protesting at the University of Tabriz demonstrating against Iran's purchase of \$2 billion in arms from the United States. This event led to nationwide protests across Iran's universities. These too were met with violence and resulted in further injuries at the University of Isfahan, the School of Education in Tehran and the University of Ahvaz. One publication, "Iran's Kent State and Baton Rouge" by the ISAUS, linked Iran's state violence against students to major U.S. student protests in the civil rights and antiwar movement that also resulted in police brutality and arrests.

Iranian students were deeply aware of the links between their own struggle for national self-determination and other international struggles like the civil rights movement in the United States. They were part of a larger solidarity movement known to scholars today as Third World Internationalism. These students believed their struggle for national independence was intimately tied to other communities that were under the imperial rule of Western powers, such as the Vietnamese, Salvadorans and Black Americans. The ISAUS published newsletters and fliers supporting movements for national liberation across the Global South, as well as the Black Power movement in the United States.

For their work rallying against the shah's regime and supporting other Third World movements, Iranian student protesters were also met with violence by SAVAK agents in Europe and the United States. In England and Germany, SAVAK agents threatened and beat Iranian students who had protested against the shah. In the United States, Iranian students voicing their desire for their nation's autonomy from imperial forces and a dictatorial regime had to wear paper masks during demonstrations for fear that SAVAK agents or Iranian officials would be able to identify and arrest them when they returned to Iran.

Despite the great risk and dangers they faced, Iranian students continued to protest the shah's regime. As scholars have noted, their organizing was consequential to the Iranian Revolution's success in 1979 that deposed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. However, many Iranians realized in the ensuing years that the government established under the Islamic Republic of Iran also did not reflect the people's interests.

As a result, the 1980s and 1990s also saw student organizing and protests against the repressive elements of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The "Cultural Revolution" of 1980 witnessed more state violence against students protesting the elimination of non-Islamic elements from universities. In July 1999, 400 plainclothes paramilitaries attacked students at a dorm in the University of Tehran after they had protested the closure of the reformist newspaper, Salam. Students and demonstrators across Iran protested this initial act of violence and were met with more state violence and arrests. These protests formed part of the foundation of the 2009 Green Movement, when demonstrations were held to protest the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president, and were again met with state violence and arrest.

The current protests in the name of Mahsa Amini have been organized under the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom." These words signify not just the right of women to bodily autonomy and gender equality, but also the right to national self-determination. They are calling for an end to the patriarchal, authoritarian and ethnocentric rule in Iran. The students in this movement are part of a legacy of young people determined to end repression in their country, whether from foreign intervention or national political corruption.

While what is unfolding in Iran today is the work of organizers on the ground, it is critical to remember the history that created the conditions that people are now protesting. The United States played a central role in maintaining Iran's police state under the shah's rule for the sake of oil and market capitalism. Over decades, Iran's brave students have worked to make this context clear — not just in the name of their own national independence, but also for the liberation of others across the globe.