RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHAT HAPPENS IN-BETWEEN MOBILIZATIONS?
Building and Organizing Contentious Politics at the University of Tehran (2007-2017)

Paola Rivetti
Dublin City University

ABSTRACT: This article investigates contentious politics in authoritarian contexts by looking at the case-study of student activism in the Islamic Republic of Iran. More specifically, the article asks 'how does the Iranian student movement "do" contentious politics?', and argues that a broader approach is needed when examining social movements and mobilizations in authoritarian countries, than one focused on visible mobilizations. In particular, interpersonal relationships, local histories of activism, and what happens 'in-between' episodes of contention should be valued as material carrying analytical gravity. Adopting this approach, the article looks at the continuities and ruptures that have characterized on campus political contention in Iran in the 2000s and 2010s, bringing to the fore the overlooked history of how the student movements have re-organized after major waves of state repression.

KEYWORDS: Iran, Authoritarianism, Students, Activism, Green Movement, Protests, Social Movements

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Paola Rivetti, paola.rivetti@dcu.ie

1. Introduction: Researching Political Contention in Authoritarian Contexts

This article examines the politics of student movements in authoritarian countries, focusing on the Islamic Republic of Iran as a case study. The question underpinning this piece is 'how do student movements "do" contentious politics in authoritarian contexts?' and more specifically the article examines how the students have rebuilt their movements and platforms for contentious politics after state repression.

The article aims to address two issues when it comes to the study of contentious politics. Scholars tend to focus their attention on visible and performative activism in the form of protests, rallies, public criticism, while underestimating 'quieter' forms of contentious politics and what happens after repression. In authoritarian and precarious environments, performative, outward, 'out and loud' activism may cause arrest, incarceration, repression, and thus may not be a viable option. More importantly, less visible forms of political work tend to survive after waves of repression and to 'pass over' social and political capital useful for later waves of contentious politics. This article captures what keeps student activists together during the time of repression and after it. To grasp it, an enlargement of the analytical focus to include time in-between protests as well as personal connections is necessary.

The second issue this article aims to address is the general lack of nuanced scholarship on political mobilizations and student activism in authoritarian contexts. The goal of this article is not only to offer some reflections to fill this gap, but also to move beyond a 'stark' division between the study of social movements in liberal democracies and in authoritarian political systems, with the latter usually relegated to Area Studies. This purpose is upheld in the belief that Area Studies and the study of authoritarianism can make important interventions into disciplinary conversations about social and political mobilizations, which have often overlooked authoritarian politics as a possibility for scientific engagement.

Before moving into the analysis, it necessary to address the label 'authoritarian' in reference to the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is no agreement on the use of this label in this case because of the flexibility of the Iranian regime, which contemplates some level of democratic participation and political competition (Abdolmohammadi and Cama 2015). Scholars have criticised the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism in more general terms, too. Dabène, Geisser, Massardier (2008), Camau and Massardier (2009), Cavatorta (2010), and Teti and Mura (2013) have highlighted how similar governance dynamics characterize nominally different political regimes. Established democracies are becoming less 'democratic' through illiberal policing and the systematic use of the law to reshape the public space conservatively, while authoritarian regimes

'upgrade' and adopt *ad hoc* liberal institutions (Heydemann 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010; Lust and Ndegwa 2010) to provide a veneer of popular legitimacy to the arbitrary nature of governance. In this sense, Linz and Stepan's (1996) classical definition of authoritarianism as limited political pluralism does not seem to work anymore as a distinct definition, because it also is a fitting description of the quality of politics in liberal democracies.

Does it make sense, hence, to talk about discrete authoritarian political systems? Building on the approach taken in another piece (Rivetti and Saeidi 2018), this author maintains that it does make sense. In fact, by the label 'authoritarian' I understand flexible yet heavily controlled systems: although systemic similarities exist between democracy and authoritarianism, there is a variation of degree according to the way in which power circulates in an authoritarian political system, and this has an impact on activism. While it is true that power is coercive in all types of regimes, according to Asef Bayat (2010), what characterizes authoritarian regimes is the 'unevenness of power circulation'. In some countries, state power is 'far weightier, more concentrated, and "thicker," so to speak, than in others,' (44) thereby increasing the likelihood of an authoritarian approach to popular politics and certainly student movements. This means that it is possible to reconcile the use of the label 'authoritarianism' and the flexibility of the Iranian political system. Authoritarian state interventions have in fact dramatically varied over the years in Iran, changing codes, function, and target. Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, 'authoritarian politics' is an analytical category that helps make sense of both the continuity and ruptures in Iranian politics.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Design

Since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2010-2011 and the Green Wave in 2009-2010 in Iran, social movements research has moved from the margins of scholarship about Middle East and North Africa (MENA) politics to the centre of it. The magnitude of the events also prompted scholars of social movements, with limited knowledge about the region, to venture in the examination of the mobilizations (Della Porta, 2014). When it comes to the analysis of social movements in the region, scholars such as Joel Beinin and Fred Vairel (2011), Maha Abdelrahman (2015), Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule (2003), Ellen Lust and Lina Khatib (2014), and Charles Kurzman (2009) have engaged social movement theory emphasizing the specificities that set apart the study of the mobilizations in the region from mobilizations in liberal democracies. Building on extant work by Jack Goldstone, Goodwin and Jasper among the others, they

voiced criticism of the excessive structuralism characterizing the political opportunity structure (POS), used to analyse the formation and development of contentious movements (Meyer 2004; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Charles Kurzman's work (1996, 2009) focused on the emotions, perceptions and meanings of actors engaged in contention to examine the mobilizations. In particular, his notion of perceptions of opportunities was fundamental in explaining the unexpected ways in which in the 1970s the opposition in Iran was able to create opportunities for mobilization in spite of the apparent absence of structural conditions for it, eventually leading the revolutionary cycle of 1977-1979. It follows that, although political limitations and constraints are present and especially so in authoritarian systems, activists find opportunities for mobilization even when these are not evident (Reisinezhad 2015; Tofangsazi 2020). While structural conditions exist and restrict given opportunities for mobilization, they do not deterministically tell us how, when and why protests occur.

Other scholars have adopted a different perspective to interrogate the survival of activism, reasoning in terms of informality and how it enables actors to organize dissent under authoritarian rule, or to hide during political repression and then resurface. Informal political spaces both facilitate demobilization and mobilization. Pascal Menoret (2011) and Marie Duboc (2011) demonstrate how informality facilitates the reorientation of activism in environments where repression has taken the upper hand. During repression, in fact, activists may need to disappear or renegotiate their commitment and informality allows for such changes of direction. Informal activism is, however, a concept difficult to capture. Scholars have deployed several notions alternative or complementary to it. In the wake of the so-called Arab Spring and in an effort to identify the political activities that had necessarily gone on despite the authoritarian regimes, Ellen Lust talked about activities 'below the radar' (2011) based on personal networks, which 'eventually formed an activist infrastructure that played a key role in the Arab Spring' (Khatib and Lust 2014, 5).

This article contributes to this critical scholarship about informality and opportunities for activism by focusing on social movements in between episodes of contention. As Ali Honari (2018) noticed, the scholarship has traditionally concentrated on protests and the relationship between activism and repression. While debates have developed about the consequences of repression, be it the radicalization, demobilization, or tactical shifting of social movements (Biagini 2017), very little effort went into investigating social movements beyond their heydays, when they 'set back' on informality. In Honari's words, 'What happens between episodes—that is, student movement activities that may not be public and are not necessarily disruptive—has been largely ignored by scholars' (129) despite being highly significant. As Jillian Schwedler and Kevan Harris (2016)

noticed too, activism is not always or exclusively directed at the state but it includes a number of other activities – such as maintaining alliances, sharing and circulate knowledge about opportunities and tactics, socializing with potential external allies but also within the same group or movement – which are often overlooked in spite of the fundamental role they have in organizing and mobilizing.

This article aims to fill this gap by highlighting the political agency of the student movement in Iran in creating opportunities for mobilization as well as the significance of local histories of activism for the survival of the movement in-between protests. Using process tracing, I consider key historical processes and events that shaped the development of student-led contentious politics to highlight the creation of opportunities for mobilization. Special attention will be given to the agency of student activists, who carved out space for organizing even in the absence of evident opportunities. Methodologically, I develop my analysis from a close reading of historical sources in combination with interviews, reports and news articles.

3. Creating Opportunities for Mobilization: The Interplay of State and Student Politics

University in Iran has historically served the purpose of strengthening state legitimacy and authority. In modern times, Western and Iranian universities have equally nationalized the masses, trained the political elites, and instilled in the student population a sense of respect for authority and the state. Universities in Iran and elsewhere have mostly been 'missionary' in the sense that, in their capacity as formal institutions, were invested of the mission to perpetuate and justify the *status quo* through science and 'neutral' knowledge. Like in the West, universities however have been the hotbeds of oppositional politics led by more or less structured student organizations, which have criticized the system of higher education and the state on the basis of ideals such as social justice, opposition to the war, free thinking, Marxism, and democracy. Most recent changes in the global economy and the state have impacted Iranian universities structurally, transforming their mission from education to financial self-sustainment. This has radically altered the relation between the university and the student population, transforming the self-representation of students as 'naturally drawn into radical politics' and their political priorities in a conservative way.

The establishment of the first university in Iran dates back to 1934. Ardalan Rezamand (2018) writes that 'The University of Tehran […] promised to be the nation's premiere site for the acquisition and exchange of Western knowledge, providing the know-how

necessary in authoritatively modernizing Iran while weakening the yoke of imperialism, a step toward justice and national self-assertion' (127), underlining the role played by the university as a site for the reproduction of state power. However, despite the strong control exerted by the state on universities, universities have since the early days seen student protests and contention taking place on campuses (Rezamand 2018). Rezamand explains the existence of contentious politics on campuses with the higher political consciousness that students develop because of their education. I suggest that architecture and the organisation of the physical space on campus too reinforce a sense of community, belonging, and common mission among the students, thus engendering the idea that students are politically more aware than the rest of the population. Despite being anecdotal, the testimony of the father of a friend, who was a university student in late 1970s and participated in the revolution, is enlightening.[1] Reza's accounts of those days are filled with references to campus yards, classrooms, and gardens, which constituted the space where political activities, discussions, meetings, and protests took place. Informal spaces on university campus are politically important to students, past and present. Marjan, a Marxist student I met in May 2008 at Tehran University, told me that her group used to meet in the gardens on campus, where they felt more comfortable and safer than in classrooms. The constant reference to space is important because it goes hand in hand with the idea that students 'own' the campus – its buildings, gardens, benches, roads – and that such ownership gives the students a specific and crucial role in society, that is to be the 'political consciousness' of society.[2] Students' self-representation as a group with higher and more refined moral understanding of politics, relevant to society as a whole, is a constant in the history of student activism, although during more recent times, the insistence on students as 'customers' has changed the function that students assign to themselves, in Iran and elsewhere.[3]

Before the revolution, the students played a crucial role in winding up the radical political spirit of the 1970s and leading to the 1979 revolution. In the aftermath of it, universities, and especially the University of Tehran, were a microcosm of the groups and ideological tendencies that mobilized against the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the late 1970s. The campuses were home to this constellation of groups. Therefore, after the revolution, crucial to the stabilization of the new regime was the taming of the universities, especially in the framework of the Islamization project of the state and society. Since the early 1980s, then, while Khomeini's followers occupied central positions within

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[1] I met Reza in 2015, and since then our conversations have taken place during the years regularly.

[2] I met Marjan during a campus visit on 11 May 2008 in Tehran University, Faculty of Sociology.

[3] This is something that has constantly come up in conversations with research participants since 2014, and with my own students in Ireland.

the state and governance structures, universities too had become a *locus* to conquer through the violent expulsion of all groups who did not align to Khomeinism. The occupation of the US Embassy, between November 1979 and January 1981, constituted a fundamental step in the definitive success of the Khomeinists against the other groups and ideological tendencies. It is no coincidence that the occupation was organized and led by Khomeinist university students (Ebtekar and Reed 2000).

The role of the student movement – which by the mid-1980s was expurgated of all liberal, Marxist, nationalist lay groups and had organized into the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat or Office for the Consolidation of Unity, affiliated with the Khomeinist Islamic left – was therefore organic to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and celebrated as such by policy-makers and public intellectuals. It is not surprising, then, that students in Iran have thought of themselves as the leading political group within society for decades.

Student Politics as National Politics in Post-1979 Iran: Cooptation and Autonomy

The hegemony of the Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat (DTV), which was configured as an umbrella organization uniting all Islamic associations active on the single university campuses across Iran, was however challenged after the end of the war in 1988 and the death of Khomeini in 1989. The effort to dismantle DTV's influence was part of a broader plan to reduce the power of the Islamic Left, which the DTV was associated to and which was protected and looked favourably upon by Khomeini himself. In 1992, the Student Basij Units, affiliated with the Islamic right, were introduced in universities and a new student group, the Islamic Association of the Student Basij, was established under the auspices of the post-war rightist government with the goal of containing the influence of the Islamic left on the campuses. The creation of the student Basij Units was accompanied by a law introducing a special quota for Student Basij members to enter universities. In the meantime, the Cultural Revolution Council passed new guidelines for choosing university councils and presidents. Under the new rules, Islamic leftist students were prevented from participating in such councils and from influencing the nomination of the highest university offices and functionaries, who decided on the legal status of student associations. A new office was also established, the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader, which had a permanent presence on campuses (Mahdi 1999, 8-11). Reza Razavi (2009, p. 9, note 7) reports that voices were raised in favour of dismantling the DTV: its formation in the early days of the revolution had been designed to reunite all Islamic groups within universities against Marxist and liberal oppositions. As during

the 1990s the stability of the Islamic Republic was secured, some conservatives argued, the DTV's existence made no sense and thus it had to be dissolved.

The struggle for the control over university politics and student activism made it into national newspapers too. Depending on which factions they sided with, the newspapers supported the DTV or denigrated it. Incidents took place between the DTV and rival student associations, with direct implications for the national politics and factional infights between the Islamic left and right (Saghafi 1373/1994). The relevance of student politics to national politics is telling of the importance given to the DTV and the access to the national political elites the DTV enjoyed.

It follows that the DTV's opportunities for political mobilization were numerous but also constrained by the overarching factional competition between the Islamic left (to which the DTV was associated) and right (to which the DTV was opposed). As the hegemony of the Islamic left was challenged during the 1990s, the DVT could organize protests and criticize the rightist government, but hardly could mobilize outside of the structure of factional competition. This is why Zep Kalb (2019) talks about the DTV as a corporatist organization, whose closeness to the leftist political elite lent it power but offered little opportunity for mobilization outside of factional rivalry. The DTV, however, responded to the pressure coming from the rightist government and the constraints posed by the sponsorship of the Islamic left by democratizing its internal structure (Kalb 2019). In 1993, it decided to abandon the screening of candidates and voters for internal elections, strengthening electoral competition as well as diversifying the ideological preferences of those standing for internal election and the electorate (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2013).

DTV's diversification played a fundamental role in creating the conditions necessary for its gradual distancing from the Islamic left and the ruling government since the late 1990s. This move brought DTV's political activism outside of the factional framework and the competition between the Islamic left and right, strengthening its autonomous political agency. Although it regained a central political role thanks to the election of the left-sponsored candidate Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997, the DTV also grew more and more critical of Khatami's government to the point that Khatami did not support the students when they were repressed for protesting against the forcible closure of the leftist newspaper *Salam* in 1999. According to commentators and observers, Khatami's reluctance to extend his protection to the DTV on this occasion was motivated by the fear that the student protests could cause a general unrest (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2014). Adrienne LeBas (2011) argued that corporatist organizations, which have built up their power and mobilizational capacity over decades of state sponsorship, can be indeed very successful when organizing against the incumbent elite. The DTV,

however, fragmented in consequence of the 1999 repression and its distancing from the Islamic left. After riots lasted for days, and students were violently repressed (Chesh-mandaz-e Iran 1382/2003), the DTV split in two 'tendencies' (*teif*): one more conservative and closer to Khatami and his government, Teif-e Shiraz; and one openly critical of the government and the state, and outlining the duty of opposition that the students have no matter which government is in power, Teif-e Allameh, which was majoritarian.

This split diversified and boosted politics on campus, but the Allameh tendency lost its political centrality and privileged connection to the Islamic left. As Khatami's presidency ended in 2005 and a new presidency started under the leadership of the anti-liberal champion Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on campus progressive activism was flourishing. Marxist, anti-authoritarian, and liberal student groups were active on a number of issues, ranging from women's rights to ethnic minorities and social justice. Issues such as hikes in enrolment fees and other 'student' issues seemed however not to be on the radar of the student movement, which engaged topics such as democracy and human rights in Iran – rather than issues more relevant to the everyday life of students.

4. On Campus Organizing and Student Politics During Ahmadinejad's First Term (2005-2009)

During the first mandate of Ahmadinejad (2005-2009), however, stark anti-activists measures were put in place and a number of commentators talked about a 'second cultural revolution'[4]. Building on a law passed in 1998, the president reinforced the presence of the Bassij Units on campus, expanding their numbers (Golkar 2010). Also, the 1998 law transformed the Basij Units into a military institution, allowing the presence of military forces within the universities. The militarization of universities and the containment of progressive student activism had an architectural and physical nature too, epitomized in the practice of burying the remains of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war on campuses. This practice was sponsored since 2003 by Tehran's municipality as a way to extend state control over university campuses (Elling 2009). In 2005 the newly appointed dean of Tehran Polytechnic, Alireza Rahai, ordered the demolition of the office of the Islamic association, the pro-reform group which was part of the DTV and the core of political activities on campus. Purges also took place. According to students interviewed in 2006, since 2005 more than 100 liberal professors had been forced into retirement,

[4] This is in reference to the first cultural revolution, operated in early 1980s, which purged campuses, university faculty and curricula of all Western influences, creating an 'Islamic' university and higher education.

at least 70 students had been suspended for political activities, and some 30 students had been given warnings. The expulsion of 'trouble-makers' from universities became a widespread costume based on the 'star system', which rated the students' conduct (ICHRI 2011). Students were however able to keep on organizing although mobilizations were less evident and frequent. Interpersonal relations, the diversity of inter-group alliances and a strong sense of mission are the factors that allowed for the survival of the student movement as a whole.

In May 2008, I was invited to the campus of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Tehran University. The invitation followed a long interview I had with a student activist, Mohammad, a member of the Democratic Islamic Association of Tehran University and Medical Sciences at Tehran University (DIA), a group sprung off the local Islamic association at Tehran University and various DTV fragments. The group decided to split from the mother organization because of ideological differences: composed of radical liberals, DIA considered the rest of the Islamic association and the DTV too conservative both socially and economically, oriented towards a socialist-Islamist model, thus they decided to form their own organization in 2006.

Understanding student politics was not easy: in particular what disoriented me the most was the density of on campus activism, which translated into the existence of a massive number of groups whose names, activities, and members often overlapped. I needed a 'guide' on the day, because access to the campus wasn't free and security agents often controlled the student cards of those who crossed the gates of the campus. Mohammad talked to the guards and I could enter. He was a founding member of the DIA, but he also was a member of the Islamic association. He navigated on campus politics with extreme ease, and distributed greetings to a huge number of people we encountered in the spaces we toured: the gardens, the canteen, the corridors between classrooms.

Mohammad had a very peculiar story. Of an extrovert temperament, he had already spent on campus long enough not only to know a great number of younger as well as more seasoned student activists, but he also knew quite well progressive staff members. Because of the repression that hit both students and staff, he explained to me, a sense of solidarity and closeness had developed between the two. Back then, he was in the process of writing his thesis under the supervision of a well-known and respected sociologist, the daughter of a notorious intellectual. In his early years as a university student, he told me, he was a student Bassij. 'I come from a poor family, and becoming a student Bassij was the easiest way for me to get into university'[5].

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[5] All excerpts are dated 10 May 2008.

Mohammad can be considered a gate-keeper. He knew everybody, he was the student of a respected professor. He had been around, on campus, for almost ten years, which he used to build and strengthen connections among political groups. This was also confirmed by the Iranian activists I met in Italy and Turkey after 2009, who were in the process of seeking asylum. All those who passed through the University of Tehran knew him, and remembered him with affection and sympathy because he had a 'non-sectarian attitude: he talked to everybody and respected all points of view. This is very important, when your friends are going through hard times or interrogations […] because you know he has nice words for you'[6]. Mohammad invested in inter-personal and inter-groups relations strongly. During the time we were in contact, he often invited me to parties celebrating somebody's release from prison or the birthday of somebody held in prison, regardless of which group the jailed activists belonged to.

The construction of his reputation took Mohammad a long time spent in meetings, assemblies, and hanging out on campus. Between late February and July, long and warm days are in fact the perfect timing to socialize: the gardens, the coffee shop, and the cool corridors of the university buildings are populated by students, who are more relaxed and less busy than during the Winter session. In addition, his older age, the fact that he was considered to be the custodian of old stories, secrets, and knowledge about the student movement gave him the right credentials and a respected status. He accumulated knowledge thanks to interpersonal connections, and could contribute to strategic discussions by addressing past conflicts between groups or reflecting on past successful or failing strategies.

Mohammad epitomizes the importance of relational connections between groups, which have kept the activist community together in spite of adverse circumstances. Another important factor explaining the resilience of activism was the strong sense of mission all groups shared. This was true although the groups active on campus were extremely diverse. Examples include the Daneshjuyan-e Azadikhah va Barabaritalab, or Students for Freedom and Equality (DAB), which formed as a nationwide network of leftist students at a number of universities in 2006 (Shafshekan 2017, p. 250). Before falling victim of repression, arrests, and the 'star system', this network produced leftist publications and hold large on campus events and demonstrations, including

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[6] Interview to Mojtaba, former member of the Islamic Association at Tehran University and former student in Political Science, Turin (Italy), September 2010. Mojtaba's wife, Farnaz, also knew Mohammad and appreciated him. Mojtaba and Farnaz met at university, were both active in the Islamic Association, fell in love, and got married. Before leaving Tehran, Mojtaba worked in a publishing house and Farnaz as a journalist. They kept contact with their peers in the Islamic Association. Those who continue to be active in politics are a precious contacts for Farnaz, because she is a journalist specialized in political and social affairs.

commemorations of the National Student Day (16 Azar), Labor Day (1 May), and International Women's Day (8 March). The DTV and the local Islamic associations too counted a number of sub-groups, or committees, every of which had specific characteristics. Mohammad introduced me to the members of the Committee for Ethnic Minorities of the local Islamic association, which worked along with the Women's Committee and the Committee for Religious Minorities. They all had political and organizational autonomy, despite working all under the sponsorship of the local Islamic association.

The presence of groups and committees dedicated to issues that went beyond immediate student politics within the Islamic association, was in line with the tradition of the student movement in Iran, which has historically adopted a 'holistic' approach. Building upon a long tradition of student activism celebrated as crucial to the development of the entire society, Iranian student activists in 2007-2008 had big political ambitions. Building upon the supposedly 'universal nature' of student activism, students engaged topics that went beyond the campus life. Their role was political and they wanted to intervene in national politics. Their goal was democratizing Iran, rather than improving the student life and the system of higher education, and this reinforced the shared feeling among the students that they had the quasi-millenaristic mission of leading society into a better political era.

This is not surprising considering the history of the student movement in Iran and the place that successive national governments have (instrumentally) assigned to the student movement and the DTV in particular. The public visibility that the DTV enjoyed – reflected for example in the fact that national newspapers such as the popular *Sharq* dedicated articles and analysis to the DTV and its stands on policy issues – gave the students self-confidence and a strong sense of purpose. During a conversation with some members of the Students for Freedom and Equality (DAB) group from Tehran University in 2007, one of them asked me to have a word in private. He then asked if we had any Marxist political party in Italy I could put them in contact with. He told me that they wanted to increase their international visibility, so that their cause could be endorsed internationally. I asked if this was dangerous. He said that contacts with political or social forces abroad could be dangerous, but he thought that nothing would really happen and that the regime 'wouldn't mind'. This episode illustrates the international ambitions of students and their risk assessment, which was rather relaxed in spite of increased repression since Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, both in general and specifically against DAB.

Self-confidence, the tendency to 'think big' and international, the huge variety of groups with different ideological leaning, suggest that a vivid and dynamic activist environment existed on campus, highlighting the students' agency. In the lead-up of the 2009

presidential election, structural factors too contributed to further mobilize the students who took over the public space on campuses by organizing electoral debates. The June 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad came as a shock and was strongly contested. A protest movement, called Green Movement or Green Wave, emerged from the sustained mobilizations which lasted into the winter of 2009-2010. University and student activists were a prominent feature of the Green Movement. They had survived Ahmadinejad's repression by relying on informal networks organized in groups or around campaigns on different issues, such as women, minorities and students' rights. They also joined the electoral campaign committees of the two candidates (Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi) challenging Ahmadinejad, which represented an opportunity to mobilize after the conservative presidency of Ahmadinejad. Activists could strengthen and enlarge their networks thanks to their participation in the committees, where they could cooperate with like-minded people, marking a change from the oppressive atmosphere created by the government. Electoral committees represented a valuable asset for activists coming from loosely organized groups, as they offered opportunities to establish useful networks, alliances, relationships with the peers and the elite (Rivetti 2020).

The repression that followed the 2009 election and crushed the Green Movement was very strong and caused a general feeling of 'depression' on campuses. Fatemeh, a long-time feminist activism, recalls that 'people just burst into tears in classrooms […] lecturers changed all the time [because of purges], some of our classmates disappeared […] It was very sad, and if I think again of that period, I cry'[7]. The time I spent on the campus of Tehran University in Enqelab Avenue in April 2017 illustrates the strategies put in place by the students to revive and rebuilt their movement after such repression.

5. Reviving The Student Movement After the Repression of the Green Movement

I have visited the central campus of Tehran University in 2017 with Siavash, was a student of Political Science in his final year. We got in contact through a common friend. Siavash was interested in talking about his future perspectives, as he wanted to get a Master degree from a university abroad. His girlfriend was studying Gender Studies in the UK. I asked Siavash how he got interested in politics and he said that his older brother was already active in the Islamic association of Tehran University years before, so he knew he wanted to join the association. He says that he enrolled in Political Science

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[7] Interview with Fatemeh, 9 April 2017, Tehran.

because he knew that students in this faculty are political. Siavash was part of a group of students who revitalized the Islamic association after the election of Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013. Rouhani's election relaxed the atmosphere on campus and those Islamic associations which had their permission to operate revoked or dissolved, could try to retrieve it. In the meanwhile, Siavash explains, a number of activities have taken place to achieve the hardest goal, namely rebuilding the student movement.

We entered the campus on Enqelab Street and roamed around. In the buildings of the Faculty of Law and Political Science, a book exhibition was taking place. It was organized by the *anjoman-e elmi* (scientific association) of the university. While political student groups suffered from repression, scientific and academic organizations could operate and this is why philosophy, science, and literature associations flourished: people kept on networking in this way, Reza – a student active in the revamped Islamic association on campus – explained to me.[8]

Reza said that only a strong repression could tame the students after the Green Movement. 'The public atmosphere (*fasa'ie omumi*) was radical and this also reflected in universities, as the university is not separated from the broader society', he explained[9]. In December 2009, after months of anti-Ahmadinejad agitation by the Green Movement, the regime organized a march in solidarity with the newly re-elected president. Reza explained that it 'was the beginning of the end [of the Green Movement] the [following] Summer [of 2010] further tamed universities' because students left Tehran and the campus, and went on holiday. It was only in September 2010 that students started to organize some activities again, mostly cultural, avoiding political initiatives.

Shirin,[10] a young student from the Elm-o Sannat (Science and Technology) University in Tehran, was elected in 2016 as the representative of the local Islamic association, which had previously been closed down by Ahmadinejad's government. She explains how they succeeded in re-establishing the association years after. 'After the Islamic association (*anjoman-e eslami*) was closed in 2010, students started to organize in the framework of scientific associations (*anjoman-e elmi*). These associations were active in the cultural sphere only. However, in 2016, we succeeded in reopening the Islamic association […] In 2013, when Rouhani was elected, we started to negotiate with the university authorities to reopen the Islamic association. […] the negotiation lasted one year.

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[8] It needs to be noted that the label for political associations, is 'Islamic' associations. In this instance, the adjective 'Islamic' is a synonym to 'political', given the politicization of Islam on university campuses since the 1960s.

[9] Interview with Reza, 18 April 2017, Tehran.

[10] Interview with Shirin, 20 April 2017, Tehran.

Those who were involved in it had to provide tons of documents!'.[11] The students could make a case for the re-establishment of the Islamic association because they wanted to enlarge the type of activities carried out. In particular, Shirin wanted to organize workshops and meetings about the political history of women in Iran: it was safer to do as an Islamic association rather than as a scientific one, which could have been accused of engaging in 'social' activities not in line with its scientific mandate. Significantly, given the ambition of the government led by Rouhani to mark a new era after Ahmadinejad, the university authorities agreed with this line of argument and allowed for the reopening of the association. Since then, the Islamic association of Elm-o Sannat became more and more implied in politics, carving out more opportunities for organizing and mobilizing beyond the campus. The students members of it in fact campaigned for the election of Rouhani in 2017 and also for the Omid (Hope) list – close to Rouhani's camp – at Tehran's local election in 2017.

The scientific associations played a fundamental role in making a platform for organizing and networking available and open to the general student population on campus. While many were aware of the fact that the scientific associations were an expedient in the absence of an alternative, others ignored the existence of the DTV and its past history. Political repression operates, in fact, a dramatic fracture in the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. Repression may erase the memory of the past and disperse the political capital that past generations have struggled to build, unless specific conditions such as family or friendship ties exist. Being aware of this circumstance, activists also organized workshops and talks on the subject of the history of the student movement in Iran. According to Siavash, such initiatives were of fundamental importance to ground student activism in a longer trajectory and to make the students feel part of an important history. Structural difficulties were however present. In particular, Siavash referred to a massive brain drain impoverishing universities in Iran. Those who have connections, in fact, go abroad to study, leaving those with less cultural capital and less money behind. Also, 'today, university students have less economic availability. University fees have risen and most of students are workers, too. This means less time for political work', concluded Siavash. In such circumstances, scientific associations were also fundamental to keep the students' sense of community alive because they offered to student-workers additional opportunities for education for free, thus reaching out to a larger number of students and keeping them engaged.

While during the Ahmadinejad's presidency and in the lead-up of the 2009 election, politics on campus was characterised by presence of diverse active groups, after 2009

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[11] For a detailed description of the process, see Honari (2018).

the number of active groups was smaller and the type of activities was less diverse. Siavash explains that in 2016-2017, students' self-perception was different from the one that students had ten years before.[12] After the repression of 2009-2010 hit society, the sense of empowerment was lost and replaced by depression and disillusion, as referred to by Fatemeh, too. 'I use the notion of post-*mobarezha* (post-activists) to grasp this change and define political people today […] Protests are personal, private. I think that this society is politically poorer [than before]. Emigration is massive, and this has a negative impact on society', reflected Siavash.

While both pre and post-Green Movement the student movement managed to carve out space to organize, the ways in which this has happened vary significantly. While students in 2007-2008 were concerned with national issues such as the democratization of Iran, in 2017 student were less ambitious and self-confident. They worked hard to regain a space for organizing on campus which had previously been taken away from them. Structural conditions were less favourable to the flourishing of a strong, collective movement, and the individualization of the stories of activism noticed by Siavash was part of a larger trend which went well beyond student activism.[13] The relevance of economic demands, as opposed to political ones, is reflected in the dynamics characterizing the protests of early 2018, in which university students played an important role. The protests reflected a societal shift in Iran, where the lower middle classes became more concerned about the lack of economic opportunity, rather than the democratization of the country like in the past (Bayat 2018; Ehsani and Keshavarzian 2018).

In this context, the strategies to revive and keep the student movement together focused on an inward attention to the students' needs, with the goal of reinforcing the grip of the students' associations on the spaces on campus that could be used to organize and carry out political activities. Along with this, opportunities for mobilization and organizing were provided by the close, co-dependent relation between electoral cycles and student activism, as explained by Shirin. The overlap between student activism and electoral politics is a common feature of a number of authoritarian countries, given the central role played by universities in the nation-building process, the symbolic value that students activism has in post-colonial political ecologies, and the importance of cooptation as a regime's strategy to control political contention.

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[12] Interview, 3 August 2016, Tehran.
[13] Interviews, 2016, Tehran. Part of the findings from those interviews are presented and discussed in Rivetti (2016).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article contributes to discussions about activism in authoritarian countries by highlighting two aspects. First, the relevance of the political work 'in-between' episodes of contention, which debunks the two mutually excluding arguments which are often deployed in analysis of activism in the Middle East and North Africa. On the one side, we have the 'resilience argument' which reduces the complexity and ups-and-downs of contentious politics to the notion that 'nevertheless, movements survive'. On the other side, we have the 'repression argument', which argues that movements will never be effective because of hostile structural conditions. The emphasis on what happens 'in the between' helps formulate a more nuanced analysis.

The second aspect this article highlights is that we can focus on what happens *apart* from mobilizations if we adopt an analytical perspective stressing the work of social movements in between mobilizations. Because of authoritarianism and repression, mobilizations may not be the most important element of analysis. Comparative analysis suggests the same. In 2011 Egypt, people mobilized and toppled a long-standing authoritarian regime, but could not resist the return of authoritarianism soon after. To understand why that was the case, what were the weaknesses of the popular revolution of 2011, we need to focus on the long-term dynamics of local activism, beyond revolutionary organizations themselves. Likewise, in order to understand student politics in Iran, we need to broaden up the scope of our analytical gaze to delve into invisible (or less visible) political organizing. In conclusion, this analysis is relevant to understanding contentious politics, its development and unfolding during periods of demobilizations, when movements disengage from visible protesting to engage in other different yet fundamental activities.

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AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:

Paola Rivetti is Associate Professor in Politics of the Middle East and International Relations. She was awarded the 2018 Early-Career Researcher of the Year Prize by the Irish Research Council and in 2018, she received the DCU President's Award for Early-Career Researcher. She published articles in a number of academic journals. She is author of *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement* (Palgrave, 2020). She is co-editor of *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018) and *Continuity and change before and after the Arab uprisings: Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt* (Routledge, 2015).