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Youth policy discourses in post-Revolutionary Iran¹

Youth policy in post-Revolutionary Iran has been shaped by various discourses which have been affected by the broader characteristics of five distinct historical phases. In the *Early post-Revolution* phase (1979-1981), young people played a unique role in the establishment of the Islamic Republic (invention, management and control of various new structures, policies and procedures) as 'pioneers of the Revolution'. The second phase, *Holy Defence*, coincided with the Iraq-Iran war (1981-88) and every aspect of youth life was affected by the related discourse of 'youth as vanguards of the Holy Defence'. The establishment of the 'Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution' and a complete revision in the educational system and other public spheres was another main event of this phase.

With the appearance of some signs of western inspired youth life-styles and culture in the third phase (*Reconstruction: 1989-97*), the 'youth as victims of western culture' discourse dominated youth policy and the 'Supreme Council of Youth' (1992) was established and various policies were adopted to combat it. The fourth phase (*Reforms: 1997-2005*) was influenced by the 'youth as agents of social change and development' discourse. The expansion of youth NGOs, the establishment of several youth related national bodies and the formulation of various youth policies took place under this discourse. The *Principle-ist* administration of President Ahmadinejad (2005-present) introduced the 'youth as agents and beneficiaries of social justice' discourse. Existing youth policies were revised to conform to the revolutionary principles and new policy initiatives were introduced based on this orientation.

Introduction

The 2006 national census indicated that over 35% of the Iran's population were aged 15-29 – almost 25 million young people. Youth population rates have shown a steady growth during recent decades, increasing from 23.4% in 1956 to 35.5% in 2006, although it is estimated that this trend will reverse in the coming decades with the youth population rate falling to around 20% in 2025 and 17% in 2050.

The current strikingly high proportion of young people within the overall population has been one of the major catalysts for the special policy attention paid to young people in Iran over the

past 30 years. However, analysis of the main policy initiatives in the field of youth affairs indicates that these efforts have been shaped to a great extent by the main political agenda of each era rather than by any real evidence-based account of youth needs and priorities. This article endeavours to map the main discourses which have shaped youth policy in Iran in the three decades since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The past thirty years can be divided into five distinct historical phases, each with their own characteristics and discourses. The titles of these phases alongside their time period and the main youth discourse identified with them are outlined in the following table:

Main youth-related discourses in post-Revolution Iran

	Title of the phase	Years	Main Youth Discourse
1	Early post-Revolution	1979-1981	Youth as Pioneers of the Revolution
2	Imposed War (Holy Defence)	1981-1988	Youth as Vanguard of the Holy Defence
3	Reconstruction	1989-1997	Youth as Victims of Western Culture
4	Reforms	1997-2005	Youth as Agents of Social Change & Development
5	Principle-ism	2005-present	Youth as Agents & Beneficiaries of Social Justice

Youth as Pioneers of the Revolution

Young people played a unique role in the Revolution and were considered to be 'pioneers of the Revolution' in the early years immediately after it. Youth involvement in the establishment of the Islamic Republic (the invention, management and control of various new structures, policies and procedures) was endorsed at the highest levels and young people were given strategic responsibilities and posts. Perhaps the most notable policy development with direct impact for youth affairs in this phase was the issuance of Ayatollah Khomeini's mandate to undertake a 'Cultural Revolution' in various aspects of Iranian society. The establishment of Basij² was the other important event during this phase, which has continued to have a significant influence in subsequent phases up to the present day, with young people playing a prominent role on this platform. There was no cross-sectoral structure for youth in this phase.

prominent feature and every aspect of youth life was affected by the related discourse of 'youth as vanguards of the Holy Defence'. However, despite the fact that young people were taking part in the defence voluntarily and enthusiastically based on their religious beliefs and nationalist sentiments³, the adopted practices in using them in the war (especially through Basij) have been criticised by international human rights organisations (notably Amnesty International) on grounds such as underage recruitment and the reliance on 'human wave' attacks. The 'Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution' was established and activated to implement the related decree issued in the previous phase. A complete revision in the educational system (for example, in procedures and textbooks for schools and universities) and other public spheres was one of the main features. This phase, too, did not have any cross-sectoral structure for youth affairs.

Youth as Vanguard of the Holy Defence

The second phase was marked by the beginning and continuation of the Iraq-Iran war (1981-88) known in Iran as the 'Imposed War' or 'Holy Defence'. Again, the active involvement of young people in the administration of this event was a

Youth as Victims of Western Culture

With the ceasefire with Iraq in 1988, the reconstruction phase began. In this third phase (1989-97) the First and Second Five Year Development Plans were formulated and implemented with a focus on reconstruction, economic adjustment and privatisation. Little attention was paid to the diverse range of economic and social youth-related issues

(such as employment, housing, health, and delinquency) in these Plans and it was mainly based on a cultural approach (focusing on the moral upbringing of young people). With the appearance of some signs of western inspired youth life-styles and culture and the perceived weakening of revolutionary values (after the end of highly value loaded phase of the 'Holy Defence'), the issue of 'western cultural invasion' and how to combat it was raised at various policy platforms especially the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution which seized the opportunity to establish the 'Supreme Council of Youth' (1992) to handle the situation. The latter immediately formulated and adopted the 'Educational⁴ Charter of Young Generation' and subsequently formulated the 'Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Youth' based on the Charter and obliged various governmental bodies to devise their action programmes on youth according to its framework. Its secretariat undertook some national studies on youth affairs. Both policy instruments and youth studies adopted an explicit cultural approach.

Youth as Agents of Social Change and Development

The fourth phase started with the election of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997. This phase can be divided into two distinct sub-phases. The first sub-phase (1997-2003) was marked by a change in the approach to youth affairs from a merely cultural to a socio-cultural one. A focus on youth participation especially through youth NGOs alongside 'Youth Dialogue' and youth leisure time were among the main features of this period. In 1999, a 'National Youth Centre' was established as a coordinating body subject to the Supreme Council of Youth. This sub-phase also coincided with the formulation of the Third Five Year Development Plan, which paid more attention to youth issues based on a socio-cultural approach. The 'National Youth Centre' was changed and upgraded into the 'National Youth Organisation' (in 2000) according to this Plan and a 'National Youth NGOs Network' was established.

The second sub-phase (2003-5) was characterised by a notable change in youth policy through adopting a cross-sectoral and multidimensional approach. More emphasis was placed on the importance of youth policy. Firstly, a biennial National Youth Program (2003-2004) was adopted through which the 'National Youth Assembly' (as an umbrella platform for youth NGOs) was established and the 'National Charter of Youth Rights' was adopted.

This period also coincided with important policy development and implementation at national level, which had a considerable impact on the youth field. The adoption of the 'National Instrument of 20-Year Vision of the Country', the Fourth Five Year Development Plan (which paid more attention to youth issues based on a cross-sectoral approach) and the 'General Policies of Article 44 of the Constitution' (a reinterpretation of the Article which allowed for the private sector and civil society to play a more active role) were the main general policy developments. Alongside them were specific policy initiatives in the youth field of which the most notable were the formulation of the National Instrument of 'Youth Situation in 20-Year Vision of the Country', the formulation and adoption of the 'National Cross-Sectoral Instrument of Youth Affairs Development' in accordance with the Fourth Five Year Development Plan, and the formulation and adoption of seven of 13 National Programs to Organise and Facilitate Youth Affairs⁵ based on the National Cross-Sectoral Instrument mentioned above. A 'National Headquarters to Organise Youth Affairs', with several sub-committees composed of the related deputies of the main youth related bodies, was formed in order to achieve further coordination and joined-up action towards the implementation of these policy initiatives.

Youth as Agents and Beneficiaries of Social Justice

The Principle-ist administration of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, the fifth phase in our analysis, began a new phase in public and social policy

development. The main policy approach of the new administration was a return to the values and principles of the Islamic Revolution which were considered to have been ignored during 16 years of 'Reconstruction' and 'Reforms' administrations. Existing policies (especially the Fourth Five Year Development Plan), programmes, and practices were revised and new policies and action plans were devised. The same approach was adopted in the field of youth policy. Although the other six of 13 National Programs to Organise and Facilitate Youth Affairs based on the National Cross-Sectoral Instrument of Youth Affairs Development were formulated and the existing seven Programs were revised to match the new approach, they did not form the basis of the youth-related measures of the government. Instead, the intentions of the new administration were realised and implemented through new policy initiatives like the establishment of the 'Mehr-e Reza Fund' (providing facilities for youth marriage, employment and housing), the 'Maskan-e Mehr Fund' (Compassion Housing Fund), the 'Justice Share', and an explicit support for youth religious activities and organisations (like Basij and cultural centres of mosques). These initiatives furnished President Ahmadinejad with a significant number of votes in the 2009 election from more traditional and religious youth, disadvantaged rural and urban youth as well as young members of organisations such as Basij.

Other notable measures taken during this phase were the upgrading of the Head of the National Youth Organisation from 'Advisor to the President' into 'Deputy President' and giving him Cabinet membership, and the appointment of the 'President's Young Advisors Committee' consisting of Young Advisors to all ministers and heads of governmental bodies.

Conclusion

One of the major issues with regard to youth policy is that despite the almost global rhetoric of evidenced-based policy making, the reality is that policy also evolves for other more

ideological and political reasons. This is clearly the case in Iran and this article has illustrated this through identifying the main youth discourses in post-Revolutionary Iran that have shaped youth policy priorities over the past three decades.

In a synthesis report on youth policy in a number of European countries⁶, it is noted that the conceptualisation, delivery mechanisms and grounded practice of youth policy is invariably contingent on a shifting set of relationships between political dogma and ideology and professional (academic and practitioner) experience and rationality. The prevailing rhetoric of a 'magic triangle' dynamic between youth research, youth policy and evolving practice with young people, in order to more effectively secure youth policy objectives is still a long way from reality in many, if not most countries, including Iran. Ideological and political imperatives often continue to subordinate more rationally-based youth policy making grounded in the evidenced needs and aspirations of young people.

References

- 1 This article is a summary of the paper titled "Youth policy discourses in post-Revolutionary Iran" presented at the XVII ISA (International Sociological Association) World Congress of Sociology "Sociology on the Move" from 11 to 17 July 2010 in Gothenburg, Sweden. The entire research paper can be requested from the authors: atmazinani@yahoo.com and howardw@glam.ac.uk
- 2 Established in November 1979 based on a mandate from the founder of the Islamic Republic, Basij is a paramilitary volunteer force subordinate to the 'Islamic Revolutionary Guard'. The full name of the force is *Nirou-ye Moqavemat-e Basij* (Mobilisation Resistance Force) or *Basij-e Mostaz'afin* (Mobilization of the Oppressed) with its main features and functions being deep loyalty to the supreme leader, providing voluntary public services, morals policing,

engaging in internal security as a law enforcement auxiliary force, and confronting dissident gatherings. The organization has branches in nearly all mosques, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, factories, and governmental and public bodies. The National Youth Organisation of Iran has suggested that about 50% of young people are members of Basij, using its services and taking part in its activities. They become entitled to various benefits, according to their level of activity, such as a reduction in the duration of obligatory military service, access to leisure activities, and more recently, getting 'Justice Shares' – which devolves 40% of the shares of state owned economic firms to the poorest deciles of the population as well as certain other social groups.

- 3 Maintaining this system of beliefs and sentiments in the young generation, in the context of the perceived continuous security threats to the nation, is a key concern for the political system. This issue is a fixed item on the agenda of youth policy as an element of national-religious identity (with Basij being a major player) and is constantly monitored

in national studies. Some recent surveys show that the majority of young respondents (around four-fifths) are ready to defend their country even at the cost of sacrificing their life in case of any foreign attack.

- 4 The word 'educational' is not a proper translation for the original word 'تربیتی', but since it has been formally translated and mentioned in this way, the same translation is cited here. The exact translation for the word is 'moral upbringing' which explicitly points to the cultural and religious connotations of the instrument.
- 5 The titles of these 13 National Programs are: 'youth national and religious identity', 'youth marriage', 'youth leisure times', 'youth housing', 'human development and employment for youth', 'youth participation', 'youth welfare and social security', 'youth health', 'youth and family', 'youth NGOs', 'youth studies development', 'formulating and reviewing youth indicators', 'youth structures and resources reformation'.
- 6 see Williamson, H. (2002), Supporting young people in Europe: principles, policy and practice, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing

Les discours sur la politique de jeunesse dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire

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Dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire, la politique de jeunesse a été modelée par divers discours nourris des caractéristiques générales de cinq phases historiques distinctes. Dans les premières années de la *phase post-révolution* (1979-1981), les jeunes ont joué un rôle unique dans la mise en place de la République islamique (création, gestion et contrôle des diverses nouvelles structures, politiques et procédures), en véritables « pionniers de la Révolution ». La deuxième phase, dite de la *Sainte Défense*, a coïncidé avec la guerre Iran-Irak (1981-88) ; tous les aspects de la vie des jeunes étaient sous-tendus par le discours d'une jeunesse « à l'avant-garde de la Sainte Défense ». Cette période a vu l'établissement d'un Conseil suprême de la révolution culturelle, ainsi qu'une révision complète du système éducatif et d'autres sphères publiques.

Avec l'apparition de certaines manifestations des modes de vie et de la culture à la mode occidentale

dans la troisième phase (*Reconstruction* : 1989-97), l'idée de « jeunes victimes de la culture occidentale » a dominé la politique de jeunesse. Le Conseil suprême de la jeunesse (1992) a été créé, tandis que diverses politiques ont été adoptées pour combattre ces développements. La quatrième phase (*Réformes* : 1997-2005) a été influencée par le discours de « jeunes agents du changement social et du développement ». Cette période s'est caractérisée par l'expansion des ONG de jeunesse, l'établissement de plusieurs instances nationales liées à la jeunesse et la formulation de diverses politiques de jeunesse. L'administration « *principaliste* » du Président Ahmadinejad (2005-aujourd'hui) a introduit le concept de jeunes « agents et bénéficiaires de la justice sociale ». Les politiques de jeunesse en vigueur ont été révisées pour être mises en conformité avec les principes révolutionnaires et de nouvelles initiatives politiques ont été introduites sur la base de cette orientation.

Jugendpolitische Debatten im postrevolutionären Iran

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Jugendpolitik im postrevolutionären Iran wurde durch verschiedene Debatten geprägt, die durch die generellen Merkmale von fünf getrennten geschichtlichen Phasen beeinflusst wurden. In der *frühen postrevolutionären Phase (1979-1981)* spielten Jugendliche als ‚Pioniere der Revolution‘ eine einzigartige Rolle beim Aufbau der Islamischen Republik (Einführung, Verwaltung und Kontrolle verschiedener neuer Strukturen, Politiken und Verfahren). Die zweite Phase, die *heilige Verteidigung*, fiel mit dem Iran-Irak-Krieg (1981-88) zusammen, und jeder Aspekt des Lebens von Jugendlichen war von der diesbezüglichen Debatte über die ‚Jugend als Speerspitze der heiligen Verteidigung‘ betroffen. Die Gründung des ‚Obersten Rates der Kulturrevolution‘ und eine vollständige Überarbeitung des Bildungssystems und anderer öffentlicher Räume bildeten weitere wichtige Ereignisse in dieser Phase.

Mit dem Auftauchen einiger Anzeichen von westlich inspirierten Lebensstilen und Kulturen der Jugend

in der dritten Phase (*Rekonstruktion: 1989-97*) dominierte die Debatte über ‚Jugend als Opfer westlicher Kultur‘ die Jugendpolitik, und es wurde der ‚Oberste Jugendrat‘ (1992) gegründet und verschiedene Politiken zur Bekämpfung dieser Lebensstile verabschiedet. Die vierte Phase (*Reformen: 1997-2005*) wurde beeinflusst durch die Debatte über ‚Jugend als Träger von gesellschaftlichem Wandel und Entwicklung‘. Der Ausbau von nichtstaatlichen Jugendorganisationen, die Gründung von mehreren nationalen Gremien im Jugendbereich und die Formulierung verschiedener Jugendpolitiken fanden im Rahmen dieser Debatte statt. Die Verwaltung von Präsident Achmadinedschad unter der Überschrift *Prinzip-ist* (2005-heute) führte zur Debatte über ‚Jugend als Träger und Nutznießer sozialer Gerechtigkeit‘. Bestehende Jugendpolitiken wurden überarbeitet, um sie auf die revolutionären Grundsätze auszurichten, und neue politische Initiativen wurden auf der Grundlage dieser Orientierung eingeführt.

Дискурсы молодежной политики в пост-революционном Иране

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Молодежная политика в пост-революционном Иране была оформлена различными дискурсами, на которых оказали воздействие характеристики пяти четких исторических фаз. В ранней пост-революционной фазе (1979-1981гг.) молодежи принадлежала уникальная роль в учреждении Исламской Республики (изобретение, управление и контроль различных новых структур, политик и процедур) как «пионеров революции». Вторая фаза, «Святой обороны», совпала с ирако-иранской войной (1981-1988 гг.), и каждый аспект молодежной жизни оказался под воздействием соответствующего дискурса «молодежь как авангард святой обороны». Другим главным событием этого этапа стало учреждение «Верховного совета культурной революции» и полный пересмотр системы образования и других публичных сфер.

С появлением некоторых признаков молодежных жизненных стилей и культуры, инспирированных Западом на третьей фазе (Реконструкция: 1989-97гг.), в молодежной

политике начал доминировать дискурс «молодежь как жертва западной культуры», был учрежден «Верховный совет молодежи» (1992г.), были одобрены различные политики для противодействия этому. Четвертая фаза (Реформы: 1997-2005 гг.) находилась под влиянием дискурса «молодежь как носители социальных изменений и развития». Расширение молодежных неправительственных организаций, учреждение нескольких национальных органов, связанных с молодежью, и формулирование различных молодежных политик происходило под влиянием этого дискурса. Принципилистская администрация Президента Ахмадинежада (с 2005г. по наст. вр.) представили дискурс «молодежь как участник и бенефициар социальной справедливости». Существующие молодежные политики были пересмотрены, чтобы соответствовать революционным принципам, и на основе этой политической ориентации были представлены новые политические инициативы.