Undergraduate Student

“The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Approach to Iranian Human Rights”

University of Southern California
There is a general consensus among political scientists which traits characterize a democracy. These aspects include competitive and free elections, basic freedoms, the rule of law, capitalism and affluence, and a strong civil society and civic culture. For countries with a poor human rights record, these aspects are either weak or missing from society. Repression and manipulation by governments thwart the growth of an autonomous population and functioning civil society.

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines how every country should treat its people and the rights to which they are entitled. Article one, in fact, states “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Human rights, specifically political rights, are serious issues facing the theocratic and socially conservative Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a militant extension of the government’s commitment to upholding the Islamic Revolution, utilizes its intelligence capabilities to hinder the inherent rights of the Iranian people and prevent any hope for a healthy civil society.

Authoritarianism is a common theme in Middle Eastern countries, and Iran is no different. Although a declared theocracy, the country still has authoritarian tendencies rooted in its history and a coercive apparatus as proof. These authoritarian countries typically have institutionalized, strong security forces to ensure complete control over their populations with little resistance. Through the coercive apparatus and security forces, people are being oppressed and human rights abused. For Iranians, their opposition votes are almost worth nothing and their right to peaceful demonstration against the government is highly discouraged, to say the least. Essentially, all of their political rights to express dissent are undermined for the sake of preserving the highly centralized regime.

To say that Islam, the official religion of Iran and the basis for the 1979 Revolution which brought into existence the country’s current governmental structure, prevents these rights from being attained is unfair. In fact, eighteen years after the Revolution, voters chose reform-minded Mohammad Khatami as president. Khatami’s campaign platform included promises of a more liberal Islamic democracy and termination of the “repressive constraints” placed on Iranians by the government.\(^2\) It is not religion itself that impedes democratic political rights, but how the state uses the vehicle of religion to carry out its repression. Under the guise of theocracy, Sharia law, and the Supreme Leader, the government is actually manipulating and controlling its people.

Likewise, it is inaccurate to claim that culture is the reason Middle Eastern countries are usually authoritarian and not democratic. It is not the culture but the history of repression and the virtually impenetrable coercive apparatus run by strong, well-funded security forces that keeps the authoritarian regime functioning. Anyone would choose democracy over authoritarianism, including Iranians. That is, there is a universal want for liberty and (political) freedom. Human rights, or lack thereof, are a global issue that reaches beyond different cultures, governments, and people.

Iran must take a hard look at its human rights record if it wants to be respected by world powers as a modern state. The mere fact that Iran signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights shows that the country does recognize the legitimacy of protecting human rights.\(^3\) Iran must abandon its coercive apparatus and allow civil society to flourish. The concept of a thriving civil society is to serve as a check to government power. Additionally, the civil society


acts as a buffer between individuals and the regime. It can call for demands, formally or informally, from the state as well as protect the population from any unmerited intrusion or infringing done by the state.

A prosperous civil society is an indication of legitimacy in a regime, a concept with which Iran constantly struggles. When refusing to grant a fair and free presidential election, the Iranian government undermined its own legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The act prevented civil society from providing feedback to the government, thus stunting growth. A robust civil society demonstrates that the government is comfortable with its people and that its people are content with how their government is ruling over them.

On November 20th of this year, the United Nations passed a resolution, immediately endorsed by the United States, urging Iran to “respect its human rights obligations fully.” Specifically, the resolution calls for Iran to address its “brutal response” to the demonstrators during the aftermath of the June 12, 2009, presidential election. The resolution demands that the government end its use of arbitrary imprisonment as well as acknowledges that most Iranians arrested were merely exercising their universal rights.4

The 2009 Iranian presidential election made the headlines of all major newspapers and news channels around the world because of the controversy associated with the results and how the government treated (or, rather mistreated) the protestors and demonstrators. Despite claims by contender Mir Hussein Moussavi of voting fraud, the election commission concluded just two hours after polls were closed that incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won with 85% of the votes.5 The election results were very problematic. It is highly unlikely Ahmadinejad was able

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to garner that many votes with Moussavi’s strong support among women, young people, and intellectuals. Furthermore, the election commission is run by the Interior Ministry, which serves under President Ahmadinejad. In order to certify a fair election and that all votes are counted, the election commission should be independent of the government or the country.

Although the results were highly controversial, voting fraud and irregularities are common in democratic elections for developing and transitioning countries. Even more disheartening than the allegedly rigged election results were the measures taken by the government to suppress and silence the opposition through the security forces. Ahmadinejad is a relatively popular figure in Iran, and probably would have won the election; most protestors were not objecting to his win. Instead, they were dissatisfied with the how the election was conducted and the results were determined. The government took this political unrest as an attack on its regime, and therefore the Islamic Revolution.

As the protector of the revolution and the regime when it is perceived to be under attack, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responded by monitoring and excessively managing the population. The organization’s intelligence actions directly impact the people, usually neglecting or stripping away their rights.

Arrests and imprisonment, for instance, were common intelligence activities used by the IRGC during the Iranian presidential election this past summer. The power to arrest and detain in special prisons anyone it deems a dissenter or opponent of the Islamic Revolution is a prime example of the relationship between the IRGC and Iranian human rights. In most cases, the dissenter is simply an individual using his democratic right to peaceful demonstration or free

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speech to communicate his unhappiness with the regime. Before the election, the IRGC guards actually warned of their willingness to arrest any opposition. In fact, they stated their intentions of making sure Moussavi would not win. According to a 1982 Statute, the IRGC is forbidden by law to engage in political activity. Clearly, the group’s involvement in muting political protest breaks this statute. A reported 457 people were arrested in one day by the IRGC and other police forces, while an unknown number were imprisoned.

The threat of confrontation and brutal physical force was also a tactic applied by the IRGC during the election. In particular, the Basij Militia, a volunteer army under direct orders from the IRGC with the duty to combat unrest and police the streets, played a major role in the days following the election. In many cases, their threats turned into a grim reality. A day after the election results, at least ten people were killed in altercations between the Basij Militia and protestors. Some witnesses even reported “nighttime raids” in which the Basij Militia attacked protestors and sympathizers with axes and daggers. In one incident, the Militia fired at a crowd of stone-throwing demonstrators, resulting in the death of seven. Certain Militiamen even shaved their beards and wore civilian clothing to blend in with the protestors in order to better attack them, claims Iranian politics specialist Mehdi Khalaji. The Basij Militia also went as far as to infiltrate Tehran University and “ransack student rooms” in reaction to earlier violent student protesting directed at them, wounding students in the process. The forceful and aggressive nature of the Militia caused some political analysts to even call the election a military

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coup. Iranian affairs expert Rasool Nafisi deemed the regime after its handling of the protests “a regular military security government with a façade of a Shiite clerical system.”

The Basij Militia, under the direction of the IRGC, not only broke human rights codes when taking away the demonstrators’ rights of peaceful assembly, protest, and free speech, but the group also exercised their intelligence capabilities to track down and physically crush “counterrevolutionaries.”

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was also able to indirectly violate human rights through its manipulation of media and communication in the country. It was common for foreign news reports on the election to include a brief statement about the Iranian government’s persistent lockdown on international media. Information sent from Iranians to the outside world was also blocked. The IRGC issued a stern command through the state news service for websites and blogs covering the election aftermath to remove anything that would encourage or create unrest. Foreign reporters were at one point kept from leaving their offices to report on the street. Without outside sources providing their own account of the event, there is room for bias and unwarranted censorship, which is exactly the case in Iran. The country’s official news source, the Islamic Republic News Agency, is run by the government’s National Guidance Ministry. This prevents any assurance of balanced and fair news coverage.

In November of 2009, some Iranian news sites announced the IRGC’s plan to launch its own news agency, Atlas, by March of next year. As many suspect, the creation of an IRGC-operated news organization would allow the Guard to maintain tight control over

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“counternarrative reports” on anything about the regime. Furthermore, this would let the IRGC manage where the information is going. Essentially, Atlas would provide the Iranian government’s “official” accounts of news events for the rest of the world and its citizens to read. This would potentially be a misrepresentation of the situation in Iran and would give a biased account of current events from the perspective of the regime. As an intelligence organization, the IRGC already collects domestic information. With its own news agency, it will now control how information is being distributed to the public. Having gained so much political power, truly hegemonic power over Iranians, the Guard could theoretically maliciously break human rights norms and laws without the world really knowing the truth or knowing at all.

Electronic jamming by “ground-based interference” done by the Guard during the election blocked such respected news channels as BBC’s World News and Persian TV. Yahoo Messenger, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs were practically the only means of communication for Iranians during the election, and the IRGC also attempted to shut down these sites. However, many used proxy sites to sidestep these filters. Iranian blogging communities are one of the top ten most active in the world because of the government’s tight censorship of media entering and exiting the country. Taking away a vital part of how these citizens openly communicate within and outside the country further impedes their basic right of free speech and to access information.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s relationship with the IRGC brings another dynamic to the group’s powerful presence in Iranian society. Ahmadinejad served as a member for two years in different posts including leader of an engineering unit and as a member of the Basij

Militia and the IRGC’s secret intelligence unit, respectively. As a former member, Ahmadinejad made contacts, many of whom later became supporters during his first presidential election in 2005. His past service also proved beneficial for the IRGC when, as president, he assigned many members and former members influential roles within the government such as cabinet members. After the March 2008 general elections, one-third of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis) was represented by IRGC members and twenty of the thirty provinces elected governors who were IRGC members. Furthermore, for the first time ever, IRGC members held positions in embassies in Western capitals and the United Nations in New York.

In August of 2009, Ahmadinejad nominated Heidar Moslehi as his Minister of Intelligence for the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Moslehi previously served as “adviser for clerical affairs” during Ahmadinejad’s first term as president. Moslehi’s association with the Basij Militia, as a former member, raises some questions regarding how he will run the MOIS. Because the Basij Militia reports directly to the IRGC, it is probable that the IRGC will gain even more informal authority within the governmental structure, maybe even over the MOIS, now that he is Minister of Intelligence. This personal tie to the IRGC presents some interesting issues concerning the organization and authority of the IRGC in relation to the rest of the Iranian government, especially since former reformist President Mohammad Khatami was not a former guard and had anything but a friendly relationship with the group.

19 Taheri 245.
Ahmadinejad was a former member, there are organic elements of loyalty and the formation of cliques within the governmental institutions that add to the IRGC’s informal power. 

Aside from personal favors, Ahmadinejad, as the newly elected president, gave about $10 billion in contracts to the IRGC, thus cementing complete support from the Guard. The sense of familiarity and loyalty between the two parties undoubtedly increased the IRGC’s informal authority among the regime and the people. Now, the group has the president on its side. Oftentimes, this makes it much easier to get things done and carry out planned activities because no one is questioning every step taken.

June of 2009 was not the first time the IRGC was directly involved in an election. In the 2005 presidential election, the Guard allegedly stuffed ballot boxes for Ahmadinejad. In South Khorasan, 298,000 votes were counted even though there were only 270,000 eligible voters. Revolutionary Guard commander Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr even admitted that the Guard did, in fact, have a role in altering election results. It is highly likely the IRGC did commit voting fraud for the 2009 election as well, though their attacks on demonstrators received more attention and coverage. And although it is not clear whether Ahmadinejad asked the IRGC to alter election results or threaten “dissenters,” the group does undoubtedly have the capacity and the President’s approval to conduct domestic intelligence on protestors, in their eyes, for the sake of preserving the Revolution.

The affect and impact the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had on Iranian human rights were very negative. The country, in electing a new president, attempted to hold fair and free elections. The Guard’s arbitrary arrests and harassment of protestors reinforced the kind of repression the regime should be abandoning. If Iran is seriously trying to modernize and

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22 Naji 258.
23 Naji 73.
liberalize, it must first rid of its dangerously powerful security forces. The intelligence used by
the IRGC was for wrong intentions. The group was targeting and silencing civil society to make
certain Moussavi would not win. Neglecting the democratic and political rights of the protestors,
the IRGC hoped it would quell the unrest. However, civil society fought back in mass. Most of
the protestors were supporters of Moussavi, the youth. Almost seventy-five percent of Iran’s


Takeyh, Ray. “Iran at a Crossroads.” Middle East Journal 57.1 (2003): 42. JSTOR. Web. 20 November 2009.} The youth population, therefore, poses a formidable threat to
the current regime because of their outspoken and politically active nature. In one of the most
moving parts of the unrest, a young Iranian named Neda Agha-Soltan was shot, and subsequently


Takeyh, Ray. “Iran at a Crossroads.” Middle East Journal 57.1 (2003): 42. JSTOR. Web. 20 November 2009.} Neda and her death, which was caught on video,
became international symbols of the protests. The IRGC’s handling of the election protests only
brought more attention to the country’s disregard for human rights.

Notable Middle East scholar Ray Takeyh aptly summarizes the current state of affairs of
the country: “…Iran is entering a period of uncertainty and potential unrest. The critical question
This clash could turn into another bloody revolution, this time led by the youth and intellectuals.
Although the IRGC is gaining more informal power within the government because of its ties to
Ahmadinejad, it is uncertain whether it can continue its repression. Civil society is growing
stronger and is unafraid to fight back, as demonstrated with the amount of protest during the
election. The intelligence acts done by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the
election managed to hinder Iranian human rights because it further disillusioned civil society about trusting or respecting government legitimacy (or lack of) as well as attract international scrutiny and criticism of the country’s backwards policies for liberalization and modernization.


