Islam, Education, and Human Rights in Iran*

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In the Islamic world, education was traditionally conducted by clergy in *makhtab* or *madrasah*, where students mainly learned to recite the Qur'an. Beginning with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, however, the traditional world was forced to modernize, and education was transformed.

First, the state began to conduct education to mold the population and send teachers to state facilities to teach children, now were grouped by age.

Second, education was popularized. Traditional Islamic education aimed to develop the clergy, and only select males were educated. Modern education, however, aimed for national development, and all children were to be educated.

Third, European secular academic systems, and religious education had to coexist. In many countries, religious education is generally conducted even in public schools although the degree of state intervention and other issues may differ.

How are human rights taught in Iran? I compare textbooks before the Islamic Revolution (1979) and those of the 1990s, focusing on human rights education.[1] Before the revolution, the Shah promoted modernization, particularly by introducing culture and systems from the United States. Social insecurity caused by rapid modernization triggered the Islamic Revolution, which is said to be the forerunner of global Islamic fundamentalism today. It is not a return to tradition but an Islamic revival movement in response to modernization.

Islamicization of Education

Postrevolution education is characterized by a close relationship between education and Islam, not just in religious but also public schools, which significantly influences how human rights are taught in schools. Postrevolution education is not a continuation of traditional Islamic education methods or a return to tradition. Modern, Westernized methods, which replaced traditional Islamic education, were Islamicized after the revolution. In the early stages of modernization, Western education methods were merely transplanted and schools used textbooks translated directly from French. Prerevolution textbooks show teachers wearing modern Western clothes, which was uncommon in everyday life.

After the revolution, however, responsibility for education was not given back to the religious sector. Secular and Islamic religious schools, which were separated in the education reforms, were not reintegrated. Public schools established during modernization are still run by the state.

A visible aspect of Islamicization is the gender-segregated schools. Some were segregated to begin with, but after the revolution, all elementary and high schools were segregated by gender. Many public schools were coeducational, so twice as many schools were required after the revolution. The necessary number of schools could not be secured immediately and some schools had to have classes for boys in the morning and for girls in the afternoon.

Islam forbids females from age 9 to be seen uncovered by men, except their fathers, grand-

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fathers, or brothers. After the revolution, however, even first- and second-grade girls under 9 had to cover their heads with a *maghnae* (a kind of veil) and wear a *mantu*, a coat that flows to the feet. Most girls keep their *maghnae* on during class and must wear both *maghnae* and *mantu* when going out. During physical education, girls wear track suits and sneakers but keep their *maghnae* and *mantu* on, which makes rigorous exercise and fast movement extremely difficult.

The curriculum saw an increase in religious and Qur'an classes, as well as Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. English and Arabic are the major foreign languages taught: English from junior high school, and the Qur'an from first grade of elementary school. First graders, who have not yet learned much Persian, the Iranian language, recite the Qur'an after listening to it on tapes. Islamic history and other religious classes are part of the university entrance exams.

The most striking feature of postrevolution schools is the "moral education teacher (*morabbi-ye tarbiyati* or *morabbi-ye parvareshi*)."[2] The teacher does not teach particular classes but presides over various school events and gives educational guidance. Most school events today are related to Islamic religious events such as the commemoration of the birth of Ali, who is of particular importance to Shiites. The teacher guides and takes the lead in religious events. The primary qualification for such a teacher is his knowledge of Islam.

Other teachers are not allowed to discuss their beliefs with students. Other classes consist mostly of memorizing textbooks. The separation of academic subjects and morals makes it difficult for general teachers to discuss human rights, while moral education teachers can discuss human rights based only on Islam.

Textbooks Before the Islamic Revolution

The role of Islam increased greatly in postrevolution education as reflected in the textbooks. The school system has 5 years of elementary school, 3 years of junior high school, 3 years of senior high school, and 1 preparatory year for university education. I compare social studies textbooks for the fifth and final grade in 1973–1974, before the revolution, and in 1999–2000.

Prerevolution social studies textbooks paid great attention to the Shah. Cover pages were followed by portraits of the Shah, his wife, and son. Textbooks were divided into geography, history, and civics. The history section contained detailed descriptions of the coronation of the Shah, his marriage, the birth of his son, and the modernization policy (White Revolution).

"Human rights" appears in the prerevolution textbooks only in texts on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Civics consisted of "the Iranian system of government (monarchy)," "the separation of powers," "cooperative unions," and "building world peace," including texts on the United Nations, and UDHR, which is described as protecting the rights and freedom of all human beings. The following page shows a photograph of feet in chains, accompanied by UDHR's Articles 4 and 5 (prohibition of slavery and torture). Below that, a photograph shows a man in prison and a woman sorrowfully extending her hands to him, with Articles 9 and 11 (prohibition of arbitrary arrest and detention, right to fair trial). The Shah's accomplishments are emphasized, and his speech at the International Conference on Human Rights held in Teheran is quoted, stating that society will develop when it is free of a minority that restricts the majority.

Prerevolution textbooks on protection of human rights focus mostly on the arbitrary abuse of judicial authority by the minority, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. Ironically, the Shah restricted free speech, detained and tortured opposition members, and concentrated power in the hands of his relatives. The Shah felt most threatened by the Islamic clergy, who traditionally held judicial authority before the Shah's rule, and it is likely that he was implicitly criticizing them.

Postrevolution Textbooks

More recent social studies textbooks for fifth graders show Ayatollah Khomeini, the religious leader since the revolution. Postrevolution textbooks also consist of geography, history, and civics. The history section now takes up important Islamic figures instead of the Shah and describes the Islamic Revolution. The civics section explains "independence," "freedom," and the "Islamic Republic," which were all slogans during the revolution.

The textbooks do not explicitly mention human rights but have chapters on "individual behavior in an Islamic society," including sections on "belief in God," "respect for others," and "frugality and avoidance of waste." Readers are exhorted to be responsible, be kind to others, keep the cities clean, respect life and property, and use everything without waste. The chapter concludes by saying that the country is still on its way to becoming an Islamic society, that everyone must see how far the country has progressed, and that all should improve themselves. The textbooks state not that everybody has human rights but that everybody has the duty to build an Islamic society.

Postrevolution textbooks state that the Islamic Republic is free, but that does not mean that everyone can do as they like.[3] The textbooks state that all societies must have laws, and Iran's laws are Islamic. The textbooks emphasize freedom within the framework of Islamic law, and that the people voluntarily adopted Islam and agreed to follow Islamic law.

Conclusion

The change in education is mirrored in textbooks on human rights. Prerevolution textbooks explain human rights using UDHR, reflecting the Shah's internationalization and United Nations-oriented policy. Postrevolution textbooks, however, do not mention "human rights" but include a section on what an individual in Islamic society should do, which is to act within the overriding framework of Islam.

In 1997, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, who advocated the "rule of law" and "freedom," assumed the presidency, and society was divided between the conservatives, who wanted an Islamic state, and reformists, who called for more freedom and democracy. The education system is also constantly changing. In 2002, the moral education section in the Ministry of Education was abolished, and education is facing further transformation. The influence of moral education teachers will diminish. Discussions on education and human rights will no doubt influence discussions on their universality.

Endnotes

1. Studies on comparisons of prerevolution textbooks in Iran include Sakurai Keiko's *Kakumei Iran no Kyoukasho Media—Isuraamu to Nashonarizumu no Soukoku (Textbook Media in Revolutionary Iran—Conflict between Islam and Nationalism)*, Iwanami-shoten, 1999.

2. For more on moral education teachers, see "Iran-Isuraamu Kyouwa Koku no Gakkou Kyouiku niokeru Kyouiku Houhou to sono Henka (Teaching Methods and their Changes in School Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran)," *Chuutou Isuramu / Afurika Bunka no Shosou to Gengo Kenkyuu (Cultural Aspects and Linguistic Studies of Islamic Middle East / Africa)*, Morita Toyoko, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, 2001, pp. 343–354.

3. For more on "freedom," see Morita Toyoko's "Iran no Shakaika Kyoukasho ni Kakareta Jiyuu—Iran Isuraamu Kakumei Zengo o Hikaku Shite (How Freedom is Discussed in Social Studies Textbooks in Iran—a Comparison of Pre- and Post-Islamic Revolution)," *Heiwa Kenkyuu Seminaa Ronshuu (Collection of Seminars on Peace Studies)*, vol. 2, Nihon Heiwa Gakkai , 1999, pp. 69–79.