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# Authorization Denied: The high cost of the public expression of dissent in Iran

July 9, 2009

**1999: "There was great commotion going on at the Shariati Hospital. God is my witness that one of the students had a 15 centimeter wide crack in his head. Many lay there with broken hands and feet. When one of our friends about whom we had had no news arrived, we saw that his clothes were torn into pieces, he bore the marks of four knife stabs on his waist, and one side of his face was swollen and bruised."**

-Student's testimony on the police and militia raid of Tehran University dormitories, The night of July 8 to 9, 1999, in Iran the 18th of Tir.

**2009: "In the most savage attack, which occurred on the evening of Sunday, June 13, the forces of Ansar, plainclothes militia, and the guards began a widespread and well-coordinated attack on the Tehran University campus. These individuals carried various weapons, including long daggers and axes. ... They [also] set the students' living quarters on fire, and virtually recreated another 18<sup>th</sup> of Tir, [this time] with broader dimensions, greater filth, and brutality. Once again, the students' dormitories were blown up and their innocent blood was left on the walls".**

-[Statement by the "Office for Consolidating Unity"](#), an umbrella organization of university Islamic associations, June 16, 2009.

Following the June 12, 2009, presidential elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new episode of massive human rights violations unfolded before the world. Iranian citizens took to the streets [to protest peacefully against electoral fraud](#). The government responded by cutting off many means of communication inside Iran, sequestering foreign journalists, and giving free reign to the Bassij paramilitary force and plainclothes militias to beat up and shoot at protesters. The names of at least 34 victims, mostly killed by gunshots in the week following the elections, have been reported. The real number is believed to be higher. Thousands of peaceful citizens and activists have been arrested, and the crackdown continues unabated.

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Students were among the first to protest these election results. [They were also the first to be targeted by government forces.](#) On the night of June 13, forces of Ansar Hezbollah, the plainclothes militia, and security forces raided the dormitories of Tehran University. Men's and women's dorms were both raided. The reports on the casualties vary, but there is at least [one confirmed death](#), and scores of students were injured or arrested. Similar attacks took place in dormitories at other universities around the country.

This is not the first time students have been punished for expressing their views or for protesting in public. In Iran – in the absence of legal alternatives or safe forums – dormitories have become gathering places where current political and human rights-related issues are discussed. [Students are often at the forefront of the struggle for human rights](#) and frequently the [target of state-sponsored violence.](#)

Ten years ago today, [plainclothes militia, Ansar Hezbollah, and security forces raided several dormitory buildings at Tehran University](#) to punish students who had peacefully protested on July 8, 1999, against increasing restrictions on the press. Attackers armed with guns, clubs, and chains targeted protesters who had returned to their dorms, as well as students who were sleeping. Eyewitnesses likened the attack to an earthquake – shattering doors, windows, glass, and furniture. These material losses were not the most serious consequence of this state-sponsored “earthquake,” which left scores of students with broken bones, stab wounds, and other serious injuries. The casualties were higher in a similar attack on the dormitories of the University of Tabriz.

Later that day, angered by what they saw as a punishment for exercising their right to peaceful assembly, students took the protest to the street outside the university. They were joined by thousands of outraged Iranian citizens. The protest was violently suppressed and, in the process, an unknown number of protesters were gunned down. Among the victims was a 27-year-old pro-democracy activist, [Ezzat Ebrahimnejad](#), the only victim ever officially acknowledged by authorities.

What followed was hardly a surprise to those who witnessed the events of the 1980's in Iran, when revolutionary guards and plainclothes militias attacked peaceful protests and gatherings and caused death and injury to too many Iranian citizens to be counted and remembered. Over the years, the Islamic Republic's authorities have systematically denied authorization for the peaceful gathering of dissidents; have arrested thousands of protesters; have tortured thousands of prisoners, [hoping to extract false confessions](#); and have convicted them for such crimes as waging war against God, being agents of America, or opposing Islam.

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The absurd process during which victims are, thus, transformed into perpetrators is all too familiar to Iranian dissidents and their families. In the case of Ezzat Ebrahimnejad, the absurdity reached a higher level. Ebrahimnejad, the victim of a fatal gunshot, [was tried and convicted](#), after his death, of “acts against the national security of Iran, through unlawful demonstration, engaging in stone-throwing at the guards, and insulting the security office.” The military court that convicted him also [granted impunity](#) to the members and the commander of the security forces who had attacked the University campus:

***“When a demonstration disrupts or weakens the system and insults the regime or sacred Islamic values,” explained the court, “it cannot, by any means, be called an ordinary student protest.” ... “Therefore, the security officers should have acted in compliance with their inherent duties, in reaction to the chaos they confronted, and it seems they did exactly that ....”***

Adding insult to injury, the court, which ordered the Treasury to pay compensation (“blood money”) to 34 of the approximately 400 students who had filed complaints, convicted one member of the security forces for stealing an electric razor. The justice system failed to hold accountable those who ordered and carried out the attack. These rulings served as a clear message to the attackers and to their victims, confirming a long-established pattern, repeated most recently in June 2009.

The case of Ezzat Ebrahimnejad is not exceptional. The fact that witnesses who saw his assailants were intimidated and did not testify; that his family was threatened not to allow students to participate in his funeral or to follow-up on his case; that, for years, his mother and sisters were not allowed to mourn him in the cemetery before, after, or on July 9, the date of his death. Rather, [Ebrahimnejad’s case](#) is representative of a [consistent and ongoing pattern](#), meant to erase the victims of political violence from our memories. And it has proven successful.

In the absence of strong and persistent international solidarity, the cost of seeking justice has been high for students who have filed complaints, for the lawyers who defended them and were charged themselves, and for the hundreds of students and citizens who have been arrested and beaten, year after year, for trying to hold public commemorations of the July 1999 events. This time around, in the context of the 2009 presidential election controversy, the international community has paid more attention, making protesters and their demands relevant. The mobilization of civil society around the world in support of civil society in Iran may very well help to reverse the unfortunate pattern of violence against Iranians who struggle for a better future. But that mobilization must be focused on issues, rooted in human rights, and independent of politics or political concerns.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the July 1999 events, the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation (ABF) pays homage to the memory of all the students who lost their lives, only because they were expressing their views and exercising the right to peacefully assemble. ABF reminds those responsible for these killings that the memory of the victims will be kept alive until the facts are revealed and justice served.

