

A Study of the Hegemonic Potentials of Iranian Teachers' Collective  
Activism (1920-2023)

by

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## Abstract

The Iranian Teachers' Movement (ITM) is socially and politically one of most important groups and professional associations in contemporary Iran, having its roots in the foundation of modern education originating under the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979). Under severe suppression by both monarchial and Islamic regimes, it has nonetheless grown into a formidable social and political force. The movement was born out of a teachers' protest in 1961 before slipping into a hiatus, until its revival with rich political imagination, as an independent association following the 1979 Revolution. The radical ideas of the first generation of teachers' organic intellectuals, however, could not be realized due to the severe crackdown on all opposition in the 1980s. The movement gradually and incrementally grew back in the 1990s but in a rather fragmented way. The idea of an independent teachers' association or union was revived at this time by the second generation of teachers' organic intellectuals of the early 2000s, known as the "Chalk-holding Teachers" and by establishing the teachers' "guild centers" in various cities. In 2010, the third generation of the teachers' organic intellectuals, called the "Justice-seeking Teachers", turned the ITM into a formidable hegemonic power by restructuring the teachers' discourse based on free education and children's rights in the context of neoliberal cutbacks to public education. The revolutionary uprising of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in 2022 compelled the ITM to confront a historic question, "What is the moral and historical responsibility of teachers in response to this popular uprising?" and "how can the ITM make the diverse demands of participants in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement its own?" This thesis explores hegemonic potentials of ITM through historical and empirical research that is analytically enriched through the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci.

**Keywords:** organic intellectuals, Chalk-holding Teachers, Justice-seeking Teachers, subaltern-centered pedagogy, teachers' potentially hegemonic activism.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- CCGAIT: Coordinating Council of Guild Associations of Iranian Teachers
- ITM: Iranian Teachers' Movement
- I/TTGC: Iran/Tehran Teachers' Guild Center
- TGCs: Teachers' Guild Centers
- TICs: Teachers' Independent Centers

This thesis is dedicated to the teachers who struggle for freedom and justice.

Standing together dumfounded and in wonder  
There is blood. So much blood, the stench of blood  
There is dead, so many dead, so many killed  
Oh, the lovers are also dead and gone  
There is no more love and life  
Making fists with determined steps

They are asking me, "Who are you?"  
I, I am a teacher only a year  
I am Atekeh  
Trying to take the same steps  
On a well trodden road, like the teachers before me

They say,  
What is your desire from this change they call a Revolution?  
Me,  
Only my classroom to teach  
You ever had one!  
No never, this room was theirs  
You will have it in time

Clenching my teeth, scream and cry inside

Atekeh Rajabi

Translated by Hossein Rahmati

## Acknowledgments

The idea of studying the Iranian Teachers' Movement first came to my mind in a private conversation with my economist friend, Dr. Mohammad Maljoo, on the occasion of my translation of *For a Left Populism* by Chantal Mouffe (Akhtaran, 2019). Maljoo was surprised about ignorance of the ITM while in his opinion, the ITM was a long-standing and leading social group. I found his observations fantastic. At that point, I had rather vague ideas about the ITM, especially about the way I should study it until I shared the ideas with Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh. This thesis would not have been possible without his knowledge, leadership, and patience. Long conversations with Dr. Vahabzadeh brought to me new understanding about the ITM. When I was struggling to articulate my vague ideas, he helped me express in a polished way such that the ideas became clearer to me. He is a true follower of Iranian teachers' legendary figure, Samad Behrangi. My gratitude is also extended to my committee members, Dr. Bill Carroll and Dr. Andrew Wender for their patience, thorough reading of my thesis and their insightful comments. To Jim Sparkling and Tim Ball for their flexibility enabling me to strike a balance between my income and cost of living while studying.

Intellectual endeavors are always challenging and require a sense of serenity. My wife Aylar is the sanctuary and a heaven that brings me safety and comfort. I would like to thank her for her contributions to this thesis.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*Winning the majority of the peasant masses means, for the Italian proletariat, making their questions its own from the social point of view.*

Antonio Gramsci (1978:443)

*A guild movement will only achieve its objectives when it can connect its demands to general demands of society.*

Mohsen Emrani (“Connection” 2022)

*Iranian Teachers’ Movement would determine Iran’s future.*

CCGAIT (“Final Resolution” 2022b)

The Iranian Teachers’ Movement (henceforth: ITM) has proven to constitute, socially and politically, one of most important progressive social groups, forming and developing around teachers’ professional associations in contemporary Iran. Through a historical analysis of the ITM, this thesis will examine the potential of the Iranian teachers’ movement to grow into a hegemonic force of the Iranian subaltern. In doing so, it will look at other movements to the extend that they shed light on the potentially leading role of the ITM.

The ITM has its roots in the foundation of state-funded modern education under the Pahlavi Dynasty (est. 1925)—about one-hundred years ago. Since then, as an integral component of Iranian society, the teachers have grown demographically. The teachers’ political significance has also developed despite the ITM’s ebbs and flows. My thesis conceptualizes the historical development of ITM from a subaltern position into a potentially hegemonic group from its origins in the 1920s to the early 2020s. To gain a solid understanding of the ITM’s internal transformations, this thesis explores the group in tandem with its antagonists (authoritative monarchial and Islamic regimes). Focusing especially on the repressive measures of the ruling

Islamists and the impoverishing, neoliberal policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the thesis offers a detailed, contextualized perception of the ITM's historical development.

Elaborating on the internal organizational and intellectual developments of the ITM, my thesis identifies four main intellectual transformations within the ITM: first, the advent of the teachers who came up with the *idea* of movement as a hegemonic force between 1979 and 1981; second, the emergence of the so-called “Chalk-holding Teachers”—a movement within the ITM—who revived the ITM as an *independent* social force in the late 1990s; third, the formation of the “Justice-seeking Teachers” who pushed the ITM towards taking a hegemonic position in the 2010s; and fourth and last, an emerging generation of the teachers' organic intellectuals who have been most affected by the protest movements of the poor, marginalized, and subaltern in November 2019 and in the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. Then, I investigate the discourse of each generation of teachers' organic intellectuals and identify their main differences from the perspective of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The thesis looks at the role of organic intellectuals in building hegemony and poses the question of whether teachers' organic intellectuals can become organic intellectuals of other subaltern groups in Iran. Moreover, by exploring the ITM's plan for education, the thesis sheds light on the role of education, schooling in particular, in building hegemony.

This thesis is inspired by the observation that 2014 and after witnessed the most important period in which the ITM has been moving towards adopting a hegemonic role; the bulk of the history of ITM presented in this thesis focuses on this period. This is when the ITM succeeded in putting forward free universal education as a universal demand and developing a network of connections with both domestic and international civil society organizations.

Employing a complex legal discourse to de-securitize the teachers' collective activism. By de-securitization, I mean blocking, inasmuch as possible, the regime's security encroachment on social movements, the way through which the Islamic regime aims to dismantle any independent collective will. The ITM has created a special committee for providing legal support for arrested teacher activists and a fund to economically support families of imprisoned teachers. All of these creative acts have made the ITM the first and only civil society organization which has been able to mobilize teachers and engage with continuous collective activism under constant security pressure and suppression by the regime.

School students and teachers constitute a significant population. The whole population of school students stood at approximately 15,500,000 in 2021. The total number of all teachers (men and women) with both permanent and temporary appointments stood at 550,000 the majority of them women. The entire personnel working under the Ministry of Education (both educators and non-educators) was approximately 850,000. There are also 850,000 retired teachers. Therefore, the entire population of students and retired and working teachers stood at around 17 million (in 2021): a formidable social force by any account in a country of 84 million.

Despite the century-long collective activism of Iranian teachers and their demographic importance, there is no original, analytical research about the ITM. There are a few studies which have explored specific periods of the ITM. There is no comprehensive study of ITM from its origins (in the 1920s) to the early 2020s. The only book-length work regarding the ITM, in Persian, is titled, *The Movement of Iranian Teachers: The Process of Organization from 1921 to 2020*, by Farangis Bakhtiari (2021). This book contains a selection of teachers' statements, memoirs of teacher activists, and important calendar events but without a reliable chronology.

The book suffers from inconsistent and improper citation and lacks bibliography. The most important issue with Bakhtiari's book is that it does not engage with the ITM as it has been instead, suffering from an ideological dogma, this book looks at, however disjointedly, the ITM from the perspective of Bakhtiari's orthodox Left. As such, there is a huge gap in research that this thesis intends to fill.

Accordingly, this thesis offers a reconstructed history of ITM from the perspective of the hegemonic potentials of teachers' collective activism. As such, the bulk of research involves the study of primary sources of the ITM—including various communiques and press releases of different teachers' associations and groups. A content analysis of these documents is offered when necessary. This key component of the research is complemented heavily by a history of the formation of teachers as a fraction of a social classes well as the history of organized activism of teachers and teachers' associations. This latter component of the research relies on existing secondary literature, in particular sources in Persian, and the thesis will offer a critical review of this body of literature.

The English-speaking reader will notice one of the key terms used in this thesis: the Persian term *senf* plays a central role in the ITM, and it requires clarification. Persian *senf* translates literally into English as "guild." Just like the guilds in ancient times and the medieval guilds in Europe, which will be briefly addressed in the last chapter, in the nineteenth century Iranian craftsmen had formed their guilds to advocate for their collective interests. In modern Iran, the term was retained politically, ironically to suggest that a certain profession is not political! Although collective associations and labour unions flourished temporarily in small windows of controlled freedom (e.g., between 1941 and 1953, partly under Dr. Mohammad

Mosaddegh's premiership, or right after the revolution between 1979 and 1981) they were crushed by the Iranian state and never tolerated by the Iranian state. In this context, activists always deployed this term to convey to the state that their association was merely about economic interests of membership and had no political aspirations. As regards ITM, this term first appeared in the late 1990s when the teacher-activists known as the "Chalk-holding Teachers" tried to reimagine the ITM anew after the state crackdown of the 1980s that had crushed the previous teachers' movement. To understand what "guild" means in the ITM, it is crucial to contextualize it into the history of teachers' collective action. The Chalk-holding Teachers came up with the idea of creating the Teachers' *Guild* Centers in cities in order to distinguish themselves, as *independent* associations, from the teachers' organizations aligned with the regime and its political parties (in Persian, such organizations are called "yellow"). In this context, guild means that teachers' organization represents and defends the interests of teachers and students. Additionally, since the Islamic regime annihilates any oppositional or independent collective will under the pretext of alleged political subversion, the Chalk-holding Teachers, by highlighting the guild character of ITM, sent this message to the Islamic regime and the body of teachers that the objective of Teachers' Guild Centers was to advocate for teachers' (and then students') demands. From this point of view, guild is a code for de-securitization and de-criminalization of independent collective action under the oppressive Islamic regime. When I refer to de-securitization, I mean discovering a method to counteract the regime's strategy of depicting independent collective will as a threat to national security in order to annihilate it. Furthermore, guilds have been historically responsible for managing and controlling their own affairs. When it comes to education, the concept of guild or *senfi* becomes very radical. Guild

means that the Chalk-holding Teachers attempted to manage education by councils of teacher-students, pushing back the authorities. In this sense, with the context of the Iranian history of activism, the term guild implicitly means independent, but in the ITM it gradually connoted being potentially hegemonic. A fascinating twist in deploying concepts socially and collectively!

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two offers a brief literature review pertaining to Iranian teachers' activism and education-related issues in contemporary Iranian history as sporadically addressed in work of distinguished Iranian researchers. Chapter three engages with Gramsci's theory of hegemony to figure out how hegemony works. Then I look at the role of education and organic intellectuals in building hegemony. Although this chapter aims at grasping the way hegemony is constructed and exercised by ruling classes to subaltern groups, its underlying question is to understand the historical development of ITM from a subaltern group to a potentially hegemonic force. Thereby, I seek to shed light on the potentials of the ITM to rise a hegemonic position to lead other subaltern groups in their democratic struggles against the Islamic regime. Chapter four, five and six delve into the history of ITM from the 1920s to today. Chapter four investigates the origins of the ITM from the 1920s to the 1979 revolution. Chapter five explores the ITM after the 1979 revolution until 2016. This period contains three main phases: first, from 1979-1981 when the idea of ITM as a hegemonic force came into existence; second, from the 1980s to the late 1990s, which was characterized by violent crackdown on all independent groups by the Islamic regime; third, from 1998 to 2016. This phase starts with reorganization of the ITM by Chalk-holding Teachers and their emphasis on *independence* or *autonomy* of teachers' activism in 1998. It ends in 2016 when the third generation of teachers' organic intellectuals, i.e., the so-called "Justice-

seeking Teachers” entered the leadership positions of ITM. The Justice-seeking Teachers shifted the ITM towards a hegemonic position. Chapter six investigates the ITM under the leadership of Justice-seeking Teachers from 2016 onwards. Chapter seven analyzes the historical development of the ITM from the lens of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. It also deals with the most urgent issue before Iranian subaltern groups: alliance. The conclusion summarizes the historical achievements of the ITM as an alternative hegemonic force. Reiterating CCGAIT’s statement that the ITM will determine Iran’s future, the thesis concludes that future opening in the country’s political life will only further propel the teachers into the leadership position of subaltern groups.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The scholarly literature in English on the teachers' movement in Iran is nearly non-existent, and the sources that allude to this movement in different ways and to different lengths are few and far between.

The general historiography of modern Iran contains sporadic allusions to this movement, depending on the angle and interests of the historian. In his book *Iran: A Modern History* (2017), Abbas Amanat traces the roots of Iranian modernity, or as he emphasizes, “modernities,” from the Safavid Empire (1501-1736) and follows it all the way to the Islamic Republic of Iran (est. 1979). His emphasis is nonetheless on the period of rapid modernization in the twentieth century. His periodization is based on the ruling dynasties since in his opinion the dynasties were emblematic of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural shifts. At the same time, he pays attention to the socioeconomic and cultural trends, including social movements, political parties, strikes and so on in shaping the Iranian history in this period. He addresses Iranian political parties such as the communist Tudeh Party or the People's Fada'i Guerrillas, as well as the Islamist *Fada'iyan-e Islam*, among other groups. In this context, he mentions the great influence of the Tudeh Party in the 1940s and 1950s among schoolteachers, university students, labour organizers, and so on. He also addresses the Literacy Corps in the 1960s and 1970s as a part of the state-run rural education program requiring that high school or university graduates teach in rural areas in lieu of their mandatory, two-year military service. Amanat believes that “a degree of social alienation was prevalent among the young Literacy Corps teachers” (2017:586). Amanat mentions the active role of teachers, students, and university professors in the 1979 revolution. In the autumn of 1978, teachers, students, and university professors went on strike. He treats schoolteachers belonging to the lower middle class along with the downtrodden: “The

downtrodden [those who were down and out among the rural immigrants and dismayed by the affluent lifestyle of the elite] aside, the term [the urban poor] also included the somewhat better-off but still discontent sectors of the lower middle classes: shopkeepers, public school teachers, technicians, and low-paid government employees” (Amanat 2017:768). All in all, proper attention to the teachers as a social class as well as their movements is absent in his nearly 1000-page historiography.

In his book *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (1982), Ervand Abrahamian analyzes the social bases of Iranian politics from the eve of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1909) to the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979. Among diverse Iranian social forces, he focuses especially on the Leftist parties, especially the communist Tudeh Party, which was a secular, Marxist-Leninist party with pro-Soviet tendencies. Abrahamian explores the social base of the Tudeh Party, in which the teachers turned out to have a significant role.

Teachers played a role in the higher ranks of all political parties. For example, “Eager to develop from a parliamentary caucus into a nationwide party, the Socialists opened branches in a number of cities.... A group of local intellectuals in Rasht, headed by a high school teacher named Hussein Jowdat, formed the Cultural Society. A similar group in Qazvin, also led by a teacher, formed the Educational Society” (Abrahamian 1982:127). The interesting point is the strong organic relationships between the Tudeh Party and teachers in the 1940s. Teachers constituted a main focus for the Tudeh, and the Party influenced the teachers. “The Women’s Organization of the Tudeh Party focused its activities on students, teachers, and other modern educated women” (Abrahamian 1982:335). Moreover, not only the Tudeh Party but other Leftist parties, too, played a significant role in founding the teachers’ unions. For instance, “[Reza]

Rusta, the most important figure in the history of the Iranian labor movement... helped establish the first teachers' union" (Abrahamian 1982:287). "Amir-Khizi, the second oldest member of the committee of the Socialist party,... participated in the formation of the first teachers' union in Tehran" (Abrahamian 1982:288). The Tudeh party even tried to coordinate teachers' union actions. "In March 1947, when elementary-school teachers stopped work for better salaries, the Tudeh encouraged secondary-school teachers to do the same" (Abrahamian 1982:339). The Communists, with the help of the Socialists, created *Shawra-ye Mutahedeh Ittehadiehha-ye Kargaran* (Central Council of Federated Trade Unions, CCITU). The CCITU recruited members from various unions including printers, shoemakers, and bakery assistants. It won over the union of teachers, and led strikes among various union including among teachers for more pay (Abrahamian 1982:129).

The relationship between teachers and the Leftist parties has been mutual. "*Sukhan*, the organ of the Society of Degree Holders from Teachers' College, best summed up the attitudes of the radical intellectuals inside and outside the Tudeh party" (Abrahamian 1982:406). In sum, the impact of the Leftist parties on teachers and vice versa was so strong that "by late 1951, the university administration was warning that 75 percent of the incoming freshmen were communists because of political indoctrination by their high-school teachers" (Abrahamian 1982:333).

In his other seminal work, *A History of Modern Iran* (2008), Abrahamian explores major transformations in Iran in the 20th century. Abrahamian tries to explain how Iran has "got to the present from the nineteenth century" (2008:1) from the perspective of transformations governments brought about in that period. There are three main episodes in his book: first, "the

Iron Fist of Reza Shah;” second, “Muhammad Reza Shah’s White Revolution;” and thirdly, “the Islamic Republic”. Reza Shah (1925-1941) came to power in a country where “the government had little presence outside the capital” (Abrahamian 2008:65). “Reza Shah built his new state on two main pillars: the military and the bureaucracy” (Abrahamian 2008:66). The expansion of the bureaucracy showed remarkable progress (Abrahamian 2008:70). Thanks to Reza Shah’s state-building, the salaried middle-class came into existence.

Education was one of the fields which experienced remarkable expansion. While the education budget was 7 million qrans/rials in 1925-26, it increased to 194 million in 1940-1941 (Abrahamian 2008:69). The same expansion can be seen in public education. While pupils in primary schools were numbered 7,000 in 1923-1924, the number reached 210,000 in 1940-1941 (Abrahamian 2008:84). Similarly, Reza Shah introduced a set of initiatives aimed at fostering a sense of uniformity and shared loyalty to both himself and the state, which included the introduction of a new dress code (Abrahamian 2008:83). Reza Shah announced that “female teachers could no longer come to school with head coverings” (Abrahamian 2008:94).

In many ways, Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign (1941-1979) “was a continuation of his father’s – with some minor variations” (Abrahamian 2008:123). “The Shah’s expansion of the state bureaucracy was equally impressive” (Abrahamian 2008:126). “By 1975, the state employed more than 304,000 civil servants” (Abrahamian 2008:126). “The ministries of education and higher education together employed 515,000, and administered 26,000 primary schools, 1,850 secondary schools, 750 vocational schools, and 13 universities” (Abrahamian 2008:126).

While initially starting with modest programs intended to build upon those initiated by his father, Mohammad Reza Shah accelerated his efforts after 1963 with the launch of the White Revolution (Abrahamian 2008:131). A Literacy Corps was deemed an essential component of the White Revolution, contributing to a notable increase in the literacy rate from 26 to 42 percent. (Abrahamian 2008:134). Following the initiation of the White Revolution, the quantity of educational institutions tripled. Enrollment figures witnessed substantial growth, with kindergartens increasing from 13,300 to 221,990; elementary schools from 1,640,000 to 4,080,000; secondary schools from 370,000 to 741,000; and vocational schools from 14,240 to 227,000. (Abrahamian 2008:134).

The changes brought by the White Revolution produced a complex class structure. While the salaried middle-class had come into existence under Reza Shah, it became fully established in the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. The middle layers comprised two distinctly different classes: the traditional middle class, represented by the bazaar petty-bourgeoisie, and a contemporary middle class consisting of white-collar workers and college-educated professionals (Abrahamian 2008:138). The salaried middle class consisted of over 700,000 individuals, constituting approximately nine percent of the total working population (Abrahamian 2008:138). The overall figure surpassed one million, encompassing college students and other individuals aspiring to be part of this class (Abrahamian 2008:138).

After the 1979 Revolution, bureaucracy and education did continually grow. The central bureaucracy expanded from twenty ministries employing 304,000 civil servants in 1979 to twenty-six ministries with 850,000 civil servants in 1982. Subsequently, it continued to grow, reaching over a million civil servants by 2004 (Abrahamian 2008:169). One of the newly

established ministries was the Ministry of Higher Education (Abrahamian 2008:169).

The salaried middle class emerged as a significant social force, as evidenced by Mahmud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election, largely attributed to the fact that the majority of the salaried middle class chose not to participate (Abrahamian 2008:193).

The new revolutionary regime initiated a "Cultural Revolution" aimed at countering "cultural imperialism" (Abrahamian 2008:177), which was code for oppression of any opposition in universities. It systematically removed secular teachers from the educational system through a purge (Abrahamian 2008:177). Interestingly, the new regime imposed a stringent "Islamic code of public appearance" on everyone. Men were discouraged from wearing ties, and women were obligated to wear either scarves and long coats, or preferably, the full chador – the traditional black cover favored by Islamists that envelops the body from head to toe (Abrahamian 2008:138). In a bid to garner support from the rural areas, the new regime initiated an ambitious literacy campaign targeted at the peasantry (Abrahamian 2008:180). As a result, the literacy rate doubled, nearly eliminating illiteracy among individuals aged six to twenty-nine (Abrahamian 2008:180). By 2000, 97 percent of individuals aged between six and twenty-nine were literate. Moreover, women constituted 63 percent of university students and 54 percent of college enrollment (Abrahamian 2008:189).

By contrast to Abrahamian's main focus on government, Asef Bayat does not "focus simply on the elites, the state, and regime change, but on what the revolution meant to the ordinary people, to the poor, the marginalized youth, women and other subaltern groups in their everyday life" (Bayat 2021:1). In other words, he "highlights the social side of the revolutions and looks at the subjectivities, practices, and popular politics at the grassroots level" (Bayat

2021:3). In his book *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of Arab Spring* (2021), Bayat argues that the structural changes in the Arab societies since the 1990s, such as educational expansion, urbanization, and aggressive economic liberalization, have brought a new class which Bayat called “middle-class poor” (Bayat 2021:55). Bayat argues that middle-class poor is “a paradoxical class that enjoyed college degrees, knowledge of the world, and middle-class dreams but was pushed by economic deprivation to live the life of the poor in the slums and subsist on precarious jobs” (Bayat 2021:9). He treats “government employees, teachers, and professionals”, among others, as “the middle-class poor” (Bayat 2017:97)—professionals and those with university degrees—distinct from the working-class. Bayat maintains that “in the Arab revolutions, the poor and working classes had lost their potential (Marxist) allies as there were no such parties anymore but had found new ‘organic intellectuals’ among the ‘middle-class poor’:  
“*deprived teachers*, lawyers, state employees, and other college graduates, who brought oppositional politics into their sprawling neighborhoods” (Bayat 2021:110; my emphasis). Thus, Bayat takes teachers as the middle-class poor and socially-politically as an organic intellectual of the middle-class poor. Then, he considers the roles of this new alliance of the working and poor class in the Arab Spring. Regarding Tunis, he writes, “the local catalysts of the better-off UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) members, the Leftist teachers in particular, brought to the surface the hidden politics of the poor and working class” (Bayat 2021:87). He highlights the unique role of the teachers in the Tunisian Jasmine revolution. “In Tunis, the teachers’ strikes would display even more powerfully the popular quest to realize revolutionary expectation for meaningful change. More than 90,000 teachers in secondary education would go on general strike in January 2015 to realize their demands for welfare benefits. They succeeded when the

parliament brokered a deal. Within three months, 63,000 teachers, this time in primary schools, organized a national strike to push for pay rise and benefits. As teachers' protests continued, college professors were already busy organizing their own stoppage over professional claims" (Bayat 2021:125).

Teachers also played a leading role in Libya. In Libya, "the leadership of the Libyan uprising, the National Transitional Council, was composed not of Islamists or al-Qaeda members but doctors, lawyers, teachers, and some defectors from the Qaddafi regime who suddenly found themselves leading a revolution" (Bayat 2017:147). Although Bayat explores vividly the new middle class-poor and its capacities to lead social protests, he does not investigate specifically teachers as the new organic intellectuals of the subaltern, and more specifically, Iranian Teachers' Movement developments after the 1979 Revolutions. These concepts relate to Iranian reality also: as the chapters on the Iranian Teachers Movement will argue, Iranian teachers also wonder if they are a part of the middle-class or working-class, and in either case, the poor.

In her book, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of the Revolution*, Nikki R. Keddie (2003) explores the political, cultural, and social changes of modern Iran over the past quarter-century. She (2003) investigates the most significant issues in modern Iran, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), and the effects of 9/11 and Iran's relationship with the U.S. and development in education, health care, the arts, and the role of women in this period of Iranian modern history. Keddie (2003) addresses the most important political action of Iranian teachers before the 1979 revolution to be the strikes of the teachers led by Mohammad Derakhshesh in 1961 (see chapter 4). "Tehran's schoolteachers, led by a member of Tehran's independent opposition, Mohammad Derakhshesh, went on strike and demonstrated before the

Majles for higher pay. During the demonstration two teachers were killed by the police. This was the breaking point, and there were rumors of a military coup backed by the shah or, alternatively, of serious royal concessions” (Keddie 2003:142). It is worth noting that according to different reports, only one teacher named Dr. Abolhasan Khanali was killed by the police. One of the political consequences of the teachers’ action was the formation of a new government led by Ali Amini, the ablest member of the independent opposition. “Amini settled the teachers’ strike by awarding the teachers a pay raise and making their leader, Derakhshesh, minister of education” (Keddie 2003:142).

In the tense struggles of 1978, which led to the 1979 Revolution, teachers were significantly active. The interesting point is that they were financially supported by the bazaar merchants. “Bazaaris also helped to support families of victims of 1978’s struggles and provided financial support for the antiregime strikes that began in May 1978 among university students and teachers and in the fall spread to the workers and civil servants” (Keddie 2003:228). After the Revolution, teachers were ideologically oppressed in the name of the Islamization of university curriculum, which implied the Islamization of post-secondary education under the name of “Cultural Revolution.” “Teachers were required to purvey the state ideology. New Islamic student associations were formed with the aim of supporting the government, and textbooks were revised in accord with the new ideology. Ideological commitment to the Revolution became a requirement for university admission” (Keddie 2003:257). “The Cultural Revolution was one reason many teachers and trained persons left Iran. One part of the program was to unite the theological schools of Qom with the universities, making secular teachers go for a time to Qom” (Keddie 2003:290). The other important oppressive measure of the new regime

was to form and promote pro-state associations to prevent the independent ones, including the teachers' Islamic associations.

One of the most curious paradoxes of the Islamic regime in Iran, a regime known for its unrelenting discrimination against women, was the fact that the gender educational gap between women and men narrowed after the Revolution. "Under the new regime not only did literacy among young males and females approach universality, but also the percentage of females among university admissions continually rose, until they were about 66 percent by 2003" (Keddie 2003:286). "Despite great advances in university education, both male and female graduates face high levels of unemployment. Also, the shortage of facilities and teachers at all levels as well as low pay, which leads university teachers especially to hold several jobs, means that the quality of education has generally fallen" (Keddie 2003:287). This seems to be one of the stronger drives of the movements of students and teachers. Although Keddie addresses certain aspects of teachers' actions and educational conditions before and after the Revolution, her study is not systematic and at best provides secondary materials.

Featuring outstanding contributions from leading sociologists, social anthropologists, political scientists and economists in the field of Iranian studies, *Iran in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Politics, Economics and Conflict* (2008) examines topics such as social development, including gender relations, contemporary politics, international relations, and the development of the economy (Katouzian and Shahidi 2008). Regarding educational growth, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani (2008) discusses that the rising fertility rates after the 1979 revolution, promoted by the ruling Islamists, and its consequences for the education. "The primary school age population doubled from about 5 million at the time of revolution to about 10 million in the early 1990s, causing a huge problem

with shortage of schools and teachers. Schools increased the number of shifts, sometimes to three, in order to cope with demand” (Salehi-Esfahani 2008:250). He demonstrates how the state took advantage of this condition to pursue its neoliberal policies in the educational sector. “As a result of the dramatic change in the ratio of adults to children, there were many primary teachers without a job who volunteered to teach pre-school. Despite the fact that public schools lacked the formal authority to teach 5-year-old children, the ministry allowed schools to use their classrooms for free and hire former primary school teachers with funds contributed by parents and private sources to set up pre-school” (Salehi-Esfahani 2008:250).

Salehi-Esfahani maintains that a reason for “rising female education is greater availability of schools for girls with female teachers and a separation of the sexes in the public sphere. Women have taken advantage of one type of suitable jobs, those in the public sector, so very likely the same could happen when suitable private sector jobs become available” (2008:262). Furthermore, a substantial portion of the increased education among girls can be attributed to female teachers, and the acceptance of school attendance has grown within the socially conservative population due to the process of Islamization (Baharmitash and Salehi-Esfahani 2009:92). Thus, girls find education accessible, and women find teaching a suitable job “as of 2020, 64 percentage of teachers were female” (“Analytical Review” 2021).

*A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran* (Foran 1994) considers Iran as one of the few countries in the world that enjoys a revolutionary heritage with no fewer than five major potentially revolutionary movements (in 1905-11, 1918-21, 1945-46, 1951-53 and 1977-79). It highlights the complexity of Iranian social texture, which “is articulated in the discourses of opposition – nationalism, Islam, and socialist and radical trends of protest” (Foran 1994: xiii).

The book consists of essays probing into “the heterogenous social bases of movements for change in Iran” (Foran 1994: xiii) from the perspective of a wide range of theories, from cultural analysis to neo-post Marxism (Foran 1994). The central question is of “the *causes* of social movements in Iran” (Foran 1994: xiii). The book (1994) reads the history of social movements in Iran as “serious courageous popular struggles involving remarkable coalitions of lower- and middle-class elements against powerful vested interests, foreign and domestic” (Foran 1994: xiii). In this context, Examining the often overlooked events of 1960-63 through the perspective of resource mobilization theory, Misagh Parsa (1994) delves into a crucial moment during this time—the teachers' strike in 1961. Parsa (1994) contextualizes the teachers’ strike within domestic and foreign conditions. He (1994) takes, on the one hand, the fiscal crisis of the Pahlavis toward the end of the 1950s, and on the other hand, the election of John F. Kennedy to the U.S presidency as two determining factors within which teachers’ strike took place. Parsa (1994) refers to teachers’ unique social position since they have widespread relationships with school students. According to Parsa (1994), student networks can have connections to various sectors of society and may become active in times of conflict. With these in mind, the teachers’ May 2, 1961 demonstration for better salary in front of the Majles ended up with the death of Dr. Abolhasan Khanali by the police. “Because of the economic crisis, the teachers received sympathy from other segments of the population in Tehran. Universities closed down in support of strike, and bazaaris and some workers also backed the walkout. Several workers’ syndicates in Tehran issued statements of support” (Parsa 1994:146). This coordinated protest action, at the time of presidency of Kennedy in the U.S, forced the Shah into a defensive posture. He adopted a double approach. On the one hand, he promised to meet teachers’ salary demands. On the other

hand, the wave of arrests of teachers and students intensified. That said, none of the Shah's measures bought an end to the walkout. "On the fourth day of the strike, in the midst of growing politicization and demonstrations, Premier Sharif Emami resigned and was replaced by Ali Amini. The new premier met several times with teachers and finally accepted their demands, including higher salaries and punishments within six months of those responsible for Dr. Khanali's death" (Parsa 1994:146). Their leader, Mohammad Derakhshesh, was appointed the new Minister of Education. Parsa (1994) argues that "beyond the economic concessions the teachers won, their strike had two significant political consequences. First, it challenged the government of Sharif Emami and accelerated his replacement by Ali Amini. In addition, it facilitated the mobilization of other social groups that also opposed the government" (1994:147).

The two other significant social protests Parsa (1994) investigates in the period of 1960-1963 involved bazaaris and clerics. Parsa (1994) concluded that "the failure of 'the' movement then becomes evident in terms of the distinct nature of this series of separate movements, and their relative capacities faced with the various strategies employed by the state" (Foran 1994: xvi), which was in short "a combination of suppression and cooperation" (Foran 1994: xvi).

In Persian literature, there is a lack of analytical and even historical study of the ITM. The only book regarding ITM is titled, *The Movement of Iranian Teachers: the Process of Organization from 1921 to 2020*, by Farangis Bakhtiari (2021). This book contains a selection of teachers' statements, notebooks of teachers' activists, important calendar events without a reliable chronology. The book suffers from inconstant and improper citation and lacks bibliography. Regardless of its issues, Bakhtiari seeks to reveal the anti-capitalist potentials of the ITM (Bakhtiari 2021:74). The main line of argument that Bakhtiari (2021) follows is to

criticize the “ideology” of attributing to the teachers a middle-class status. She maintains that this ideology has prevented the ITM from uniting with working class (Bakhtiari 2021). In her view, teachers are essentially workers and if they throw away the ideology of middle-class and figure out that they are workers, they will unite with the working-class (Bakhtiari 2021), and this can pave the way for staging an anti-capitalistic revolution. What she really means by unification of teachers and workers is to melt the ITM into working class since her “unification” is not a result of co-articulation between the ITM and different segments of the working-class; rather, it is a result of the teachers’ objective position in production and reproduction process. Here two assumptions appear: first, the Islamic Republic is a capitalist regime; and second, the working-class is the sole privileged actor mandated with the overthrowing of the Islamic regime. As a result, her 720-page book, at best, endeavors to demonstrate what the ITM should be from her viewpoint, rather than analyzing the ITM as it has been.

While the ITM is one of the most long-standing, organized, and effective social movements in modern Iran, there is no original work on it. As explored in this chapter, distinguished Iranian historians and researchers have mostly addressed the ITM from a state-centric standpoint or in an unsystematic and sporadic way. This MA thesis is the first in-depth, systematic, analytical, and historical study of the ITM. My main resources for reconstructing the ITM’s history from its origins in 1920 up to now come from newspapers, online information, TGC’s Telegram channels, teacher activists’ websites, and has documents in Bakhtiari’s book. Then, I will analyze the ITM from the lens of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony with the central question of potentials and limitations of ITM for becoming a hegemonic social force.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

By reading the ITM through a Gramscian lens, this thesis explores whether the ITM has the potential to play the role of a hegemonic social group. Such group can influence and unify (other) subaltern classes through a democratic alliance of social movements and civil society associations, including those of university students, workers, pensioners, bus-drivers, and nurses, that challenge the repressive and discriminatory policies of the Iranian regime. The history of the Iranian teachers' movement is closely related to the project of building hegemony at least in two aspects: first, the ITM is an *independent or autonomous movement*, which in the Gramscian approach, can be a potentially hegemonic movement and second, modern school and child and adolescent education play a central role in constructing hegemony, what Gramsci, referring to a certain potential, calls subaltern-centered pedagogy. In what follows, I will focus on Gramsci's theory of hegemony by incorporating related concepts such as subalternity, spontaneous movements, organic intellectual, education, the integral state, and the collective man. Following the history of the ITM (chapters 4-6), I will apply the theory outlined here for the purpose of analysis and conclusions.

#### **3.1. Hegemony**

Let us start with our central concept, hegemony. "The methodological criterion on which our own study must be based is the following: that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (Gramsci 1971:45). If domination is based on force, hegemony is based on intellectual and moral leadership. In this sense, hegemony is in "contrast with domination" (Hoare and Smith 1971: xiv). This would

constitute one interpretation of Gramsci, one that in my view is not supported by Gramsci's own theory. Another interpretation of the Gramscian insight holds that it does not mean that domination and hegemony are mutually exclusive. Hegemony requires domination, for sure, if hegemony is to remain stable. And domination requires hegemony, if it intends to be justifiable in the eyes of the populace.

Looking further into the concept, hegemony is exercised over the allied groups, and it requires the ability of a social group to gain moral and intellectual leadership, meaning the making of other subaltern groups' demands its own, expressing them and fighting for them (Gramsci 1978:443). This leadership "is 'historically' caused by the *prestige*" (Gramsci 1971:12; my emphasis). Although hegemony requires intellectual and moral leadership, it is economic as well. Indeed, Gramsci stresses that hegemony "must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (Gramsci 1971:161).

A social group can only achieve moral and intellectual leadership if it goes beyond its immediate corporate-economic interests and "aspires to a position of leadership in the political and social arena" (Hoare and Smith 1971: xiv). Thus, as long as a subaltern social group remains exclusively within its own field of economic interests, it cannot become a hegemonic force. In other words, syndicalist groups cannot go beyond their subalternity and become a hegemonic force since their syndicalist approach prevents them "from ever becoming dominant, or from developing beyond the economic-corporate stage and rising to the phase of ethical-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the State" (Gramsci 1971:160).

Although the hegemonic group will be in the position of winning active or spontaneous consent of those over whom hegemony is exercised, it is impossible to imagine a society without antagonistic forces (Mouffe 2018:2). *A la* Marx's concept of class antagonism, Gramsci states, "Those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively" (1971:12) should be dominated through force. Domination "tends to 'liquidate', or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force" (Gramsci 1971:57) the antagonistic forces. In other words, the given (hegemonic) social group should exercise power on the antagonistic forces. Otherwise, it cannot guarantee its hegemony. This is why Gramsci, following Hegel and Marx, states that the ultimate victory of hegemony can only be achieved through capturing the state. Taking hegemony and domination altogether leads us to integral state.

Gramsci makes a distinction between civil society and political society (or the state). Civil society is the locus of building and exercising hegemony. Indeed, the state secures the consent of various social groups through civil society. That said, civil society is simultaneously "the territory upon which social classes compete for social and political leadership or hegemony over other social classes" (Thomas 2009:137). In this sense, civil society is the locus of competing over hegemony as well. "Such hegemony is guaranteed, however, 'in the last instance', by capture of the legal monopoly of violence embodied in the institutions of political society" (Thomas 2009:137). As a result, it can be argued that the state, properly speaking, is a combination of hegemony (civil society) and domination (political society). If the state fails to win active or passive consent of the social groups it governs through civil society, it will use its force to dominate and subjugate them. That said, even when the state imposes order on groups from which it fails to gain active or passive consent, this force should be legal. That is why,

Gramsci stresses that even when the state “holds force firmly in its grasp, it must continue to ‘lead’ as well” (Gramsci 1971:57).

As discussed, Gramsci not only does not consider the state as domination but delves into the hegemonic aspects of the state. For him, the state is “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its *dominance* but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci 1971: 244). From this point of view, the state functions as an educator-ethical entity (Gramsci 1971:246), meaning that the state attempts to train masses in a way that actively and spontaneously align with the ruling classes’ interests and values (Gramsci 1971:247-278). Again, educative-ethical function of the state is based both on hegemony and domination: school as a positive educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative educative function (Gramsci 1971:258). Thus, education is a means for the state to construct hegemony, especially in the modern era where the state has the prerogative to run national education. Interestingly, in Gramsci the function of state, civil society, education and so on is not pre-determined. Just as civil society can become the locus of building hegemony, education also can become the instrument through which the pupil becomes hegemonic.

### **3.2. Education**

Gramsci does not regard “education and knowledge as politically neutral. Schools for him are sites of ideological struggle” (Reed 2012:271). He makes a distinction between two types of schools: vocational and classical, and then he develops his own concept of school, called common or modern school, and subaltern-centered pedagogy. While “the vocational school is for

the instrumental classes the classical school is for the dominant classes and the intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971:26). By instrumental classes Gramsci means subordinate or subaltern ones. Whereas the aim of classical school was to “develop in each individual human being an as yet undifferentiated general culture” (Gramsci 1971:26), and “served to a tiny elite of ladies and gentlemen who do not have to worry about assuring themselves of a future career” (Gramsci 1971:27), the objective of vocational schools is to “serve entire professional sectors” (Gramsci 1971:26) and to prepare pupils for their future career (Gramsci 1971:27). Although the main task of vocational school is to prepare pupils for their future career, it aligns the pupil with values, norms, and world/life of the dominant order in which they should pursue their career (Gramsci 1971:34).

Vocational schools “denied [the pupil] their full development as critical thinkers and as such compromised their formation into active political subjects capable of leading society into new moral and political directions” (Reed 2012:571). That is why vocational schools are designed to keep subordinate classes in their subalternity. In contrast, Gramsci puts forward the idea of common schools and subaltern-centered pedagogy. Contrary to vocational school, whose objective is to train specialized subaltern groups, Gramsci’s subaltern-centered education is “a process of education whereby the student-teacher learns about her history-making capacities in light of a critical understanding of her lived experience” (Reed 2012:575). Subaltern groups suffer from lacking awareness of their historical capacities. Gramsci’s common or modern school aims at providing the pupil with the consciousness of their historical potentials, a way to put an end to their subalternity.

Gramsci describes the common or public schools as follows. The common school “should aim to insert younger men and women into social activity after bringing them to a certain level of maturity, of capacity for intellectual and practical creativity, and of *autonomy* of orientation and initiative” (Gramsci 1971:29; my emphasis). “The common school should be completely funded by the state” (Gramsci 1971:29-30), since “only thus can it involve them in their entirety, without divisions of group or caste” (Gramsci 1971:30). The common schools require adequacy of school buildings and teaching body and the like (Gramsci 1971:30) “since the smaller the ratio between teachers and pupils, the greater will be the efficiency of the school” (Gramsci 1971:30). As a result, subaltern-centered education does not only need developing new, progressive curriculum, it requires sufficient infrastructure.

Gramsci sees a gap between school and life (1971:31). He explains that in modern schools, “the pupil passes to the creative phase, the phase of autonomous, independent work. From the school, where his studies are subjected to a discipline that is imposed and controlled by authorities, the pupil passes on to a phase of study or of professional work in which intellectual self-discipline and moral independence are theoretically unlimited” (Gramsci 1971:32). “The last phase of the common school” (Gramsci 1971:32) is the decisive phase in which the pupil gains “intellectual self-discipline and the moral independence” (Gramsci 1971:32). Gramsci even goes further and states that the school should prepare the pupil for “ruling – or controlling those who rule” (1971:41).

Gramsci makes a distinction between education and instruction. He argues that it is not entirely true that “instruction” is something quite different from “education” (Gramsci 1971:35) for “the learner is not a passive and mechanical recipient” (Gramsci 1971:42). As a result,

authoritative regimes cannot completely reduce education to instruction. Gramsci stresses the agency of pupils in the process of learning: “Learning takes place especially through a spontaneous and autonomous effort of the pupil, with the teacher only exercising a function of friendly guide” (1971:33). He argues that “the truly active participation of the pupil in the school” (Gramsci 1971:37) is only possible when “the school is related to life” (Gramsci 1971:37).

Most importantly, for Gramsci, the objective of modern education or common school is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals out of subaltern groups (1971:43). As organic intellectuals, pupils later contribute to “all the organisms of culture, transforming them and giving them a new content” (Gramsci 1971:33). In a larger picture, the common school is indirectly related to building hegemony since it affects culture, and the culture is the base over which hegemony is constructed.

### **3.3. The Intellectuals**

“All men are intellectuals... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971:9). This means that all men can think and reflect, and even the simplest jobs require some degrees of intellectual, cerebral activity. That said, the social function of intellectuals is different, and Gramsci focuses on this aspect of intellectuality. For him, intellectuals, properly speaking, are meant to give a group awareness of its existence and homogeneity as group (Gramsci 1971:5) and create favourable conditions for their group to grow (1971:5-6). In other words, these intellectuals play the role of leadership for their social group.

Gramsci defines two types of intellectuals: organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals. While organic intellectuals come organically into existence along with their social group, and as a result, they are dependent on their social group (1971:5), traditional intellectuals seem to be independent, meaning that they appear to embody a historical continuity that persists even in the face of the most complex and profound political and social transformations (Gramsci 1971:7). Thus, while organic intellectuals arise from, and identify with, the social group out of which they come into existence, traditional intellectuals claim to be independent of any specific social group.

Politically speaking, the subaltern cannot speak (Vahabzadeh 2007:103). They speak in the language of the ruling classes. As a result, subaltern groups are unable to relate their worldview to their life activity, as they are tied to the hegemonic ground of the ruling class (Vahabzadeh 2007:109). The subaltern, however, can break away from this form of subjugation “through a creative act, an act of decision, which attests to the attempt at *re-grounding* one’s life-world” (Vahabzadeh 2007:110). This means that when the subaltern engages with a genuinely original and creative act, they break with the terms of reference given by the hegemonic class that they had hitherto internalized. That is the moment when hegemony falls apart, and the subaltern, by virtue of this creative act, emerges as a potentially new (hegemonic) force. From now on, the subaltern’s lifeworld, which up to this point has been under all terms of reference and worldview of the ruling class, is now re-grounded, which means that the subaltern’s lifeworld has shifted from the epistemological ground of the ruling class into the ground and worldview of the subaltern class itself. Thus, the subaltern starts to articulate its own worldviews, instead of subscribing to the worldviews of ruling class. This shift, which is

ultimately an epistemological shift, but a lived epistemological shift, is what Vahabzadeh (2007) calls “re-grounding.” This re-grounding originates with the organic intellectuals of the subaltern class. The organic intellectuals enable the subaltern group to hegemonically re-ground their experiences. The organic intellectuals are the most conscious layers of a social group and they come into existence out of *praxis*. Regarding the ITM, the teachers’ first generation of organic intellectuals comprised those who founded Independent Teachers’ Centers in 1979-1981. They internalized and articulated the ideals of the 1979 revolution and all struggles leading to the revolution. Theoretically, the subaltern groups as a whole can only speak when they become the state, but in the process of ending their subalternity it will be the organic intellectuals of the subaltern who articulate the group’s demands and give it a new vision.

Now, the question becomes: how does a social group develop its own strata of intellectuals? This is a matter of act, or as Vahabzadeh states “a creative act, an act of decision” (2007:110). Gramsci sees this creative act in the concept and function of the (communist) party. For him, even a newspaper or a review can have the function of a party (Gramsci 1971:149). He sees the political party for some social groups as “nothing other than their specific way of elaborating their own category of organic intellectuals.” He insists that “these intellectuals are formed in this way and cannot indeed be formed in any other way” (Gramsci 1971:15).

The organic intellectuals not only enable the subaltern to hegemonically re-ground their lived experience by shifting their epistemological ground from that of the ruling classes to their own, but they also play another central role: the ideological assimilation of the traditional intellectuals (Gramsci 1971:10). Any social group which aspires to become hegemonic should be able to ideologically assimilate the traditional intellectuals. As a result, the more the subaltern

group in question is able to elaborate its own strata of organic intellectuals, the quicker the assimilation, and subsequently, becoming hegemonic, will happen (Gramsci 1971:10). Thus, it is impossible for a subaltern group to become hegemonic if it fails to develop its own category of organic intellectuals. If the function of the party for a subaltern group is to promote and gather the group's organic intellectuals, and if the essence of a party is "a creative act" (Vahabzadeh 2007), then, the development of organic intellectuals is a matter of praxis, not purely intellectual endeavors.

### **3.4. From Subalternity to Hegemony**

As discussed earlier, hegemony captures the way in which the ruling class governs the subaltern classes. A viable form of governance, Gramsci would emphasize, entails the vast deployment of means of extracting consent from the subaltern, with education being the key, long-term institutional factor in actively producing consent, especially through technical training which links the economic activity of subaltern youth to the interests of the ruling class. But precisely because of that, Gramsci also theorizes the way subaltern groups can potentially become hegemonic. Gramsci describes non-hegemonic groups with different terms like "subaltern", "subordinate", or sometimes "instrumental" (Hoare and Smith 1971: XIV). The subaltern groups are always subject to activities of the ruling classes (Vahabzadeh 2007:98), or in Gramsci's terms, "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up" (Gramsci 1971:55). As a result, the history of subaltern classes lacks unification although there is a tendency of unification in their historical activities (Gramsci 1971:54-55). A

subaltern group, in Gramsci's view, is characterized by a lack of awareness of its own potentials and how to progress beyond its subalternity (Gramsci 1971:159). This group has not yet developed a sense of class consciousness or the realization that their history could hold significance and should be documented (Gramsci 1971:196). They never believe in the historical significance of their actions. This is why Gramsci underscores the immense importance of any *independent* actions taken by subaltern groups (1971: 55). Subaltern groups' independent initiatives are a sign of gaining autonomy vis-à-vis the ruling class, and, consequently, of their potentials of constructing their own hegemony.

Subaltern groups can go beyond their subordination only through permanent victory (Gramsci 1971:55), which means only when they become hegemonic and, subsequently, capture the state to guarantee their hegemony (Gramsci 1971:52). That said, Gramsci adds that even when subaltern groups achieve permanent victory, they cannot immediately throw away their subordination (Gramsci 1971:55). "Even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves" (Gramsci 1971:55). So deep is the hegemonic influence of the ruling classes on subaltern groups that only through continued moral and intellectual reforms backed by economic reforms can the subaltern groups go beyond their subalternity.

Subaltern classes' movements are characterized by spontaneity (Gramsci 1971:196). Just as with subalterns' history, spontaneous movements are fragmented, sporadic, and without a new vision and conscious leadership. Subalterns are still subordinate, even when they rebel. Their consciousness is not "the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group" (Gramsci 1971:198-199) or as Vahabzadeh (2007) puts it, the hegemonic grounding of their lived experience by their organic intellectuals. Their consciousness

is fragmented and comes from the hegemonic grounding of their lived experience; or, as Gramsci states, from their “everyday experience illuminated by ‘common sense’” (Gramsci 1971:199). They lack genuinely original or “creative act, or act of decision” (Vahabzadeh 2007:110). Their acts are spontaneous reactions to specific situations, and as soon as their demands are met, they just fade away. In other words, they cannot transcend the stage of guild-economic interests into moral-political ones.

Spontaneous movements can easily be contaminated or exploited by the ruling classes, most likely, by the right-wing of the ruling class and tuned into reactionary movements (Gramsci 1971:199). However, Gramsci does not reject spontaneous movements. First of all, there is no pure spontaneous movement (Gramsci 1971:196). Secondly, there are elements of conscious leadership in these movements, although none of them are predominant (Gramsci 1971:196). Instead of rejecting spontaneous movements, Gramsci argues in favor of turning them into organized and conscious movements.

According to Gramsci, “among the subaltern groups, one will exercise or tend to exercise a certain hegemony through the mediation of a party” (1971:53). Autonomy vis-à-vis enemies and support from other subaltern groups are two main phases through which subaltern groups should go to become hegemonic (Gramsci 1971:53). Interestingly, Gramsci uses autonomy vis-à-vis the enemies rather than vis-à-vis the ruling class. This means that Gramsci does not take the entire ruling class as the enemy of the subaltern. This is due to his splitting class into layers, including the organic intellectuals of the ruling class (Gramsci 1971:3-23). Contrary to the orthodox Left, which see classes as homogenous, Gramsci argues in favor of heterogeneity of social classes. In this sense, a class is made of various layers each of which has its own distinct lived experience of

life, interests and demands. This is not only the case with the ruling class but also the so-called working class. Moreover, enemies include the organic intellectuals of the ruling classes. In that case, autonomy vis-à-vis enemies includes autonomy vis-à-vis the organic intellectuals of the ruling classes. This means that subaltern groups should develop their own worldview and morality, which is independent from those of the ruling classes. In that case, one of the main battlegrounds would be the realm of ideology. This is the purest political moment in which transition from structure to superstructure takes place. In this moment, there is a confrontation between ideologies until one ideology or a group of ideologies become dominant (Gramsci 1971:181).

Now, let us explore how a social group can grow into a hegemonic position. Gramsci identifies three moments of the formation of a social group: in the first moment, the social group attains “homogeneity, self-awareness, and organization” (Gramsci 1971:181). This is the moment when a social group comes into existence. In this moment, members of a social group feel solidarity with each other. That said, their consciousness is still limited to the solidarity of corporate interests among the members of that group (Gramsci 1971:181). In the second moment, the solidarity of interests extends from one group to a social class (Gramsci 1971:181). At this moment, members of different social group achieve the consciousness of having similar interests, although this solidarity is still purely economic (Gramsci 1971:181). The third moment is “the most purely political phase” (Gramsci 1971:181). In this moment, “one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too” (Gramsci 1971:181). This is the moment of transition from structure to

superstructure, in which there is a confrontation between ideologies until one ideology or a group of ideologies becomes dominant (Gramsci 1971:181) and “propagate [s] itself throughout society – bring about not only a unison of economic and political aims but also intellectual and moral unity” (Gramsci 1971:181-182).

Although Gramsci’s explanation is insightful, it seems that there is an element of economism in his argument. His first moment is when the members of a subaltern group feel solidarity in the field of their corporate interests. At this moment, the members of other subaltern groups have reached a sense of solidarity with each other in the economic field. The second moment is when subaltern groups reach this sense of solidarity, in the economic field. The third moment is when this solidarity goes beyond corporate interests into moral and political issues. That said, some subaltern groups are not formed based on corporate interests. Imagine queers or LGBTQ+ communities. Based on Gramsci’s explanation, only in the third moment when solidarity expands into moral and political field a group like LGBTQ+ can join other subaltern groups.

### **3.5. The Question of Alliance**

The question of alliance is essentially a question of hegemony. Every subaltern group which aspires to become hegemonic should make the questions of other subalterns’ groups its own. This is the point with which Gramsci engages in *Some Aspects of Southern Question* (Gramsci 1978). He states that the proletariat can only make an alliance with the southern peasant if it manages to make the question of peasant its own (Gramsci 1978:443). In doing so, the proletariat should “understand the class demands which they [the peasant] represent; incorporating these

demands into its revolutionary transitional program; placing these demands among objects for which it struggles.” (Gramsci 1978:443) This means any subaltern groups which aspire to become hegemonic should make a chain of equivalence among distinct, fragmented demands of subaltern groups. A chain of equivalence will be made if the leading subaltern group(s) manages to put forward a hegemonic programme to connect fragmented demands of various subaltern groups into the leading group(s)’ universal and cohesive worldview (Vahabzadeh 2007:108).

While the orthodox Left regards the working class as the privileged historical agent of revolution, Gramsci regards the “collective man” as the actor of any historical act (Gramsci 1995:156). Contrary to the homogeneity of the working class, which is an automatic result of the objective position of actors in the relations of production, Gramsci’s “collective man” *attains* “a ‘socio-cultural’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed individual wills, heterogeneous in their aims, are welded together for the same goal on the basis of an (equal) and common conception of the world” (Gramsci 1995:156). The way the collective man is formed is through making a chain of equivalence between distinct and fragmented demands of subaltern groups.

This exposition of Gramsci’s theory indicates the way it can shed light on my analysis of the ITM. The ITM certainly has at its heart the economic (in fact, *subsistence*) interests of teachers in face of a savage and plundering neoliberal state of the Islamic Republic that is reducing all state-funded, permanent positions to temporary-contract jobs and blocking collective action bodies (such as labour unions) from forming or taking effective action to counteract neoliberal policies. But the ITM goes beyond the merely economic interests of its constituents. As I will document in subsequent chapters, the movement has shown its political significance, as it challenges the educational policies of the Iranian regime, taking moral and intellectual stances

against it, and exposing the regime's cunning ways of disempowering the Iranian working peoples. As such, the ITM imposes a vivid disruption in the hegemonic function of the Iranian state. Moreover, within the Iranian culture, teachers enjoy a high social status as educators, and therefore, their movement has the capacity of growing into a leading movement in the future coalition of various social movements against the tyranny of Islamic measures and IRI neoliberal policies.

The next three chapters will offer a history of the ITM, from its inception into its development as a professional (guild or *senfi*) association into one that has become not only increasingly political but is growing into a potentially hegemonic social force capable of exercising "intellectual and moral leadership."

## **Chapter 4: Origins of ITM: Before the 1979 Revolution**

This chapter offers a condensed reconstructed history of the ITM from its inception to 1979, in order to contextualize the ITM's development after the Revolution and especially over the past decade. The contextualization is aligned with my research question regarding the hegemonic capacities of ITM. In reconstructing from the movement's origins until 1979, I take two factors into account: first, the most important events with nationwide effects, and the significant social, technological and organizational changes in ITM.

### **4.1. The Emergence of First Modern Schools**

Iran's modern schools can be traced back to the late Qajar era in the second half of 1800s. At that time, the Iranian population was vastly illiterate, and the absence of modern education imposed itself as a key factor for the impending modernization of Iran (Amanat 2017:300). The traditional, religious madrasa was the dominant form of education, and its teachers were "often low-rank mullahs with rudimentary training: the informal surroundings, haphazard attendance, almost no curriculum, and arcane textbooks, if any" (Amanat 2017:471). Traditional schools were unable to meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization. In this context, establishing modern schools permeated into Iranian agendas for modernization but there was no political will or a new vision to radically transform education. As Iran approached the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) sporadic attempts by reformers were made to create model schools. Hasan Roshdieh established the first elementary school in 1887 (Ajodani 2005:265-267). The school managed to make children literate in a short period of time. However, the traditional schools under clerics felt threatened by the new ones. They rejected

modern schools, and their followers destroyed the school (Ajodani 2005:265-267). The first girls' elementary school was established by Merhrtaj Rakhshan in 1902 (Bakhtiari 2021:14). In the patriarchal and deeply religious society of that time, this school not only faced opposition from traditional madrasas for not confirming to their values, but also because it was a girls' school, it was destroyed by opponents.

With the gradual rise of modern, state-run schools in the early 1920s, teachers gradually became a viable social force. Their first collective action took place in 1921 when they initiated a sit-in protest that lasted for ten days from October 17-27 outside the Sepahsalar mosque in Tehran (Darolshafa 2020). This mosque was a key venue for political sanctuary at this time. There is no credible report regarding the reasons behind this protest and how the state handled it (Darolshafa 2020), although a subsequent teachers' rally in December suggests that their demands were not met.

This was a 22-day strike. The teachers' primary grievances pertained to unpaid salaries and the state's prohibition of trade unions. "Elementary students marched on January 11, 1922" (Darolshafa 2020) to defend teachers' demands. Teachers' long strike and subsequent elementary students' demonstration took place Ahmad Qavam's administration (Jun 1922-February 1923) was already unstable. As a result, teachers' collective act turned into a political maneuver against the government (Darolshafa 2020). "Qavam's administration collapsed on 20 January 1922," (Hamidinavid 2020). Although police repressed the protestors, the demonstration continued until their unpaid salaries were partially paid (Darolshafa 2020). At this time, there were protests organized by unions that included Post and Telegraph Workers' Strike in 1922, or the strike of Iranian and Indian Workers of the Abadan Oil Refinery (Darolshafa 2020), but they were purely

economic and could not turn into a political maneuver against the government, especially since the teachers' strike engaged students and subsequently their families, and the protests took place in public spaces, not in the enclosed spaces of a factory.

In August 1922, the teachers in Tehran staged a one-month sit-in protest against their meager salary in front of the Majles (parliament). The sit-in concluded when the Majles mandated the government to augment teachers' salaries (Darolshafa 2020). What distinguished this demonstration from the past two was that it took place in front of the Majles, the symbol of law, and the Constitutional Revolution. Finally, the Majles obligated the government to pay a sum of 80,000 rials to schools every month, and to gradually settle the overdue salaries of teachers. Teachers were satisfied and returned to their classrooms (Darolshafa 2020).

As the country proceeded towards modernization under the Premiership of Reza Khan, new social groups gradually appeared. There were several workers' union in 1923 in Tehran, including unions of bakers, shoemakers, union of Post and Telegraph workers. In 1923, the union of teachers with 400 members was a relatively small union (Darolshafa 2020).

#### **4.2. Authoritative Modernization of the Pahlavi dynasty**

While modern schools started to sporadically emerge in the late Qajar era, it was under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) that public schools came into being as a part of the agenda of modernization. "Educational reforms had been initiated in the mid-1920s but had only really gathered pace by the end of the decade. In 1928, a standardised textbook was imposed on all secondary schools together with a standardised Persian" (Ansari 2019:159). Modernization of education played two key roles in this era: first, it was seen key to the industrialization and

modernization of Iran; secondly, it was supposed to train a new generation with new secular mentality and worldview in which nationalism and monarchy were central. This ambitious plan needed schools, universities, and teachers. This shaped a growing middle class, in which teachers were significant. The Pahlavi state led the establishment of new, modern education in Iran in an authoritative fashion. It equipped the new generation of educators and pupils with modern science and internalized a “different perspective of the world from that their parents” (Amanat 2017:469) but it did not promote critical thinking and freedom. In contrast, “it rewarded uniformity and obedience and punished imagination and diversity” (Amanat 2017:469). In other words, it welcomed modernization in so far as this served the modernization of the economy and the secularization of society, but when it came to concepts of citizenship and associated rights, the state did not tolerate modern values. While education under Pahlavi was close to vocational schools for instrumental classes, teachers’ ideal school was Gramsci’ common school. If the former aims to train a conformist generation, and organic intellectual of the ruling classes, the latter seeks to provide the subaltern groups with their own organic intellectuals, with the historical consciousness that they can become agents of historical changes. This remained a main source of widening rift between the educated layers and the Pahlavi regime.

### **4.3. The First Teachers’ Organizations**

While teachers held three significant protests in the early 1920s, their initial concerted effort to organize and consolidate their disparate activities materialized with the formation of Iran’s first teachers’ union in the 1940s, thanks to the relatively relaxed political climate during the first decade of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign (1941-1979). Paradoxically, this period coincided with

Iran's occupation by the Allies during World War II, which weakened the authoritarian Pahlavi state and afforded Iranians newfound social and political liberties.

The initial spark of the first collective effort was ignited at the height of Reza Shah's power when the first attempts were made by teachers to establish a professional association in 1933. The president of the Teachers' Colleges, Dr. Isa Sedigh, tried to establish an association for graduates of the first cycle of Teachers' Colleges in 1932. His effort was unsuccessful: although the Society of Degree Holders from Iranian Teachers' Colleges was established in 1932, it did not engage in any political activities under the reign of Reza Shah ("When Teachers" 2019). The Society started its activities in 1941 (Rabi'e 1996:229) when a group of young graduates, including Mohammad Derakhshesh, joined ("When Teachers" 2019). The Society's first charter was drafted in 1942 (Bakhtiari 2021:18). It initiated the first strike to protest the non-payment of graduate entitlements in 1942 ("When Teachers" 2019) and started to publish a monthly magazine called *Sukhan* (The Speech) in 1943 (Rabi'e 1996:229). Over time, the number of members increased, and since most of them were teachers, the Society changed its name to the Teachers' Society ("When Teachers" 2019). "The Society dealt with cultural and teachers' guild issues between 1943-1944. That said, with Derakhshesh as its leader in 1946 and with politization of the country, the Society became more political" (Rabi'e 1996:229). Thanks to its successfully articulating and pursuing teachers' guild issues in 1946-7, the Society established and started to publish *Mehregan* magazine in 1948 (Rabi'e 1996:229).

During the 1940s, not only did teachers establish their own organizations, they also played a significant role in the higher ranks of all political parties. They took advantage of the spaces created by political parties to engage in cultural activities. For example, "the Socialists,

with a strong desire to expand from a parliamentary caucus to a party with nationwide presence, established branches in various cities. In Rasht, a Cultural Society emerged, led by Hussein Jowdat, a high school teacher, comprising a group of local intellectuals. Similarly, in Qazvin, another group led by a teacher formed the Educational Society.” (Abrahamian 1982:127). “[Reza] Rusta, the most important figure in the history of the Iranian labor movement... helped establish the first teachers’ union” (Abrahamian 1982:287).

There was a strong relationship between the Tudeh Party and teachers in particular. “The Women’s Organization of the Tudeh Party focused its activities on students, teachers, and other modern educated women” (Abrahamian 1982:335). The relationships between teachers and the Leftist parties were mutual. “*Sukhan*, the organ of the Society of Degree Holders from Teachers’ College, best summed up the attitudes of the radical intellectuals inside and outside the Tudeh party” (Abrahamian 1982:406). Established in 1941, the Tudeh Party of Iran was the country’s first legal Leftist (pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist) party that rapidly grew into the largest Leftist party of the Middle East by the late 1940s. The impact of the Leftist parties on teachers and vice versa was so strong that “by late 1951, the university administration was warning that 75 percent of the incoming freshmen were communists because of political indoctrination by their high-school teachers” (Abrahamian 1982:333).

Although these mutual relationships were constructive and these parties were able to make the teachers’ guild activities political, the hegemony of these Leftist parties prevented the teachers’ organization from developing from below. In other words, “the relationship between political parties” claiming to be representative of “the subaltern and oppressed”, and defenders of their interests was “top-down” rather than bottom-up (Darolshafa 2020). That was why when the

regime's repressive apparatus managed to dismantle the Tudeh Party, the organizations that the Tudeh Party had established for teachers also fell apart. For example, "the Teachers' Union, which was established with the support of the Tudeh Party, was dismantled after the dissolution of the Tudeh Party in 1946. Since this union did not have a strong base among teachers and instead it was more focused on individual initiatives, with the arrest and imprisonment of these individuals and the dissolution of the Tudeh Party, it disintegrated. As a result, this union could not be considered as teachers' conscious collective action" (Bakhtiari 2021:17). Furthermore, the regime sought to neutralize these political parties through espionage and security operations. In this context, it was highly likely that social groups associated with these parties would also become targets of the regime's security maneuvers, which was the case with the Teachers' Society.

Tensions between the Society and the Tudeh Party appeared in 1949 when the Tudeh Party was declared illegal (Rabi'e 1996:229). Due to the deep influence of the Tudeh Party in the Society, it was likely the Society was targeted by Iranian Intelligence. The Society was deprived of facilities offered by the Ministry of Culture until 1952 (Rabi'e 1996:229). But it successfully organized the First Nationwide Conference of Iranian Teachers, held on April 1952 (Bakhtiari 2021:18).

This was the first nationwide teachers' conference about professional (guild) and educational issues. The Society's representative in the conference put that "the pressure faced by teachers and the challenges imposed on this hardworking profession by the authorities make teachers aware of the need to come together and build the foundations of a cohesive professional community to defend their interests" (Bakhtiari 2021:16). "Not only teachers' subsistence but

also educational issues and guild activities were discussed. Teachers were critical of the content of educational books, arguing they did not meet Iranian society's needs. Some teachers objected to educational authorities' approach to divide teachers" (Bakhtiari 2021:18). This conference and the issues were discussed by teachers indicated that the Teachers' Society sought to form a union of teachers which was based on the body of teachers, and that teachers' concerns were beyond their mere economic demands.

#### **4.4. The Teachers' Movement in the early 1960s**

The Society ultimately decided to establish the Mehregan Club in February 1952 (Rabi'e 1996:229). The relatively open political atmosphere did not last long. The CIA/MI6 engineered 1953 coup that toppled the democratically elected Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq brought back the Shah's absolute rule with an iron fist, and all movements and collective organization outside of the state-sanctioned ones were heavily repressed. While any oppositional party was under severe oppression, thanks to "Derakhshesh, who became Tehran's deputy in the 18<sup>th</sup> Majles, and the Club' position as a guild and cultural entity, it received more support from the Ministry of Culture" (Rabi'e 1996:229). The Club "quickly became one of the most significant organizations for elementary and high school teachers in Iran" ("When Teachers" 2019). "However, in the late 1950s, during the 20<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections, the Club became embroiled in the rivalry between Jafar Sherif Emami and Ali Amini" ("When Teachers" 2019), when Derakhshesh decided to become a Majles deputy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Majles in alliance with Amini. "Derakhshesh gained prominence as a political figure by voicing his opposition to the Consortium Agreement in the 18<sup>th</sup> Majles" (Bakhtiari 2021:20). Under the Consortium Agreement, and contrary to the

1951 nationalization of Iran's oil industry by Premier Mohammad Mossadegh, the exploration and sale of oil were entrusted to foreign companies based on the principle of a 50-50 profit-sharing arrangement (Hosseini 2014). Despite substantial support from teachers, Derakhshesh was unable to retain his seat in the 20<sup>th</sup> Majles. It was expected that the Shah would appoint Amini as the Premier, but he opted for Sharif Emami instead.

“During the late 1950s, Iran's economy encountered a budget deficit due to the government's economic policies. This deficit, in turn, led to a significant rise of over 35 percent in the cost of living” (Mosakhani n.d.). It directly affected the teachers' livelihood. This was because “Sharif Emami's Ministry of Culture, Dr. Isa Sedigh, implemented policies that exacerbated teachers' discontent, the increased working hours, and reduced holidays. In this context, Derakhshesh capitalized on teachers' discontent and led them in a campaign to challenge Sharif Emami's government by demanding higher salaries. On February 7, 1961, teachers who were members of the Club, with Derakhshesh as its head, signed a statement advocating for an increase in teachers' salaries. In the following days, teachers from across the country expressed their support for the statement. However, their demands were not adequately addressed in the budget for the following year.” (Bakhtiari 2021:22)

Subsequently, the Club declared in an ultimatum that if its proposal to increase teachers' salaries was not approved by 2 May, it would initiate a peaceful and indefinite strike (Mosakhani n.d.). Then, “in a letter addressed to the Shah, the protesting teachers made several demands, including compulsory public education for all, an increase in teachers' salaries, and the provision of adequate health care and pension.” (Bakhtiari 2021:23) Given the Club's demands were not included in the budget, it declared that teachers would go on strike on 2 May. Derakhshesh was

arrested, and the Club was closed on 30 April 1961 (Mosakhani n.d.). These oppressive measures did not prevent teachers from going on strike.

“On 2 May, all schools in Tehran went on strike. Teachers rallied towards the Ministry of Culture. However, they were blocked by the police. Consequently, they redirected their march towards the Majles and Baharestan Square” (Bakhtiari 2021:23). This situation highlighted a paradox common to any dictatorship. Initially, the protesting teachers had intended to protest in front of the Ministry of Culture, the entity responsible for addressing their guild-related issues. However, due to the repressive measures, they were forced to redirect their movement towards the Majles, indicating that their demands had now taken on a more political tone.

“The security forces responded with violence, attacking the protestors. Tragically, Dr. Abolhasan Khanali, a 29-year-old philosophy graduate from University of Tehran and also a teacher of philosophy and Arabic, lost his life” (Bakhtiari 2021:25). This incident led to the escalation of protests, and the demonstrators added the release of Darakhshesh and the reopening of the Mehregan Club to their demands (Mosakhani n.d.). Dr. Khanali’s death event deeply etched itself into the collective memory of Iranians, and that particular day, 2 May (12 *Ordibehesht* in Iranian solar calendar), has since been named and celebrated as Iranian Teachers’ Day, commemorating the sacrifice and struggle of teachers.

“Due to the political crisis and the government’s strict economic policies, other segments of society in Tehran showed solidarity with the teachers. Tehran University was closed. The Second National Front, Dr. Mosaddegh’s party now refashioned, issued a statement titled “The Teacher-Killing Government,” condemning the incident and encouraging people to continue their struggle for more freedom. The shopkeepers in Baharestan Square closed their shops, and a

protest was held in front of the central market” (Mosakhani n.d.). It seems that two factors, namely the poor economic conditions affecting all segments of society and the killing of Dr. Khanali, which transformed the teachers’ guild protest into a moral struggle against the regime, invigorated other segments of society, including shopkeepers. At this point, teachers’ guild struggles became more political.

“The Teachers staged another rally in front of the Majles on 4 May 1961 and issued a resolution in which they demanded Sharif Emami’s resignation, the approval of the Club’s demand to increase teachers’ salaries, and punishment for Dr. Khanali’s murder” (Mosakhani n.d.). Eventually, “the coordinated strike of teachers and the declaration of support from other social groups forced the government to adopt a defensive stance. As soon as the strike began, the Shah expressed his intention to improve the economic conditions of the teachers. However, neither the promises made by the Shah, nor the arrests led to the cessation of the strike. The teachers vowed to continue their strike until their demands were met” (Mosakhani n.d.). This was what distinguished this protest from the last three protests when as the teachers’ economic demands were met, they ended their protest.

“In response to the deteriorating political situation in Tehran, the government decided to allow Mehregan Club to resume its activities, hoping to exert some control over the growing protests among teachers. The Club experienced an even greater influx of teachers” (Bakhtiari 2021:25). On the Shah’s orders “Derakhshesh was released. He delivered a speech at the Club declaring that from this moment on, the teachers’ demands were not just about decent salaries, but also demand political freedom” (“When Teachers” 2019). Clearly, the teachers’ protests had now become more vividly political. Their protests and demonstrations persisted for several more

days. In the light of this political crisis, Premier Sharif Emami was forced to resign, and his main rival, Dr. Ali Amini succeeded him as Premier (Bakhtiari 2021:25). “Sharif Emami’s resignation did not lead the teachers to end their protests. Amini sought to negotiate a resolution with Derakhshesh to end the strike” (Bakhtiari 2021:25). The new Premier met with teachers’ representatives several times and eventually accepted their demands that included higher salaries and punishment for Dr. Khanali’s murder (Mosakhani n.d.).

On May 9, 1962, thousands of teachers, students, shopkeepers, and workers gathered at the tomb of Dr. Khanali to honor him. On that day, a representative of the bazar’s merchants who were disgruntled about the government’s new tax policies declared that “they had committed to continue supporting the teachers and their demands.” While these merchants and teachers were two completely distinct social groups with different interests and identities, Dr. Khanali’s death had turned the teachers’ guild struggles into moral-political struggles that other dissenting social groups.

Finally, after the appointment of Derakhshesh as the Minister of Culture, he officially declared an end to the strike on May 12, 1962, and in response to teachers who objected to his position, he warned that those teachers were acting subversively and would not be “recognized as teachers” (Bakhtiari 2021:26). Here was where the teachers’ moral-political struggles started to decline after their leader Derakhshesh became the Minister of Culture. Derakhshesh put an end to the teachers’ strike “when neither the Mehregan Club’s demands were met nor were Dr. Khanali’s killer identified or brought to justice. From this historical moment until the end of Amini’s term as Premier on 17 July 1962, the teachers’ demands never appeared in the country’s

newspapers anymore and Derakhshesh's presence in Mehregan Club diminished significantly until he lost all contact with it." ("When Teachers" 2019).

This episode in the late 1950s, with its zenith in 1961-2, was the most important teachers' collective action before the 1979 Revolution. What distinguished this from the previous activities were as follows: the 1960s movement had leadership with clear demands; these demands were both economic and political; and lastly, the protests continued until significant parts of the teachers' demands were met. The achievements of this collective teachers' movement were as follows: it successfully petitioned the Shah to release Darakhshesh; it forced the government to allow the reopening of the Club; it caused the reluctant Shah to appoint Dr. Amini as Premier; it won the support of other social groups, namely, the bazaar merchants; and lastly, the movement cracked the repressive political atmosphere after the 1953 Coup.

However, these achievements were impacted by Derakhshesh's contradictory position as teachers' guild activist with a long-standing record, and as a deputy in the Majles with political alliance with Amini in the 20<sup>th</sup> Majles election. Some believed that Darakhshesh used the teachers' dissatisfaction to advance his own political ambitions. "Some even went as far as to believe that the Club was a security plan designed by the factions within the regime to strengthen Amini's position and promote him to Premier, supported by the Democrats in the US, especially given that at that time when the Club was to be formed, the Iranian Intelligence apparatus had attempted to establish another club for teachers in collaboration with an experienced teacher named Reza Ma'refat" (According to Darolshafa in Bakhtiari 2021:26-27).

These complications obscured the extent to which the teachers might have been able to leverage the existing political divisions to achieve their demands. They cast doubts about

whether the political factions merely played and used the teachers' collective action for their own objectives. This historical experience serves as a critical lesson for the next generation of teachers' activists: it taught the post-revolutionary teacher activities to uphold their autonomy. From this time to the 1979 Revolution no significant organized activity of teachers could be identified. This is in part due to the expansion of salaried middle-class under the Shah's reforms in the 1960s.

Iran witnessed an important social and economic transformation in 1962. The Shah declared the White Revolution that originally consisted of six articles including land reform and the creation of Literacy Corps. "Aside from land reform, the most effective article in what came to be known as the "six points" of the revolution was the Literacy Corps. The program drafted thousands of urban high school male (and later female) graduates to be sent off, as part of their two-year military service, to villages throughout the country" (Amanat 2017:585). This caused a significant improvement on the rate of literacy. "The number of educational institutions grew threefold after the launching of the White Revolution (Abrahamian 2008:134). "Within five years of the start of the program in 1963, more than 500,000 boys and about 130,000 girls were enrolled in Literacy Corps schools; by 1970, 3,000 such schools had been built throughout Iran. By 1977 enrollment in these schools had grown nearly sevenfold in fifteen years" (Amanat 2017:585). This paved the way for rural areas to access modern education on a massive scale, which had an important effect on the most traditional layers of society.

Teachers became a significant middle-class social force by the 1970s, albeit without independent collective body. Although the Literacy Corps was successful in educating the illiterate, "a degree of social alienation was prevalent among the young Literacy Corps teachers"

(Amanat 2017:586). This alienation led some young teachers to detach from the national-monarchal ideology of the regime and become dissident subjects. As a result, in the 1960s and 1970s, with the radicalization of student movements, some teachers with radical or revolutionary tendencies joined Iran's urban guerrillas (Abrahamian 1982:481).

In sum, the Mohammad Reza Shah's regime offered relatively satisfactory employment conditions for teachers including extended benefits, and thus managed to recast the teachers as a part of the country's growing salaried middle-class in the 1970s (Abrahamian 1982). At the same time, though, the regime did not tolerate independent teachers' activism including attempts at creating an authentic trade union.

## **Chapter 5: Teachers' Independent Collective Activism: From 1979 to 2016**

The process of expanding modern schools, which had sporadically begun in the late Qajar era and was pursued by the Pahlavis on a large scale, continued after the instalment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. However, there were expectedly significant ideological differences between the Pahlavi and Islamic regimes regarding the promotion of modern education. While the Pahlavi regime advocated for modern sciences, secularism, and Western values, except in cases of its concept of citizenship, the Islamic state rejected these values and accepted modern sciences to the extent that they aligned with the regime's values.

Furthermore, the privatization of elementary and secondary education, which had begun during the later years of the Pahlavis' reign, intensified under the new regime, especially during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), who pursued a policy of (neoliberal) Reconstruction (*Sazandegi*). Privatization deprived a significant portion of society of education, due to which social mobility prospects through education have been increasingly diminishing. Privatization and Islamization of schools became the two major battlegrounds between teachers and the state over the coming decades.

### **5.1. The Explosion of Revolutionary Imagination from 1979 to 1981**

After the significant collective action of teachers in 1961, the teachers' movement entered a prolonged period of stagnation that lasted until the late 1970s. However, by the late 1978 as the political atmosphere of the country became increasingly political, teachers and students actively engaged in political activities. During the protests and strikes against the monarchy starting from September 1978, the most well-known and long-standing teachers' association, Teachers' Society

(*Jame'h-ye Mo'aleman*), was active and “it successfully managed to organize a demonstration of 3,000 teachers in Tehran during the autumn of 1979 (Safarzadeh 2016). Consequently, the Teachers’ Independent Centers (henceforth: TICs) started to form. Kermanshah’s TIC held a session in October 1978 and declared that due to the strict control of authorities on education, teachers would refrain from going to classrooms until 14 October (Safarzadeh 2016). “On 24 October 1978, a TIC in a district in Tehran announced that teachers demanded the closing of the security offices in schools and the release of all political prisoners, teachers, and student prisoners, including Mohammad Derakhshesh. It declared that they would go on strike from November to achieve their demands” (Safarzadeh 2016). Their demand, which was entirely political, clearly reflected the political atmosphere of the late months of 1978. With the continuation of the teachers’ protests in tandem with the anti-monarchical protests, they achieved certain demands including salary increase, release of Derakhshesh, and reopening of *Khaneh-ye Mo'aleman* (Teachers’ House) (Safarzadeh 2016).

The fall of the monarchy on February 11, 1979 created a space for the explosion of teachers’ revolutionary imagination, although this open revolutionary space was quickly closed by the authoritarian Islamic regime. In the spring of 1979, new TICs emerged in Amol, Sanandaj, Ahvaz, and Karaj (Safarzadeh 2016). As a representative of teachers in all districts and cities in Tehran, “Tehran’s TIC was also formed during this period” (Safarzadeh 2016). While TICs were forming in various cities, the leader of the Teachers’ Society, Derakhshesh, expressed his disagreement about their formation (Safarzadeh 2016).

The expansion of TICs indicated the teachers’ collective sentiment that dependent associations deprived teachers of their historical agency as moral and intellectual leaders of

society, because dependent associations could be *instrumentalized* and *hegemonized* by the state or political parties. In contrast, the TICs emphasized *autonomy*. Tehran TIC's interpretation of the term "autonomy" (*esteqlal*; also means "independent") is clarifying: "Autonomy does not imply a separation of teachers and students [from society]. Instead, it means that the teachers' associations are not affiliated with any political party. The association pursues not only professional and political objectives but also social ones" (Safarzadeh 2016). The commitment to autonomy became a fundamental principle for the ITM in the coming decades, serving multiple crucial purposes: first, it helped create teachers' leadership out of its body and in a co-constructive way; second, it acted as a defence against accusations that the teachers' movements were affiliated with underground or outlawed parties, or foreign states, which provided a convenient pretext for the oppressive regimes to violently suppress movements; third, autonomy served as an inclusive strategy, recognizing that the teachers' body was diverse, with varying ideologies and political affiliations; and last but not least, autonomy created a space for teachers to cultivate their own organic intellectuals and anti-hegemonic discourse.

The signs of Islamic authoritarianism became evident very soon when International Women's Day of 1979 women rallied against the new, compulsory hijab law and the abolition of the Family Support Law. Female high school and university students actively participated in this rally (Namdari 2008). Women were the first social group to rally against the new regime, defending their rights to their bodies. In reaction, because the Islamic regime was uninterested in absorbing *independent* civil society organizations, it adopted a two-fold strategy: oppressing independent civil society and creating parallel pro-regime associations, commonly referred to as "Yellow Organizations." This is when the pro-regime Islamic Association of Teachers (*Anjoman-*

*e Eslami-ye Mo'aleman*) was conjured up and the autonomous teachers' association was blocked from using Ministry of Education venues (Safarzadeh 2016). Soon, the regime also resorted to weakening and dismantling independent councils by preventing them from holding general assemblies and electing leadership. In effect, such efforts revealed that the regime regarded independent associations as illegal and security threats. Consequently, the democratic power rotation within the ITM and its connection with the teachers' body was diminished. Independent councils adopted one of two approaches to combat this policy: they either established underground organizations and engaged in covert struggles, or appealed to the discourse of right and lawful activity. The ITM opted for the latter in the post-revolutionary era.

The most accurate description of the TICs' charters in this period was provided by the Karaj TIC on June 18, 1979. "The Karaj TIC is a *guild* [professional, *senfi*] union since it expresses and defends teacher's particular professional interests; it is also political since the guild demands are not separable from political demands and they will not be adequately met without political liberties. It is *independent* because it is not affiliated with any organization, party, or ideology. It is democratic as it is based on a free and elective rotation of power." (Safarzadeh 2016). Moreover, the Karaj TIC declared that its membership was not limited to employed teachers and included retired teachers and educational and office personnel (Safarzadeh 2016). This indicated teachers' consciousness that to achieve their objectives, they should articulate the demands and aspirations of various layers involved in education. The Karaj TIC also explicitly expressed that it supported all democratic movements (Safarzadeh 2016).

The semi-open political atmosphere of 1979 underwent a rapid transformation towards restriction. A notable early event in this process was the occupation of the United States Embassy

in Tehran on November 13, 1979 and the 444-day hostage crisis that ensued. Following the occupation, the provisional government of liberal-minded Mehdi Bazargan (February 1979–November 1979) resigned *in toto*, and the balance of political power shifted dramatically in favour of pro-Khomeini hardliners (*maktabis* or Orthodox), who “supported the existence of the *showras* (councils) while attempting to turn them into corporatist organizations” (Jafari 2020: 265). They pursued a dual objective: exert pressure on Bazargan and prevent the growth and expansion of independent councils by creating Yellow Organizations.

In 1979, the TICs published their journals. The journals served as a platform for the TICs to discuss and debate their positions and viewpoints on various issues. Tehran’s TIC published *Mo’alem* (Teacher), which “covered a wide range of topics, from political, to guild essays” (Safarzadeh 2016). Tehran’s TIC demanded on May 2, 1979, the Iranian Teacher’s Day, that they should be allowed to participate in drafting the new Constitution (Safarzadeh 2016). The TICs demanded that education authorities be selected by teachers who should be entrusted with curriculum and educational issues, including free, universal education and harmonization of education across public and private schools (Safarzadeh 2016). In the aftermath of a Revolution whose key slogan was social justice, the teachers criticized the lack of political will to shut down private schools and make education free for all. The Teachers’ demand for free education was finally included in Article 30 of the new Constitution (ratified on December 3, 1979) that mandated the government to provide free education up to the end of secondary school.

Teachers’ criticism of the post-revolutionary political, economic, and cultural conditions was best summarized in a letter on July 16, 1979 addressed by the Tehran’s TIC to Premier Bazargan. It criticized the government’s inaction in implementing Article 30 and allowing private

schools to expand under various designations. This letter also pointed out the lack of meaningful political freedom, particularly freedom of the press, the declining economic conditions, and rising inflation. It raised concerns regarding censorship, gender discrimination, arrest of activists, persecution of workers, dismissal of protesting teachers, and the prevention of ICTs from holding meetings (Safarzadeh 2016).

On August 1, 1979, Tehran's ITC organized a seminar titled "Investigating the Nature of National Schools". The final resolution articulated the most comprehensive demands of teachers during this period: abolishment of private schools and cessation of commercializing education; educational equity and eliminating center-periphery imbalances; free education at all levels and compulsory education until the end of middle school; administration of Education by councils of students and teachers; education in the mother tongue; development of textbooks by teachers and cultural organizations; distribution of teachers based on the density of population in each region, and reforming the teacher training system (Safarzadeh 2016). These demands not only depicted the horizon of teachers' aspirations in those years but also opened up the very prospects that, after a significant hiatus, the teachers' movement today is aspiring toward.

The Shah launched the Literacy Corps in the 1960s to eradicate illiteracy; Ayatollah Khomeini announced the Literacy Movement on December 28, 1979. However, these two had fundamental differences. In his message for the Literacy Movement, Khomeini criticized the alleged "dependent culture" (read: Western) under the Shah and demanded "an independent and self-sufficient culture" (read: Islamist) (Full Text n.d.). So, Khomeini's criticism of "dependent culture" literally aimed at modern values. It showed that modern education in Iran had become so dominant that the post-revolutionary clerics, instead of rejecting modern school as did their

predecessors, sought to align modern science with Islamic values, thereby trying to influence education by clerics as captured in Khomeini's vision of "transforming mosques into schools" ("Full Text" n.d.). If Pahlavi's regime sought to raise a subaltern generation equipped with modern sciences and a secular, nationalistic pro-monarchy ideology, the new regime aimed to nurture a subaltern generation obedient to Islamic values and serve the Supreme Leader.

Although the TICs rapidly emerged in different cities across Iran during in the first three years after the Revolution, there was no centralized organization to coordinate the diverse activities of separate TICs. Efforts were made during this short period to establish coordination with limited success (Safarzadeh 2016). The arrival of dark years of repression in the 1980s prevented TICs from further developing. It can be concluded that the idea of the teachers' movement as an autonomous, grassroots, potentially hegemonic movement emerged in the period immediately following the 1979 Revolution, but due to severe repression in the 1980s could not be realized as a material force.

## **5.2. The Repression of the 1980's**

Beginning in 1981, the wholesale pressure of the Islamic regime on nearly all political opposition and civil society associations intensified, leading up to waves of massacres of activists. To exacerbate the situation, the onset of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (September 1980-August 1988) put a huge damper on all activism in this decade. The 1980's was characterised by three important events: the war, the so-called Cultural Revolution, and neoliberalization of Iranian economy. This provides a context explaining why the ITM experienced a decline during this period.

### 5.2.1. *The Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988)*

Ayatollah Khomeini called the Iran-Iraq war “a blessing.” The defensive war against the Iraqi invasion was quickly framed by the regime’s propaganda as a defence of the *Islamic* Revolution and a Shi‘i-inspired “war of liberation” (Vahabzadeh 2017:11), which reflected in the slogan: “The path to Jerusalem passes through Karbala.” The War came to an end on July 20, 1988 and Iran at last accepted the UN Resolution 598” (Vahabzadeh 2017:9).

The 1979 Revolution was called a revolution of the downtrodden or *mostaz’afan*): the poor who are promised to become inheritors and leaders of the land (verse 5 of Surah Al-Qesas)—a social justice ideal. The war provided an opportunity for the regime to discursively transform its support for Iran’s downtrodden into the liberation of the downtrodden of the *world*, crystallized in its “liberation of Jerusalem”. As a result, the ideal of Jerusalem (and dismantling Israel) as the embodiment of the ideal of governance of the global downtrodden, pushed the ideal of social justice into a secondary role. This discursive transformation was completed with execution of “thousands of political prisoners – from Marxist, socialist, radical Muslim, nationalist, and various other secular or religious backgrounds – during the fateful months of August and September 1988... as it emblemized the generational purge of defenders of social justice from diverse ideological streaks” (Vahabzadeh 2017:9-10). In this way, in addition to the change in discourse from Iranian downtrodden to *global* downtrodden, the social force advocating for social justice was also suppressed.

### *5.2.2. The Cultural Revolution*

Iranian universities were pioneers in the fight against the monarchy. After the Revolution, the university was among the first institutions to challenge the authoritative Islamic regime. The alignment of the university education with the regime's objectives was so crucial for Khomeini that he stated, "We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military threats. We are afraid of Western universities and the education of our youth in Eastern [communist] and Western interests" (Khomeini 1989c:252).

The first organized effort by the Islamic regime to control the university was the so-called "Cultural Revolution," which began in April 1980 after the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by a group called "Students Following the Line of Imam Khomeini." Ayatollah Khomeini said, "The Islamic Revolution must take place in all universities across Iran, so that professors who are aligned with the East [communism] or the West must be purged, and the university must become a center suitable for teaching higher Islamic sciences" ("Three-Year Lockdown" n.d.). Accordingly, the Cultural Revolution began under the name of "Islamization of Universities" in 1980 and lasted for three years, during which universities were closed. The closure allowed the regime to expel tens of thousands of dissident students and dismiss thousands of professors. The Cultural Revolution was not limited to the Islamization of universities; it sought to Islamize education and, in a broader sense, culture. Therefore, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution was established in 1984 under the orders of Ayatollah Khomeini. An objective of this Council was to align universities, schools, and culture with Islamic values ("Objectives and Tasks" 2007).

The developments within universities were important from two key perspectives: firstly, university student activists consistently played key roles in social movements across the country; and secondly, future generations of teachers received their education in these universities. They directly experienced the political atmosphere of universities and student movements. Later, as teachers, they brought their insights into the ITM, as was evident in the emergence of the Justice-seeking Teachers' Movement in 2014 (see below). Therefore, there existed an organic relationship between the university student movement and the teachers' movement.

Ayatollah Khomeini grasped this crucial connection: “if universities and schools are not reformed [based on Islamic values], the Islamic Republic will not be realized” (Khomeini 1989a:3). Therefore, the Islamic regime's emphasis on the Islamization of universities was not only about creating an educated workforce aligned with the regime's values but also, in a deeper sense, about structuring a generation of teachers aligned with its own ideology. In other words, the regime's final goal was to hegemonize young generations through its ideologic education. This was so crucial to Khomeini that he pointed out that “teachers' merely expressing their allegiance to Islam is not sufficient; rather, their backgrounds must be carefully examined” (Khomeini 1989d:3-2).

### *5.2.3. The Era of Neo-liberalization*

The devastations of the eight-year war and the passing in 1989 of Ayatollah Khomeini as the charismatic leader of the Revolution led to a reconstruction era. The era of neoliberal economic reforms in Iran began with the “government of reconstruction” (*dowlat-e sazanegi*) under Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), also known as “*sardar-e sazanegi*” (General of

Reconstruction). This shift towards neoliberal policies occurred when the then dominant (Soviet-style) state-centric economic model had faced significant setbacks. Moreover, while wave of neoliberalism was sweeping across the world (Farzaneh and Hosseini 2020:116). Subsequently, with the enactment of Article 44 of the Constitution, which aimed at privatization, neoliberalization was intensified. While the discourse of the “Revolution of the Downtrodden” had previously evolved into a global liberation, the reconstruction era replaced championing the cause of the downtrodden with promoting entrepreneurial capitalism. In this way, the idea of social justice, which was the foundation of the 1979 Revolution, was forgotten only a decade later.

The reconstruction effort created a dualism within the ruling class between those who considered themselves genuine followers of Khomeini and advocates of the downtrodden, and those who believed in privatization and emphasized “entrepreneurship”. The former accused the latter of *ashrafiyyat* (nobility or aristocracy), but when this so-called pro-downtrodden faction came to power during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), it also implemented the neoliberal policies on an unprecedented scale.

Neoliberal policies were incorporated into the first four-year development plan (1989-1993). Regarding public education, it was stipulated that state funding for free public education should be reduced, and a portion of it should be outsourced to the private sector (Darkesh and Firouzabadi 2023:7). Structural adjustments of the economy negatively affected the lower and middle classes. In 1988, the average consumer expenditure of the top decile was 4.6 times that of the bottom decile, while in 1996 this figure reached 15.3 times (Farzaneh and Hosseini 2020:118). Unemployment, inflation, and economic hardships led to unrests in Mashhad, Shiraz,

Zahedan, Zanjan, Arak, Urmia, Malayer, Qazvin, and Islamshahr (Farzaneh and Hosseini 2020:118). The 1992 unrest in Mashhad was the first economic and social uprising since the 1979 Revolution (Amirshahi 2022). This uprising took place in a poor, marginalized neighborhood in Mashhad, called *Kuy-e Tolab*, in protesting the demolition of illegal houses by the municipality. The largest unrest of this decade occurred in 1995 in the working class town of Islamshahr located south of Tehran (Farzaneh and Hosseini 2020:118). Early April of 1995, following a 30% increase in transportation fares and strikes by drivers, along with the absence of public transportation and the lack of available vehicles for commuting, workers launched significant protests with the participation of 50,000 people. Both uprisings were met with harsh suppression.

### **5.3. The Period of ITM Revitalization**

As Rafsanjani's government approached its final months in 1997, the election atmosphere became increasingly political. Although his economic policy was contrary to the 1980s' relatively redistributive policy, his politics continued the same pattern of harsh suppression. Therefore, two major social groups dissatisfied with Rafsanjani's government emerged: a growing population of educated youth, as well as workers, the poor, and marginalized. Interestingly, these were generally the same two major social groups that participated in the 1979 Revolution.

In this context, the 23 May 1997 presidential election became a historic event. The political atmosphere became bipolar, with cleric Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri representing the conservatives and cleric Mohammad Khatami representing the Reformists. Despite the

authoritative faction's support for Nategh Nouri, Khatami managed to defeat him with 20 million votes compared to Nategh Nouri's 7 million votes. Khatami managed to secure a decisive majority vote by emphasizing political development, civil society, and the rule of law. His discourse won the support of young voters (known as first-time voters). Two decades after the so-called Cultural Revolution and purging within universities of dissidents, the university student body came out to support Khatami. This conveyed a strong message from the young reformist generation to the authoritative faction that their Cultural Revolution project failed.

During the first two decades after the Revolution, education experienced significant growth. The literacy rate increased from 47.5% in 1976 to 80% in 1996, and the number of university students from 154,000 in 1977 to 250,000 in 1997. During this period, elementary student population reached 7.5 million. The ratio of literate women to illiterate women increased from 36% in 1977 to 74% in 1996. The numbers of girls with secondary and higher education also saw substantial growth, with over 51% of university admissions in 1997 comprising female students (Qasemisiani, Mahmudiraja, and Ravash 2016:122). The educated class believed that economic development required political freedom. Their viewpoints became instrumental in the election of Khatami.

Khatami's discourse of political development and constitutionalism created a rift in the political landscape: the Reformist-hardliner duality. Although Khatami's discourse introduced a new political vision, his economic policies largely continued the unsuccessful structural adjustment program of Rafsanjani (Mo'meni 2009). If the Rafsanjani government aimed for an authoritative structural adjustment, Khatami's administration sought to implement the same economic policies using the discourse of civil liberties and political development.

The Reformist government managed to partially open up the political space. One of its major achievements was to establish Islamic Councils of Cities and Rurals (“Eighteen Years” 2015). The rift between the power factions provided a relatively suitable environment for the growth of civil society institutions. Those years (July 1997-August 2005) witnessed a significant growth in publications, intellectual forums, political parties, and NGOs.

### *5.3.1. Reorganization of the Teachers’ Associations*

After approximately two decades of severe suppression and the dissolution of all independent teachers’ associations, at the time of Khatami’s presidency there remained two teachers’ associations: the Islamic Association of Teachers (*Anjoman-e Eslami-ye Mo’aleman*) and the Islamic Teachers’ Society (*Jame’h-ye Mo’aleman-e Mosalman*). The former was established in 1977 by Islamists Mohammad Ali Raja’i, Mohammad Javad Bahonar, and Mohammad Hossein Beheshti. Although the Association was established before the Revolution, it was officially registered with the Ministry of Interior in 1991. According to its charter, “Membership of association’s members in organizations or other parties is permissible, provided that their objectives do not conflict with the objectives of the association and two-thirds of the members of the Central Council approve it” (“Charter of Islamic Association” n.d.). The Islamic Association of Teachers later joined the Reformist front and in the 2005 presidential election, it supported the Reformist candidate, Mostafa Moein. The Islamic Teachers’ Society was established in 1986. Its declared goal was to bring about fundamental Islamic transformations in the educational system. Its charter stated, “Guardianship of the Imam Khomeini involves absolute obedience to the Supreme Leader of the Muslims of the World, Ayatollah Khamenei, and striving to preserve the

achievements of the Islamic Revolution” (“Charter of the Islamic Teachers’ Society” n.d.). Thus, both associations were affiliated with different power factions.

While Khatami’s government sought to shape civil society in its own way, the Tehran Education Department issued a press release in 1998, inviting teacher activists to come to the department to discuss the establishment of a new teachers’ union. Out of the subsequent meetings, three teachers’ associations emerged: (1) the House of Teachers (*Khaneh-ye Mo’aleman*) associated with the hardliners; (2) the Teachers’ Organization (*Sazman-e Mo’aleman*) affiliated with the Reformists; and (3) the Teachers’ Guild Center (*Kanun-e Senfi-ye Mo’aleman*) that declared its *autonomy* from political factions (“Mourning” 2019).

Born out of the 1979 Revolution and abandoned due to state repression, the idea of an autonomous teachers’ professional organization reappeared after 20 years, emphasizing the term “guild” or professional (*senfi*) in its designation. A group of teachers who called themselves the “Chalk-holding Teachers” (*Mo’aleman-e Gachbedast*) viewed the state-affiliated associations as political (read: dependent upon the state) and, to distinguish themselves from state-affiliated associations, they revitalized the term *senfi*, here connoting autonomous. In this context, therefore, *senfi* registered the refusal to associate the ITM with the state: a gesture towards the grassroots. The designation *senfi* by the “Chalk-holding Teachers” enabled a strategic move and launched an independent movement of teachers. Moreover, this designation provided the teachers with a defensive shield against the authoritative Islamic regime which did not tolerate any independent collective and was always ready to brutally suppress any such association by attributing to them affiliation with political (subversive) opposition. Also, the term *senfi* conveyed the message to teachers that the teachers’ leadership was based on the teachers as a

collective body, not on any political force, thus reassuring teachers that their collective action would not be exploited by political factions. Lastly, *senfi* conveyed the message that regardless of their ideologies, teachers could unite for the pursuit of their collective interests. By emphasizing *senfi*, the Chalk-holding Teachers essentially laid the foundations of a potentially hegemonic teachers' movement.

Born in 1996, the Iran/Tehran Teachers' Guild Center (*Kanun-e Senfi-ye Mo'aleman-e Iran/Tehran*; hereafter I/TTGC) emerged as the first embodiment of the above ideas. The Constitutive Assembly of I/TTGC took place on March 7, 2000 with the motto: "Chalk-holding Teachers and the Board of Directors should be as transparent as a glass room." (Bakhtiari 2021:75) In the Assembly, members of Board of Directors and Inspectors were elected, and the Charter of the Teachers' Guild was approved. I/TTGC received its permit from Ministry of Interior in December 2000 for a period of three years (Bakhtiari 2021:75).

According to Article 1 of its Charter, I/TTGC was a non-political and non-profit organization. Article 2 mandated I/TTGC to establish branches, offices, or representations in other cities. The Charter stressed that I/TTGC was independent. Its objectives included fostering unity and cohesion among teachers and defending the rights of all educators. Interestingly, the Charter pointed out creating a deep and lasting relationship between teachers and other segments of society. It declared that anyone with a degree in the field of education and a permanent contract with Ministry of Education could become a member of I/TTGC. Contrary to the Islamic Association of Teachers and the Islamic Teachers' Society, which allowed its members to have membership in state-affiliated political parties, I/TTGC stressed its independence from the Islamic regime. Article 16 of I/TTGC forbade members of the Board of Directors and the

General Secretary to be members of any political parties and hold any government position (“Iran/Tehran” n.d.). Following Article 2 of I/TTGC, teachers’ guild centers appeared in Isfahan, Khorasan, Shiraz, and Hamedan. In a meeting in February 2003, I/TTGC Charter was adopted as the general charter for all teachers’ guild centers in the country (Bakhtiari 2021:75). Subsequently, TGCs emerged in various towns and cities.

### 5.3.2. *Formation of CCGAIT*

Although in 1979-1981 efforts were made by the TICs to establish a central coordinating organ for teachers’ associations, they could not achieve this goal. It was in 2001 that TGCs managed to establish a coordinating organization, called “Coordinating Council of Guild Associations of Iranian Teachers” (*Showra-ye Hamahangi-ye Tashakkolha-ye Senfi-ye Mo’aleman-e Iran*; henceforth: CCGAIT). Typically, the teachers’ association in Tehran played a leadership role for TICs and later TGCs across the country, maintaining a vertical relationship. This was the first time that teachers managed to create a democratic central organization.

Article 1 of CCGAIT Charter referred to it as a non-political and non-profit organization, the purpose of which was to coordinate and pursue the decisions of TGCs across the country. The CCGAIT consisted of three pillars: General Assembly, Central Council, and Inspectors. The General Assembly was the highest decision-making authority. It was comprised of delegates of various TGCs upon approval of the CCGAIT Secretariat. Each TGC had one vote (“Coordinating Council” n.d.). The Biannual General Assembly met every August and March. An Extraordinary General Assembly could be convened under special circumstances, upon the request of an Inspector or the Central Council. The responsibilities of the Extraordinary General Assembly

included approving changes to the Charter, reviewing and approving the dissolution of the CCGAIT, and removing members of the Central Council. The dismissal of the Central Council could be only placed on the General Assembly's agenda after it was approved by the Ministry of Interior. The tasks of the General Assembly included electing members of the Central Council and Inspectors; reviewing and approving the proposals of the Central Council; and determining the general policies of the Coordination Council. The Central Council consisted of an Executive Board composed of up to 15 regular members and up to two alternate members. The Central Council served as the legal representative of the council and was responsible for issuing statements and resolutions. The General Assembly elected the Central Council for a one-year term. The Inspectors were selected by the General Assembly. Their task was to supervise the proper implementation of the Charter ("Coordinating Council" n.d.).

While the teachers' reorganization was in process and sought to recruit members from 1998 to 2002, an important university student protest took place. On July 6, 1999 the reformist newspaper *Salaam* was shut down (Behnood 2004) after exposing that Iranian intelligence had murdered Mohammad Mokhtari, a Leftist intellectual and a member of the Iranian Writers' Association. The report showed that Iranian intelligence was behind the action and had further plans for the serial murder of secular writers and publishers between 1990 and 1998 (Rostami 2020). *Salaam's* closure sparked protests by the University of Tehran's students on July 9-14, 1999. These protests were violently suppressed by Iranian security, resulting in the deaths of several students. While the victims of President Rafsanjani's economic reconstruction were the impoverished, the first victims of President Khatami's political freedoms were university students.

This was the first major university student protest after the 1979 Revolution. It was important in several respects: firstly, two decades after the Cultural Revolution and the suppression of universities, students had revitalized the university as a center of resistance against dictatorship, and making it political once again; secondly, the violent crackdown of students occurred under the Reformist government that had come to power with promises of civil liberties and rule of law, and was elected by the first-time voters. This affair exposed the limitations of the Reformist discourse, and young Iranians began to seriously question if the Reformists could deliver their promises.

#### **5.4. The Period of Organized, Conscious Actions**

While several workers' strikes and protests took place in the late 1990s (Darolshafa 2020), the first teachers' protests could be traced back to 2001. When the budget was being reviewed in the Majles in November 2000, a deputy stated: "The extraordinary salaries of government employees will increase by 20 percent, except for teachers" (Bakhtiari 2021:86). Considering that one of the longstanding demands of teachers was the elimination of pay discrimination between teachers and other government employees, this news agitated teachers. However, there is no report of teachers' protests until December 2001, when the Majles was reviewing the budget for 2002. So, this must be regarded as the first post-revolutionary teachers' protest (Poursoleiman n.d.). Considering the rally was planned to be held after Friday prayers in Tehran, it could be speculated that that was organized by the (pro-hardliner) Islamic Teachers' Society. The hardliners who were aware of the teachers' historical sensitivity towards discrimination captured the time of budget review in the Majles to channel teachers' protests towards the Reformist

government. In response to the demonstration, “organizations close to the Reformists organized another protest on 15 January 2001” (Bakhtiari 2021:85) to show their influence among teachers and exert pressure on their rival faction, the hardliners. But the teachers’ demands went beyond what the Reformist organizers wanted. Around 3,000 angry teachers chanted: “Teachers do not have bread”; “If salaries are not increased, classes will be shut down”; and “Inexperienced Minister of Education must resign”. The Minister of Education was a Reformist, of course (Bakhtiari 2021:85)! A week later, a rally of 8,000 to 10,000 teachers was held before the Majles. This was the largest rally after the war (Bakhtiari 2021:85). By contrast to the previous two protests (pro-hardliner and pro-Reformist teachers), neither faction identified with this protest (Bakhtiari:85). Although this demonstration seemed spontaneous, the slogans and demands voiced there reappeared in statements and protests organized by CCGAIT.

After spending 5 years for reorganization, various TGCs gradually began to engage in activism from 2002. The initial statements of CCGAIT did not call for direct activism from the teachers. It seems that after reorganization, the leadership was now seeking to realize and articulate teachers’ specific demands. In its Statement #3 (August 14, 2002), CCGAIT reiterated that it was a guild organization and called for an end to salary discrimination between teachers and other government employees (Khaksari 2011). While the teachers’ protests organized by state-affiliated teachers’ associations were often exploited for maneuvering within political hierarchy, by stressing its “guild” character, CCGAIT emphasized that teachers would not be exploited as an instrument in struggles between political factions.

Building upon this, Statement #4 (March 7, 2003) outlined a more comprehensive set of demands. These included the elimination of salary discrimination; amnesty for teachers who

faced persecution for their guild activities; simplifying the licensing process for TGCs across the country; ensuring an adequate and equitable budget for the Ministry of Education and Training; re-establishing the Committee for Pursuing Educators' Demands by the presidency with the active participation of representatives from TGCs; making temporary-contract teachers into permanent employment; and addressing the welfare of retired teachers (Khaksari 2013a). By articulating the demands of retired and temporary teachers, the leadership expanded its social base. This declaration warned that if the demands were not met by the mid-April 2003, the teachers would take legal action to pursue their objectives (Khaksari 2013a). Emphasizing the legality of teachers' collective actions made it more difficult for the regime to suppress the teachers. The ITM endeavored to utilize all available capacities within the Constitution to achieve its goals.

The first call to action by CCGAIT took place on 3 May 2003 on the occasion of Iranian Teacher's Day as teachers gathered in schools and expressed their demands on placards (Khaksari 2012a). The government responded by establishing a 10-person committee consisting of teachers' representatives and authorities. Surprisingly, there was no representative from the TGCs in the Committee (Bakhtiari 2021:88). The government was unwilling to receive any independent teachers' representative. In response, some representatives met with the Majles Speaker, Mehdi Karoubi, who promised that two representatives from the TGCs would attend in the Committee. Eventually, two TGC representatives attended the Committee but were barred from attending the Committee after their first meeting (Khaksari 2013b). In response, CCGAIT issued its Statement #6, urging the 10-person committee to meet the teachers' demands before September 2003. It warned that if the demands were not met, a widespread protest action would

be organized for the World Teachers' Day (a UNESCO annual event) on October 5 (Khaksari 2013b).

The members of CCGAIT were invited by the Majles to attend the impeachment session of the Minister of Education in August 2003. The Reformist Teachers opposed the impeachment and attempted to sway the votes of deputies by distributing a booklet defending the Reformist Minister. CCGAIT took a different position influenced by its fundamental principle of autonomy: while welcoming the principle of impeachment as a fundamental right of deputies, CCGAIT reminded the Minister of his unfulfilled promises. It pointed out that the main demand of teachers was a fundamental transformation of the education system, no matter who the Minister was (Khaksari 2015a). The impeachment ultimately failed.

The teachers' demands were not met by the deadline of September, and the CCGAIT organized a protest action for the World Teachers' Day on 5 October, calling on teachers to refuse to attend classes. The government reacted by summoning, detaining, and interrogating the teachers. In response, CCGAIT organized a demonstration in front of the Organization of Planning and Budget on November 8, 2003. This marked its first call for protest in a public space. However, CCGAIT asked TGCs representatives, and not the body of teachers, to participate in this rally. Given the arrests of teachers in the previous protests, it appears that CCGAIT took this tactic so that teachers would not be intimidated by repression.

Statement #8 was the outcome of this action: it called for the elimination of existing salary disparities in the public sector through the approval of the Law on Coordinated Payment System for Government Employees. It also requested a meeting with the President to make sure that the Law would be budgeted. The statement strongly objected to the summoning and arrests

of teachers in relation to the World Teachers' Day action (Khaksari 2014a). The outcome of the 10-person Committee eventually resulted in partial remuneration of the teachers' unpaid payments (Bakhtiari 2021:88). In its Statement #10 (November 2003), the CCGAIT went beyond its objection to the failure of salary harmonization and criticized the government for trying to train subservient, obedient students, instead of critical thinkers. It declared that TGCs across the country would strive to organize a rally in Tehran in January if the necessary permits were issued by the government (Khaksari 2012b). This was the first CCGAIT call for a street protest, but the CCGAIT wanted to do it legally. As expected, the government denied the permit and CCGAIT instructed teachers to attend schools but refrain from teaching classes for three days (January 17-19, 2004) (Khaksari 2012b).

Following this successful action (Khaksari 2013c), CCGAIT scheduled a meeting in February 2004 while the next year's national budget was being discussed in the Majles (Khaksari 2013c). Teachers had realized the limits of legal action and the necessity of a social force of teachers to push authorities to meet their demands. The outcome of this meeting was formulated into the famous "Yazd Statement," which could be considered the most important statement by the CCGAIT up to that point, since it presented a clear plan for a course of protest actions. First, TGCs' representatives would rally before the Majles when the budget was debated. Then, if their demands were not met, teachers would hold a two-day sit-in protest in front of their towns' Education offices from 2-4 May 2004 (Khaksari 2013c). This was CCGAIT's first call for action without applying for a permit. It argued that according to the Constitution's Article 27, "peaceful protests were permissible as long as they were non-militant and did not undermine the

foundations of Islam”. Finally, if these two actions failed, the representatives from TGCs would hold a sit-in protest before the Ministry of Education (Khaksari 2013c).

In accordance with the Yazd Statement, representatives of the TGCs rallied in front of the Majles at the time of the budget debate on February 28, 2004. Despite the police efforts to disperse the teachers, they eventually managed to meet with some deputies from opposing factions and the Majles Speaker Karroubi (Khaksari 2015b). While Karroubi and some deputies had promised teachers in December that their salaries would increase, they now stated that this Majles was in its final days and they could not deliver any promises (“Teachers: Authorities” 2004). In response, the teachers invoked the Yazd Statement and called for refraining from teaching classes for one week (March 6-13, 2004). Aside from salary harmonization, they now demanded the implementation of Special Plan for Educators (Khaksari 2015b). According to the Plan, teachers’ salaries should be increased higher than those of other government employees to reduce salary disparities (“Teachers: Authorities” 2004). The call led to the closure of schools for nearly two weeks in more than 400 cities (“Review of Social” n.d.). This marked the longest and widest teachers’ strike in the 2000s (Bakhtiari 2021:92), demonstrating that CCGAIT managed to gain the teachers’ trust across Iran within a short period of time. The Islamic regime responded to the teachers’ strike with a new wave of oppressive measures (Bakhtiari 2021:92). The *Qalam-e Mo’alem* (Teacher’s Pen) weekly magazine, the only independent teachers’ tribune, was shut down on the last day of the strike, for 920 days. This happened at a time when social media had not yet expanded in Iran, and the weekly played a great role in disseminating information.

During 2004, the TGCs faced numerous challenges and difficulties: their magazine could convey TGCs’ statements and reports to the body, and all factions within the regime now

opposed teachers' autonomy (Khaksari 2013d). In such a situation, representative of TGCs held a meeting on 14 April 2004 to discuss the implementation of the Yazd Statement's call for protest action. Reports from the TGCs indicated that due to increasing security pressures, disagreements had appeared among the representatives about the next course of action. During this meeting, the teachers received an invitation from Ministry of Education to meet with teachers' representatives (Khaksari 2013d). While the authorities had previously rejected the inclusion of representatives from TGCs in the 10-person Committee in 2003, now after the two-week strike, they wanted to meet the representatives.

The meeting was held on 15 April 2004. Attending the meetings were representatives of the Ministry of Education, Organization for Management and Planning, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Intelligence (Khaksari 2013d). The composition of the authorities in this meeting carried a message: the first two were responsible for teachers' salaries, while the latter two monitored the ITM as a security issue. This composition implied that the regime had decided to partially address the teachers' guild demands but would no longer tolerate collective actions of CCGAIT and TGCs. In the meeting, the Ministry of Education spokesperson presented a plan to increase teachers' salaries in 2004. The authorities from the Ministries of Interior and Intelligence threatened that if the CCGAIT did not retract the Yazd Statement, all TGCs' permits would be revoked. Surprisingly, CCGAIT representatives agreed to retract the Yazd Statement but insisted that their rally on Iranian Teachers' Day would still proceed (Khaksari 2013d). Out of this meeting, the Statement #13 of CCGAIT (April 15, 2004) was issued. It announced that CCGAIT had agreed to postpone the decisions outlined in the Yazd Statement until the next CCGAIT meeting in August 2004. The Statement called for May 2, 2004 rally at Ministry of

Education offices in cities to discuss the agenda for August. It also asked for the lifting on the publication ban of *Qalam-e Mo'alem* (Khaksari 2013d).

While the CCGAIT cancelled the Yazd statement in the hope that the regime would stop its suppressive measures, the regime intensified its security pressure on TGCs. In response, representatives of TGCs rallied in front of the Ministry of Education on May 22, 2004, and in their final resolution, the representatives announced they would return to protesting given that “the security atmosphere against teachers was escalating, [and] state media sought to exaggerate teachers’ salary increase to manipulate public opinion and portray teachers as greedy” (Khaksari 2014b). Due to summer school closures (June-September) no further action was undertaken by teachers.

Security forces exploited the closure to intensify pressures on TGCs. On July 10, 2004, Mahmoud Beheshti Langroodi, Secretary-General of Tehran’s TGC, and Ali Asghar Zati, a member of the Executive Committee and former Spokesperson of Tehran’s TGC, were arrested. In reaction, and since security pressures limited the possibility of participation by the body of teachers, representatives of TGCs took the lead themselves. They rallied in front of the Majles on July 18. Eventually, they met with Hamidreza Haji Babaei, a member of the Majles’s governing council. He advised teachers to wait until the investigations regarding the detained teachers were complete. This led to disagreements among teacher activists: some wanted to stage a sit-in protest at the Majles until their colleagues were released, while others were concerned that such action might worsen the situation for the detained teachers. Ultimately, they decided to follow Haji Babaei’s suggestion. The next day, they met with a prosecutor to demand their colleagues’ release, but to no avail.

Subsequently, Statement #15 was published (Khaksari 2013e). Stressing the constitutional rights of teachers, the Statement said that measures taken against teachers violated Articles 15, 32, and 37 of the Constitution (Khaksari 2013e). According to Article 15, teaching in mother tongue is permissible in elementary schools. Article 32 oversees the conditions of detention. And Article 37 announces the presumption of innocence. As such, the CCGAIT members' arrests were unlawful, the Statement held (Khaksari 2013e). Adhering to the law and maintaining independence were clearly the two fundamental pillars of TGCs. The Statement demanded the following: the immediate and unconditional release of the arrested teachers; ceasing court appearances and lifting judicial and security charges against guild activists; holding a sit-in protest on July 19-20, 2004, in front of the Majles and the Ministry of Justice; and organizing sit-ins in the provinces and counties at Education offices Sunday until the release of the arrested teachers (Khaksari 2013e). On the same day, Ministry of Education announced that based on its Career Promotion Plan, implemented since July, teachers' salaries had increased on average from 2,010,000 (i.e., \$228) to 2,400,000 rials (i.e., \$272). The Ministry also announced increase in housing mortgages for teachers and improvements in their medical insurance services ("Average Salaries" 2004). The TGCs criticized the Plan as a ruse so that the government would avoid implementing the Law on Coordinated Payment System for Government Employees, according to which teachers' salaries were supposed to annually increase by 10 percent more than those of other government employees (Bakhtiari 2021:95).

While the government sought to improve teachers' subsistence through its Career Promotion Plan, teacher-activists continued to be suppressed. The TGCs' representatives convened in Gilan on August 15, 2004, and issued CCGAIT Statement #16, which criticized the

government's Career Promotion Plan and insisted on the elimination of salary inequities. The interesting point in this statement was that it raised concerns about the lack of a comprehensive plan to improve the education system and called for granting contract teachers permanent positions (Khaksari 2012c). Intense security pressures had taught the TGCs that they should strengthen their constituency by raising the demands of different sectors within educators. Moreover, the demand to convert temporary contracts into permanent ones indicated how after the privatization plans by Rafsanjani's government, the outsourcing of the labor force through temporary contracts had increasingly affected the teachers, in contrast to pre-1990s when teachers used to be government employees on permanent contracts (Khaksari 2012c). Meanwhile, state propaganda released misinformation about teachers which demonstrated that the regime feared that the teachers' demands might gain extended social support. Notably, all of TGCs' representatives attending the Gilan meeting were temporarily arrested (Khaksari 2012c).

After the release of the Gilan Statement (#16), several members of the TGCs were arrested. Among them were eight members of the Yazd TGC who had been selected as the secretaries of the CCGAIT (Khaksari 2013f). While Statement #16 had planned a series of protest actions on the occasion of World Teachers' Day, no action took place due to security pressures, and the TGCs' meetings were also suspended. These crackdowns, it must be noted, took place during the presidency of the Reformist Khatami who was widely regarded as a defender of civil society and political freedom.

The next CCGAIT meeting, originally scheduled to be held in Mashhad in February 2005, was held in Kermanshah on April 21-22, 2005. In this meeting, differing opinions on how to respond to the wave of arrests and persecutions were debated. Some advocated a strong

statement condemning the arrests and the state's failure to address teachers' demands, while others believed that such a statement would only invite further threats against CCGAIT and the TGCs. Ultimately, they decided to convey their message through a symbol: “!?” This statement was issued in the final months of the Reformist government (Khaksari 2013f).

While the student movement in the second year of the Reformist government in 1999 faced the paradox of Reform-suppression, as mentioned above, the teachers' movement in the final years of the Reform government in 2005 faced this paradox. Facing repression under a Reformist government, the ITM leadership sought to explore “new technologies such as cellphones” (Bakhtiari 2021:97). At this time, a new generation of young teachers with the experience of student movement came to connect with the teachers (Bakhtiari 2021:97). These young teachers, who “were mostly from peripheral towns” (Bakhtiari 2021:97) identified themselves, two decades later, as “Justice-Seeking Educators”: this generation of teachers finally provided a solution to the dilemma first posed by the “Chalk-holding Teachers,” their predecessors, after a decade of guild activities under the Reformist government: politicizing the Movement, to which we will attend in Chapter 6.

### **5.5. The Crisis of Government and ITM**

In 2005, as Iran's presidential election approached, several TGCs sought to consider the plans of the presidential candidates regarding education. However, concerns were raised about the potential compromise of TGCs' independence. It was decided that engaging in discussions with the candidates should not allow them to exploit these sessions, and the autonomy of all TGCs should be safeguarded. Endorsing any candidate was strongly discouraged. Following the

meetings with representatives of the presidential candidates, Statement #18 was released on June, 10, 2005. It acknowledged that the candidates had recognized the rightful demands of teachers and proposed solutions, including salary increases, ending discrimination against teachers, and supporting guild activities of teachers. The CCGAIT reiterated that it did not endorse any specific candidate. It emphasized that teachers should recognize the value of their votes and use them in the best interest of the nation and the teachers. The statement ends with these sentences: “Undoubtedly, achieving our goals relies solely on a conscious and purposeful vote, accompanied by executive guarantees” (Khaksari 2012d). This announcement served as a clear demonstration of the prevailing mindset of the leadership during that period.

In the 2005 presidential election, seven candidates competed after being qualified by the Guardian Council: former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karroubi, Ali Larijani, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, and Mostafa Moein. Rafsanjani stood out with his discourse of reconstruction, which was accused of *ashrafiyyat* by the hardliners; Karroubi, Mehralizadeh, and Moein represented the Reformists; and Larijani, Qalibaf, and Ahmadinejad stood as hardliners. The last three candidates all expressly opposed the Reformists. However, a significant point of difference was that Ahmadinejad, unlike Larijani and Qalibaf, positioned himself in direct confrontation with Rafsanjani.

Ahmadinejad was a staunch critic of previous administrations, accusing them of deviating from revolutionary values and engaging in *ashrafiyyat* which, he claimed, had monopolized the nation’s wealth. In contrast, he portrayed himself as a supporter of the downtrodden, pledging to return the country to the people, and fulfil the promise of the 1979 Revolution. He had defended

the closure of the *Salaam* newspaper and crackdown on the student uprising at the University of Tehran. He emerged as the preferred candidate of the hardliners. While the educated youth were disenchanted with eight years of the Reformist government, Ahmadinejad managed to win the support of the poor and underprivileged, through his discourse of social justice and the fight against *ashrafiyyat* (Qasemisiani, Mahmudiraja and Ravash 2016:117). No candidate reached the required 50%+1 in the first round, and in the second round of election, Ahmadinejad defeated the runner-up, Rafsanjani. Karroubi, Rafsanjani, and Moein accused the hardliners of manipulating the votes in favor of Ahmadinejad (“Full Text of Karoubi” 2005; “Full Text of Rafsanjani” 2005; “Moein’s Message” 2005).

For Ahmadinejad the buzzword “downtrodden” signified both Iranians and those outside Iran linking him to Khomeini’s ideological emphasis on the liberation of Qods (Jerusalem). In October 2005, Ahmadinejad denied the Holocaust and called for the annihilation of Israel (“Important Events” 2009). At the same time, Iran announced its nuclear development plans, leading the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to refer Iran’s nuclear case to the United Nations Security Council in February 2006 (“Important Events” 2009). The growing securitization of Iran’s situation in international relations created an opportunity for the hardliners to secure their position within the state. They had now the chance to not only weaken their rivals but also regain a significant lost stronghold: university and education.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad appointed as the head of University of Tehran a cleric named Abbas-Ali Amid-Zanjani, who had played a role in purging university professors during the Cultural Revolution. During the three years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency at the University of Tehran, a widespread wave of early retirements and expulsions of professors, as well as pressure

on student activists and groups, took place (“Mahmud Ahmadinejad” 2013). After a couple of failed attempts at appointing Ministers of Education who would be ratified by the Majles, Ahmadinejad appointed Mahmoud Farshidi, his close associate, as the new Education Minister.

The CCGAIT held its first meeting under the Ahmadinejad government on September 14, 2005. The teachers’ meeting took place with hopes of seeing positive changes with the new government. They stressed the autonomy of TGCs, cautioned against any attempts to compromise their independence, and defined the teachers’ guild movement as a continuous and just movement aimed at securing guild/professional rights (Khaksari 2013g). The emphasis on justice seemed to be aligned with the justice discourse of the new government. Perhaps the teachers at the time believed that by emphasizing their just demands, the Ahmadinejad government would more likely meet their demands. All this while, the teachers evoked Samad Behrangi’s famous motto: “A right is to be taken, not given away”. In this meeting, the teachers decided to establish three new committees: “the Committee of Statements, the Committee of Legal Support of the arrested and persecuted teachers’ guild activists, and the Committee for the Struggle against the Privatization of Education” (Khaksari 2013g). The meeting issued Statement #20 articulating teachers’ specific demands: elimination of employment inequities between teachers (retired or working) and other government employees; issuance of permits for teachers’ organizations and dropping all charges against guild activists and the stoppage of reprisals. The statement raised concerns regarding the quality of education and as well as privatization, and also called for a rally at Education offices on October 5, 2005, on the occasion of World Teachers’ Day. Its last sentence was “God bless justice seekers” (Khaksari 2013g), which could be interpreted as implicit support for the new government. Overall, the tone of this statement

revealed that there was a glimmer of optimism that the new government might address teachers' demands.

There is no record indicating that the World Teachers' Day (October 2005) action took place. The next action involved representatives of TGCs rallying in front of the Majles during budget debate on March 7, 2006. They raised concerns about the budget's failure to address the Public Service Management Act, and called for improvements in their subsistence and status. The teachers' representatives were barred from discussing their grievances with the deputies. Instead, a group of teachers met with the Cultural Commission of the Majles. Criticizing the security crackdown on teacher-activists, the representatives of teachers concluded that *any negotiation with the authorities would be fruitless unless it was supported by teachers as a collective body* (Khaksari 2013h; my emphasis).

In the context of the Iranian nuclear issue and global efforts to curb the nuclear plan, on April 15, 2006, CCGAIT declared that given the sensitive international threats against Iran, it would require a permit to hold the Iranian Teacher's Day rally on May 2, 2007. If a permit were not issued, the teachers would rally at the Education offices (Khaksari 2014c). This was the second time CCGAIT requested permission to hold a rally in Tehran. As expected, the government did not issue a permit and the rally was not held. However, teachers did rally at Education offices across the country (Bakhtiari 2021:99). After the teachers' protests in 2001, the government had presented the bill for Public Service Management to the Majles. By the late months of 2006, news began to circulate among teachers about the government's intention to withdraw that bill. This news sparked the teachers' anger. Seven rallies were held before the Majles from February to March of 2007 (Bakhtiari 2021:100).

CCGAIIT issued a call for a demonstration in front of the Majles on February 4, 2007 in *Qalam-e Mo'alem*, its journal that had received finally a publication permit after three years (Khaksari 2014d). This was CCGAIIT's first call for action without applying for a permit. This call was enthusiastically received by teachers (Khaksari 2014d). The teachers chanted, "you who claim to seek justice, shame on you!" ("Thousands of Teachers" 2007), targeting Ahmadinejad's justice rhetoric.

The rally's resolution offered a brief overview of the ITM's history since 2002, highlighting the unfulfilled promises made by the authorities and the repressive measures taken against teachers. It identified employment inequities as the major problem faced by teachers. The resolution emphasized that despite repression, the teachers' determination to save and improve *public education* remained unbroken (Khaksari 2014d; my emphasis). Highlighting public education was important, since it was a more general demand compared to teachers' salaries. Moreover, the teachers' salaries were discursively linked, as a necessary condition, to improving public education. Struggling for quality, public education has the potential to elevate teachers' activism to an ethico-political level. Thus, calling for enhancement of public education was a necessary condition to create subaltern-center education and it had the potential for ITM to link the teachers' movement with other social groups. Public education would later play a central role in the discourse of "Justice-seeking Teachers." The resolution pointed out that the number of TGCs had increased from 20 to 40 over the past decade (Khaksari 2014d). Therefore, while the ITM leadership considered the growth of teachers' guild unions as a victory, it acknowledged that achieving its demands necessitated that *society at large should recognize the teachers' demands as its own*. The resolution also addressed immediate issues faced by students, ranging

from inadequate facilities including the lack of proper heating systems. The statement raised questions about President Ahmadinejad's discourse on justice, asserting that the government suppressed the just demands of teachers. The statement set a 10-day ultimatum for the Majles to pass the Law on Coordinated Payment System for Government Employees, calling for boycott of classes on February 19-20, 2007, if their demands were not met. It also warned the authorities against the potential arrests of CCGAIT members (Khaksari 2014d). Some teachers took additional action by rallying in front of the Majles on February 19-20, chanting slogans such as "If teachers' demands are not met, we will close schools;" "We may not have tanks and guns, but we have students behind us" (Bakhtiari 2021:101). This rally appeared to be spontaneous, and it seemed to have been organized by a group of young teachers who later become known as the "Justice-seeker Teachers".

Building on the social pressure following the 19-20 February grassroots rally, CCGAIT called for a demonstration before the Majles on February 21, 2007. Approximately 5,000 to 6,000 teachers attended this rally. What set this rally apart from previous ones was the strong and active participation of women (Bakhtiari 2021:102). The final resolution of the rally declared another rally on March 3, 2007. It stressed that teachers did not recognize any authority other than the President and the Speaker of Majles, and in the absence of a clear response, teachers would boycott classes beginning March 6, 2007 (Bakhtiari 2021:102). The Reformist Teachers' Organization also issued a call for a rally before the Majles on March 3, 2007 (Bakhtiari 2021:102). The CCGAIT held its conference on March 2, 2007, to decide about the next courses of action. In this meeting, the resolution to grant the Teachers' Organization CCGAIT membership did not receive sufficient votes and was turned down.

In the final resolution of the March 3 rally, the CCGAIT emphasized that it was impossible to suppress the teachers, a majority of whom were living below the poverty line. The statement criticized state media's misinformation regarding salary increases for teachers (Khaksari 2014e); a strategy of the regime to reduce the ITM to haggling for money, thus isolating it. In contrast, the statement emphasized that the teachers' demands went beyond mere economic considerations and were instead rooted in the preservation of their social status (Khaksari 2014e). It is worth noting that there was a significant difference between the teachers' salaries and those of other public sectors. While like any other sectors and classes the teachers needed to reproduce their labor power, their inability to do so contradicted their role as intellectual leaders of students. The teachers now questioned how a teacher who is struggling to make ends meet could inspire students to the idea that education would lead them to a bright future.

The statement further highlighted several other necessary conditions for preserving teachers' dignity and social status. These included: promoting the implementation of participatory school management systems; fostering freedom of speech and expression within the education system; and reforming teachers' recruitment system to prioritize active and critical teachers rather than those who conform to the regime's ideology (Khaksari 2014e). Therefore, as moral and intellectual leaders of students, teachers must enjoy freedom, which would be realized through the management of the education institutions by teachers themselves. The statement asked, "How can I teach my students about freedom when I myself am being oppressed?" (Khaksari 2014e). The statement further expressed its support for the teachers' rally scheduled in front of the Majles on 3 March 2007. It then outlined its specific demands: the immediate

implementation of the Law on Coordinated Payment System for Government Employees, and the impeachment of Minister of Education (Khaksari 2014e). The following day, about 10,000 teachers rallied in front of the Majles. A speaker at the rally announced the next protest on March 5, 2007, if President Ahmadinejad would not allocate the required budget for the Public Service Management Act by March 4, 2007 (Bakhtiari:103). This was CCGAIT's way of building pressure on government.

Following the President's disregard for the Public Service Management Act, the demonstration took place on March 5. Approximately 15,000 to 25,000 teachers participated in this rally (Bakhtiari 2021:104). Rallies in front of the Majles continued until March 16, 2007. Although security police only allowed teachers with identification cards to enter the Majles premises (Safarzadeh n.d.), an estimated 15,000 to 25,000 teachers marched in front of the Majles on March 8, 2017 (Bakhtiari 2021:104). The police forced the supporters of teachers to stand on the surrounding sidewalks. Many students had also come. The police treated them harshly, quickly dispersing them (Safarzadeh n.d.). Meanwhile, a group of teachers' representatives was negotiating with the deputies. Outside, the protesting teachers eagerly awaited the results. The teachers' representatives asked the people to leave the premises and gave the Majles until March 13, 2007 to take effective measures (Safarzadeh n.d.). As the frustrated teachers were gradually leaving the premises empty-handed, a group of the teachers chanted: "Schools will be closed from tomorrow," "Teacher, Teacher, Unity, Unity," "Teacher, Worker, Unity, Unity" (Safarzadeh n.d.). *This was the first time that a group of teachers articulated the unity of teachers and workers.* The police violently attacked teachers, detaining several of them (Safarzadeh n.d.).

The teachers' representatives were supposed to meet with the deputies on March 12, and announced the Majles's policy to meet teachers' demands on March 13. But police and anti-riot units had already controlled and blocked the vicinity as early as March 10 (Safarzadeh n.d.). When the teachers arrived at the premises of the Majles on March 13, they were confronted by the police and security guards. The clash was enormous: around 5,000 teachers were arrested across the country on this day ("In the Name" 2018). In reaction to the arrests, teachers refrained from attending their classes on March 14. On March 16 teachers tried to hold another rally in front of the Majles. It was unsuccessful due to heavy police presence (Bakhtiari 2021:106).

According to the report of Mohammad Khaksari, the former inspector of CCGAIT, there were two significant increases of teachers' salaries in 2004 and 2007, and coinciding with the nationwide protests by teachers (Khaksari in Bakhtiari 2021:107). The Public Service Management Act was passed in September 2007. Following the last two widespread teachers' protests, the regime had adopted a dual strategy: on one hand, addressing some of the economic grievances of teachers, and on the other, suppressing teacher-activists and TGCs.

In March 2007, a new wave of repression targeting independent organizations was launched by the Ahmadinejad government. Following the extensive teachers' action in March 2007, "the Ministry of Intelligence declared the holding of General Assemblies of TGCs illegal" (Bakhtiari 2021:106) and *Qalam-e Mo'alem* was banned again. Considering that General Assemblies were the highest decision-making body and the locus of power shift within TGCs, the prohibition of their convening dealt a severe blow to the TGCs.

Subsequently, the CCGAIT held a meeting on March 30 to adopt a position regarding the recent crackdowns. It argued that according to Article 27 of the Constitution, peaceful protests

were allowed as long as they were unarmed and did not undermine the foundations of Islam. Therefore, the violent arrest of teachers on March 13 in the vicinity of the Majles, the symbol of lawfulness, was illegal. It also highlighted how Reformist and hardliner governments acted similarly in oppressing the ITM. CCGAIT reiterated its demand for the impeachment of Farshidi, Minister of Education, and held the government accountable for the March 13 mass arrests, calling it the “Black Day of Education.” CCGAIT called for the immediate release of all arrested teachers. It further outlined the following actions: first, in response to the crackdown, teachers would abstain from attending their classes on April 15-16, 2007; second, teachers would refrain from attending classes on April 29, 2007 and would rally at Education offices across the country on May 2, 2007, Iranian Teachers’ Day; third, if the teachers’ demand for the implementation of the Law on Coordinated Payment System for Government Employees was not met, they would organize a protest in front of the Majles on May 8, 2007 (Khaksari 2012e).

The CCGAIT came under pressure to take back its call for action, leading to a new wave of arrests (Bakhtiari 2021:127). Although the security pressure was extremely intense, it was estimated that approximately 60 to 100 schools either closed or experienced teachers’ boycotting of classes on April 15-16, 2007. Ultimately, the planned protest rally at the Majles on May 8, 2007 was not held due to the heavy presence of security guards (Bakhtiari 2021:128). Similar to 2004, the regime had decided to block any and all TGC actions. Under such suffocating conditions even holding meetings by TGCs and issuing statements were considered victories; and thanks in significant part to the gradual adoption and expansion of social media, by this time, news of arrests and releases of teacher-activists circulated nationwide. Such news fostered a sense of trust in TGCs among teachers.

Meanwhile, CCGAIT attempted to hold a meeting on September 17, 2007. Security forces raided the meeting and arrested the participants. The CCGAIT's activities came to a halt. When security pressures prevented the CCGAIT from holding meetings in Tehran, TGCs in other cities attempted to counter the perception that TGCs had become inactive. Tehran's TGC called on all teachers nationwide to hold the inaugural meeting of the "Teachers' Solidarity" at their schools on October 4, 2007, coinciding with World Teachers' Day. This action was meant to facilitate discussions on education, and teachers' guild issues, and to highlight the demand for the implementation of Public Service Management Act. Teachers were encouraged to express their support of teacher-activists by signing letters addressed to the Majles (Bakhtiari 2021:131). By encouraging teachers to engage in low-risk actions, TGCs provided them with the opportunity to discuss various topics, so that their ideas would reach the leadership of the ITM.

In the same month, several notable leaders of the I/TTGC expressed their decision to run for the 2007 parliamentary elections. However, this move received severe criticism from some representatives within the teacher-activist community, emphasizing the importance of preserving the autonomy of TGCs (Bakhtiari 2021:131). I/TTGC issued a statement (4 March 2008) on the anniversary of the Black Day of Education (13 March 2007). In an innovative move, it named the days of the rallies to commemorate the historic rallies in front of the Majles in March 2007: March 5 was called the "Day of Solidarity Among Teachers"; March 6, the "Day to Appreciate Lawyers Supporting Teachers"; March 7-8, the "Days to Appreciate Outstanding Teachers in TGCs"; March 9, the "Day to Follow up on Teachers' Demands"; March 10, the "Day to Appreciate Journalists Supporting Teachers"; March 11, the "Day to Appreciate Deputies Advocating Teachers' Rights"; March 12, the "Day to Reflect on the Memories of March 2007",

and March 13, the “Day of Rejecting Violence and Defending Citizens’ Rights.” It called on all teachers to hold teachers’ consultation meetings in schools on March 9, 2008 to discuss the ways to advance their guild/professional demands. The statement urged the teachers to refrain from attending their classes on March 13, 2008 (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2008).

The wave of arrests and suppression of teacher-activists continued in 2008. Under the pretext that the TGCs’ permits had not been extended, security bodies considered TGCs illegal and proceeded to dismantle them (Bakhtiari 2021:132). Iran’s National Security Council memorandum banned the circulation of news regarding ITM in media, leaving the impression that “the associations are afraid and no longer active or have forgotten their colleagues” (“Teachers Are” n.d.). However, the I/TTGC held a meeting on the occasion of Iranian Teachers’ Day. The I/TTGC criticized the Minister of Education, security apparatus, and the President, and then raised the issue that teachers were responsible for their colleagues and other segments of society (“Teachers Are” n.d.), especially students suffering from poverty. The I/TTGC asked teachers to hold protests at the grave of Dr. Khanali on May 2, 2008 and in front of the Tehran Education office on May 6, 2008, and advised them to avoid participating in the state’s celebrations of the Teacher’s Week (“Teacher Are” n.d.). Recall that Iranian Teachers’ Day originally commemorated the murder of Khanali on May 2, 1961. On May 1, 1979, Ayatollah Motahari, a disciple of Khomeini, was assassinated. The regime used the assassination of this “exemplary teacher” to overshadow and appropriate the secular May 2 Iranian Teachers’ Day and launched a Teachers’ Week to honor the pro-regime teachers. By doing so, the regime endeavored to erase the memory of Dr. Khanali and the entire history of the teachers’ movement.

In contrast, I/TTGC celebrated Dr. Khanali in an effort to revitalize the origins of Iranian Teachers' Day.

While the government was holding the Teachers' Week events, news emerged regarding the death sentence for the Kurdish teacher-activist Farzad Kamangar. He had been imprisoned on charges of affiliation with the Kurdistan Free Life Party. The propaganda apparatus of the Islamic Republic portrayed this party as terrorist and separatist. The news of his death sentence triggered a wave of reactions and concerns, especially among teachers. The regime intended to send the message to teacher-activists, particularly Kurdish activists, that the regime had the power to subject them to death. Furthermore, considering that the TGCs in the Kurdish areas were among the most active, and calls for action in these regions consistently received high responses from teachers, the regime sought to intimidate teachers and activists in these areas. Finally, being aware that the execution of Kamangar would trigger a wave of reactions from teachers, the regime might have thought that attributing Kamangar to separatist groups, an accusation directed at Kurdish activists, could create a negative image of teachers in the public's mind. On May 2, Kurdistan's TGC protested against the death sentence issued for Farzad Kamangar, and recognized teachers' protests as a right as well as criticizing the decision of the National Security Council to ban ITM-related news ("Final Resolution of Teachers" n.d.).

Despite security pressures and arrests, CCGAIT held its meeting on July 11-12, 2008. This meeting did not issue any call to action, merely focusing on reiterating the demands of teachers and criticizing the security measures against TGCs. It protested against the death sentence imposed on Farzad Kamangar, and demanded the retraction of verdicts issued in this case and against teachers nationwide. It also demanded the renewal of TGCs' permits by the

Ministry of Interior; by this time, the permits had expired for about eight years already (Khaksari 2014f), which practically rendered TGCs' illegal associations, and thus prosecutable.

Despite intense pressures, on January 1, 2009, 30 TGC representatives rallied in front of the Majles to follow up on implementation of the Coordinated Payment System Law. The security forces dispersed them, arresting some activists. On January 4, 2009, CCGAIT issued its Statement #30. This statement referred to the Ahmadinejad government as a despotic and law-evading government that failed to implement the Coordinated Payment System Law without providing any acceptable justification. It criticized the Majles for its lack of oversight over the President. The Statement declared that all lawful means for pursuing the teachers' rightful demands were blocked, while still stressing the teachers' concerns regarding subsistence, education, and security. It called for lifting the ban on *Qalam-e Mo'alem* and release of Farzad Kamangar. CCGAIT announced it would take Kamangar's case to international forums and engage in protests. It called for rallies of teachers on World Teachers' Day throughout the country on the condition of obtaining permission (Khaksari 2014f). While the CCGAIT council had organized its rallies in March 2007 without applying for a permit, now it conditioned the future rallies on issuance of permit. It seemed that when the leadership knew it lacked strong social support from teachers due to severe suppression, it resorted to the legal options.

## **5.6. The Green Movement of 2009 and New Challenges**

As the May 2009 presidential election approached, President Ahmadinejad announced on February 17, 2009 in a televised program that the Coordinated Payment System Law would be fully implemented by early 2009 (Bakhtiari 2021:140). Obviously, his goal was to win teachers'

votes. At this time, CCGAIT was under intense security pressure due to the ban on *Qalam-e Mo'alem*, and the state's banning of any news related to ITM. Therefore, CCGAIT could not issue effective calls, but a wildcat rally of young teachers in front of the Tehran Department of Education took place in May 2009. It was attacked by the police (Bakhtiari 2021:141). In the same month, Iranian workers issued a resolution on the occasion of May Day. The statement raised demands similar to those of the teachers, which included the right to independent workers' unions; gender equality; decent income for retirees and condemning wage discrimination against retirees; condemning child labor; declaring support for all freedom and equality-seeking movements, such as the university student and women's movements ("Resolution" 2009). But the most interesting part of the workers' resolution was their support for teachers: "Expressing our strong support for the demands of teachers as intellectual workers, nurses, and other hardworking sectors of society, we consider ourselves united with them and demand the immediate realization of their demands and the abolition of the death sentence for Farzad Kamangar" ("Resolution" 2009). But why did the workers' statement address teachers as "intellectual workers"? Were teachers truly intellectual workers? Was naming teachers (intellectual) "workers" a way to point out that teachers should see themselves as part of the broader working class and feel united with workers? Although the statement supported the teachers' demands, teachers' unions were not among the signatories of the statement ("Resolution" 2009).

As the June 2009 presidential elections approached, the political atmosphere in the country became increasingly intense. This election was one of the most polarizing and controversial presidential elections in the history of the Islamic Republic, and led to the

formation of a grassroots protest movement known as the Green Movement. The main competition was between Ahmadinejad, who represented the hardliners, and Mir Hossein Mousavi. Mousavi had served as Premier during the Iran-Iraq War from 1981 to 1989 and had significant disagreements with Ali Khamenei, who was the President at the time (“Story of Mir-Hosseini” 2022). Ahmadinejad, who had gained the support of hardliners by attacking two influential politicians (Rafsanjani and Khatami) back in the 2005 presidential election, had now secured the full support of the hardliners by adopting a stance aimed at undermining Mousavi. As a result, the political landscape of the country became highly polarized: on one side, the hardliners around Supreme Leader Khamenei, and on the other side, all the forces opposed to the former, loosely called the Reformists. This polarized political environment also affected the teachers. While some teachers believed they should avoid supporting any candidate and boycott the election, others thought they should actively participate in the elections (Bakhtiari 2021:142). The CCGAIT ultimately declared its official position in a press release. Criticizing the Ahmadinejad government, CCGAIT considered elections as a right and an opportunity, and implicitly advocated for Mousavi (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2009).

The presidential election took place on June 12, 2009, and the next day, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner by a significant margin, leading to widespread and sustained protests led by Mousavi and Karroubi, the other presidential candidate. The Green Movement, with its central slogan “Where is my vote?”, persisted on the streets for several months despite the regime’s violent crackdown, ultimately culminating in the killing and injuring of hundreds of protestors and the arrest of hundreds more. While the Iran nuclear file was becoming increasingly security-

sensitive, and international sanctions against Iran were being imposed, the Green Movement saw the regime triggering another wave of suppression and arrests of civil society activists.

The cleansing opposition from the university, which began during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, entered a new phase after the Green Movement with the appointment of Kamran Daneshjoo as Minister of Higher Education. This period was referred to as the “Second Cultural Revolution.” During the first three months of Daneshjoo’s ministry, approximately a quarter of Iran’s universities witnessed changes in management, and significant dismissal or early retirement of professors. In a meeting with university presidents, Daneshjoo stated: “You should not recruit professors who are not committed in practice to *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Supreme Jurist) and the Constitution” (“Mahmud Ahmadinejad” 2013). Note that for Daneshjoo, allegiance to the Supreme Leader Khamenei took precedence over allegiance to the Constitution.

These suppressive measures were not limited to universities but aimed at education as a whole. Mehdi Navid-Adham, the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Education, stated in August 2010: “the current education system does not serve to the Islamic regime, and we must embark on a different form of education.” He described his envisioned education system as one that nurtured students who were waiting for *Imam-e Zaman* (the Twelfth, hidden, messianic Imam of the Shia, known as Mahdi) and “establishers of the just Mahdi society” (“Mahmoud Ahmadinejad” 2013), different codes for allegiance to the Supreme Leader.

The Islamic Republic’s concerns in the field of education ultimately led to the drafting of the policy document titled “Foundational Transformation Document for Education.” This document, signed in 2011 by the President and the Head of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, pursued two main objectives: educating students loyal to the Supreme Leader and

his values, and the privatization of education under different names like the euphemistic term “public participation” (“Document” n.d.). The document designated the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution as the policy-making body. The High Council for Education oversaw the proper implementation of the policy by Ministry of Education. In other words, Ministry of Education was reduced to an executive organization.

In December 2013, the Tehran Department of Education signed an agreement with the Tehran (Islamic) Seminary. According to this agreement, public schools in Tehran became affiliated with Tehran Seminary. This move was considered a step toward implementing the policy of Islamization of education, and this made Tehran’s Department of Education subservient to the Seminary. The agreement was supposed to be implemented for two years starting from December 2013, and could be renewed thereafter (“Dependence” 2013). It could be said that the Islamic regime has pursued three major objectives: privatization, Islamization, and militarization of schools by appointing managers close to security bodies.

While the last street protest of the Green Movement on February 11, 2010 faced severe repression and a state of suffocation ruled over the country, CCGAIT issued a call for a one-week hunger strike to protest illegal executions and imprisonments (referring to the case of teacher Farzad Kamangar) on the occasion of Iranian Teachers’ Day. Due to the prevailing security situation, the CCGAIT called not for teachers but for members of the Central Council of the CCGAIT and representatives of TGCs to participate in the hunger strike (“Call for Hungry” 2010). Kamangar was executed on the final day of the announced hunger strike by teachers on May 9, 2010. One year later, Kurdistan’s TGC declared Kamangar its honorary member and named the anniversary of his execution the “Day of Denouncing Organized Violence and

Defending the Right to Life.” Kamangar’s execution received international attention and created solidarity among people (Bakhtiari 2021:150), demonstrating that the regime’s plan to portray Kamangar as a terrorist and separatist had failed.

In the days when the Arab Spring was sweeping through Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other Arab countries, the leaders of Green Movement, Mousavi and Karroubi, asked for a permit from the Ministry of Interior to hold a march on February 14, 2011 in solidarity with the people of Tunisia and Egypt. The regime did not issue the permit; instead, the pressure on activists continued to increase. The last street presence of the Green Movement took place on February 14, 2011. The protesters chanted, “Mubarak, Ben Ali, now it’s Seyyed Ali’s turn”. In response, the regime placed the Mousavi, Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnavard under house arrest. The Green Movement declined. While Iran’s nuclear program was channeled to the United Nations Security Council, and the specter of a war was looming, Ahmadinejad’s government launched its “Targeted Subsidy Reforms” policy removing price control over key subsistence items, thereby putting wage earners under increased economic hardship.

Under such conditions, the pressure and threats against teacher activists increased, and the TGCs were unable to engage in significant activities until the June 2013 presidential election. There was a general prevailing sentiment of boycotting the June 2013 election. In the final days leading up to the election, the Reformist candidate Mohammad Reza Aref withdrew in favor of the moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani. Hashemi Rafsanjani, whose candidacy for this presidential election was not approved by the Guardian Council, also endorsed Rouhani, just as former Reformist President Khatami. Rouhani boldly stated, “Let me say one word ambiguously: the 2013 presidential election would not be similar to the 2009’ (“Hassan Rouhani” n.d.),

implying that this election would not be rigged. These positions, along with the support of Reformist politicians and a spectrum of actors and celebrities, garnered popular support for Rouhani's campaign. In this context, debates on participating in the election resurfaced among TGCs. A significant portion of well-known teacher activists within the TGCs supported Rouhani (Bakhtiari 2021:152). However, unlike 2009, CCGAIT did not take any formal stance on the election.

Rouhani won the elections in June 2013 with the key promise of improving the economy and cooperating with other countries. His foreign policy moved towards reduction of tensions with the West and ultimately led to the formation of the July 2015 nuclear agreement, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. While the domestic political atmosphere became relatively relaxed after the election, the Central Council of CCGAIT held a meeting on September 22 in which three proposals were discussed: first, the TGC's policy in coordination with Ministry of Education under the Rouhani government; second, the effective campaign for imprisoned teachers; and third, holding the World Teachers' Day events. During this meeting, there were also discussions and exchanges of views regarding the theoretical foundations of the Teachers' Union (the formation of the Federation of Teachers' Independent Associations) and effective communication between the CCGAIT and international teachers' organizations. Another interesting decision of this meeting was the establishment of a fund to support imprisoned teachers (Bakhtiari 2021:152). While teachers had formed a committee to pursue the legal rights of imprisoned teachers, the creation of a financial support fund marked another step in supporting activist teachers. Since the Ministry withheld the salaries of imprisoned teachers to put their families under pressure, this fund meant to reduce the effectiveness of this tactic.

On May 2, 2014, CCGAIT issued a statement on the occasion of Iranian Teacher's Day. The statement saluted the workers (Khaksari 2014g). Recall that in the May Day 2009 statement, the workers had strongly supported the teachers and explicitly condemned the death sentence of Farzad Kamangar. Now, the CCGAIT statement expressed its hopes that the workers' demands would be met, a relatively conservative position. Since the workers' unions were strongly influenced by Marxist-Leftist ideas, and Marxist parties were banned in the Islamic Republic, the ITM leadership seemed to be very careful not to be accused by Iranian security of Marxist influence. Remember that one of the fundamentals of the leadership has been de-securitizing the ITM.

### **5.7. The Turning Point in ITM**

On September 30, 2014, an online statement was published. It was titled the "Statement of 100 Teachers", and signed by "Justice-seeking Teachers" on the occasion of the new school year. This statement was a turning point in the ITM, marked by a radically new shift in discourse, heralding the arrival of a new generation of teachers who, among other things, were deeply engaged with the expanding social media.

The origins of the "100 Teachers" went back to the late 1990s, when the "Chalk-holding Teachers" actively sought to create teachers' independent associations. At that time, there were students studying in universities to become teachers. They had experienced student protests and activism as well as crackdowns, but specifically had learned organizational activism, direct action within universities, publication of journals, and continuous critique of the ruling factions, Reformists and hardliners (Bakhtiari 2021:144). In the last months of Khatami's administration

in May 2005 and in the last months of Ahmadinejad's government in May 2013, several grassroots, wildcat protests of teachers took place. These protests were different from the ones organized by CCGAIT. It seems that these seemingly spontaneous protests were organized by the same young teachers who, later in 2014, had issued the "Statement of 100 Teachers".

This statement attributed the structural problems in education to all governments (Habibi 2014). The tone of the statement towards President Rouhani's policies was harsher compared to that of the last statement of CCGAIT. It stated: "After one year of Rouhani's government, the situation is still deteriorating. The new government has not only failed to overcome previous problems but has added new problems to public education, teachers, students, and families" (Habibi 2014). The statement thoroughly examined the problems faced by permanent teachers. But it went further to emphasize the work and subsistence conditions of temporary-contract teachers who, due to neoliberal policies and the privatization of education, constituted a significant portion of the teaching population at that time. It criticized the intention of Rouhani's government to expand the privatization of education. It also addressed the increasing number of students forced to drop out of school, attributing this to rising living and educational costs. For the first time, the Statement of 100 Teachers spoke of the right of foreign nationals' children to access free education (Habibi 2014).

This statement criticized other (pro-Reformist or pro-hardliner) teachers' organizations for exploiting the teachers' activism to enter political power circles. The statement highlighted its own distinct approach: "As a collective of Iranian teachers, we are concerned about the future of *public education* and believe that we should express our demands and strive for their realization independently from the government" (Habibi 2014; my emphasis). While the issue of public

education had been addressed in previous CCGAIT statements, what distinguished the 100 Teachers' declaration was the emphasis of *free, public education* for Iranian and non-Iranians (in particular, Afghan children) and the rights of *students and children*, despite the fact that the teachers' salaries and employment conditions remained important. As well, this Statement called for ending gender, cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic discriminations within the educational system. The "Statement of 100 Teachers" called for independent organization and mobilization of all teachers (Habibi 2014). This demand had been previously raised as well, but the Statement now emphasized that the Constitution guaranteed the right to independent associations for all citizens, implying that the regime's action against teachers was unconstitutional and therefore illegal. It emphasized the need for collaboration with working sectors including nurses and workers, to achieve basic rights. It also called not only on teachers but also on students and their families to act (Habibi 2014). In this sense, the "Statement of 100 Teachers" could be viewed as the manifesto of the Justice-seeking Teachers so that the ITM would become hegemonic by emphasizing public education, or in a Gramscian term, subaltern-centered pedagogy, and by developing its connections with other subaltern groups. For the first time, the statement held an online petition (Habibi 2014). Recall that *Qalam-e Mo'alem* was the official platform of ITM, and when the movement gained momentum, the regime banned its publication (e.g., in March 2004 and March 2007). Now with the expansion of the internet, teachers could take advantage of various media outlets.

In November 2014, physics high school teacher Mohsen Khashkhashi was stabbed by his student in the classroom in Borujerd. He passed away a few days later in hospital. This news triggered a wave of concerns among teachers across the country. The police did not allow

teachers to attend his funeral, which further angered the teachers (Rezaee 2014). In response, a group of teachers and TGCs released an online statement, which appears to have been written by the authors of the “Statement of 100 Teachers.” This statement considered the attack as an indication of increased violence in society and attributed its cause to the crises in education. Mentioning the high student-to-teacher ratio in public schools, the statement protested the plan of the Ministry of Education to reduce the number of teachers. The statement considered both teachers and students as victims of a dysfunctional cultural, social, and educational system and demanded fundamental reforms. The statement called on teachers to wear black in schools and refrain from teaching their classes on November 29 (“Statement By” n.d.). It is worth noting that in 2005, the Ministry of Education declared that it had a shortage of around two thousand teachers (“Analytical Consideration” 2020).

On December 29, 2014, a group of teachers issued a letter to the President, demanding an end to injustices and discrimination. They objected to the Majles’s rejection of Teachers’ Ranking Bill due to fiscal restraints, while a similar bill was passed and implemented for nurses (“Strike of Thousands” 2015). According to this bill, teachers would receive their salaries and benefits based on degrees, job experience, and other teaching and research qualifications (“Latest Updates” n.d.). Later, an open letter addressed to the Speaker of the Majles was published on January 13, 2015. This letter stated that due to the lack of serious commitment by authorities, the Coordination Payment System Law and the Public Services Management Law were incapable of establishing justice for teachers. It called for ending discrimination and injustice against teachers who mostly lived in poverty (“Strike of Thousands” 2015). Finally, the first stage of Teachers’

Ranking was implemented in 2015 after teachers' collective actions in 2014-2015 ("Positions" 2020).

While CCGAIT and TGCs were under intense security pressure and their prominent members were imprisoned, the "Justice-seeking Teachers," after publishing their "Statement of 100 Teachers" manifesto, took the initiative. Following their two open letters, which had remained unanswered, the "Justice-seeking Teachers" published their first call for action through social media. CCGAIT opposed it, announcing, "Recently, there has been news circulating on social media about a strike and refusal to attend classrooms.... This news was not related to CCGAIT and no such decision had been made by CCGAIT nationwide since CCGAIT was negotiating with the government and the Majles regarding the resolution of teachers' issues, particularly salary issues of teachers in the country" (Bakhtiari:178-179). Although CCGAIT did not support the call, teachers in various cities refrained from teaching in classrooms, and organized protest rallies ("Strike of Thousands" 2015). Mohammad Habibi, a leading teacher-activist, maintained that this protest was mainly driven by temporary-contract teachers who had lost their hopes to become permanent due to the Rouhani administration' decision of not converting temporary government employees to permanent ones (Rezaee 2015). After three decades of neoliberal policies, temporary-contract teachers had now become a significant portion of the teachers.

The "Justice-seeking Teachers" gained growing attention following the "Statement of 100 Teachers", their statement regarding the murder of Khashkhashi, two open letters to the President and the Speaker of Majles, and their successful call to action. According to Habibi, the main policy of CCGAIT and TGCs was still based on negotiations with the government. On Habibi's

claim, at that time, TGCs had sought to collaborate with the Rouhani government. Moreover, they aimed to play a mediating role between teachers and Ministry of Education (Rezaee 2015). This situation sparked discussions within the CCGAIT and TGCs, making the CCGAIT and TGCs consider if spontaneous grassroots actions implied inefficiency of CCGAIT and TGCs and how the leadership of the ITM must deal with such actions (Khaksari 2015e). Some used the label “orthodox Left” for this new generation of teachers who considered the teachers movement as part of the workers’ movement using the analogy of “oppressor and oppressed.” But the progressive elements within CCGAIT and TGCs attempted to include these emerging teacher-activists into the leadership (Bakhtiari 2021:179).

Following the successful call by the “Justice-seeking Teachers,” I/TTGC issued a call for a *legal* protest rally of teachers on March 1, 2015 in front of the Majles in Tehran and the Education offices in other cities. It applied for a demonstration permit (“I/TTGC’s Call” 2015). The ideological influence of Justice-seeking Teachers was so strong that it was noticeable in the I/TTGC’s call for action. For example, I/TTGC’s statement stressed its opposition to the commodification of education and privatization in the educational system. The statement considered high-quality and free education and healthcare as one of the most fundamental rights of citizens. It warned the authorities to take immediate actions to improve education before it was too late (“I/TTGC’s Call” 2015). Knowing that a protest permit was unlikely to be issued, the I/TTGC called these rallies “Silent March” to prevent suppression. The idea of Silent March was a legacy of the Green Movement during the Million-Strong March on June 17, 2009. As earlier mentioned, the Justice-seeking Teachers were actively involved in the Green Movement.

This call was met with an enthusiastic response from teachers. Over 100,000 teachers rallied in dozens of cities in front of Education offices, demanding the implementation of the law and ending salary inequities. In Tehran, more than 2,000 teachers rallied in front of the Majles (Khaksari 2015c). The final resolution of the “Silent March” demanded freeing imprisoned teachers (“I/TTGC” 2015). While the Silent March received wide support, it registered the internal differences of ITM. Isfahan’s TGC called for teachers’ vigilance and refraining from any actions outside the framework of decisions made by CCGAIT (Khaksari 2015d). I/TTGC declared on March 13 that it welcomed young teachers’ participation. It also warned the authorities about future teachers’ actions, should the government still refuse to meet the teachers’ demands (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2015a).

The second protest organized by the Justice-seeking Teachers was successfully held on April 16, 2015 in several cities in front of Education offices across the country (Bakhtiari 2021:188). While the I/TTGC applied for permit for the March 1 rally, the Justice-seeking Teachers regarded their rally a right. Retired teachers and even high school students joined the protesting teachers. In this rally statement, Justice-seeking Teachers demanded the release of imprisoned teachers. It added that “considering that Tehran’s TGC statement on March 13, 2015 provided the government with a deadline until Iranian Teacher’s Day to take effective actions to fulfill the teachers’ demands, this demonstration was completely self-initiated and solely in support of the teachers’ guild objectives” (Bakhtiari 2017:188). There seemed to be coordinated efforts between the Justice-seeking Teachers and I/TTGC.

As always, the government disregarded the teachers’ deadline of May 2, and the Central Council of CCGAIT called on teachers to nationwide rally on May 7, 2015. The influence of the

“Statement of 100 Teachers” (the Justice-seeking Teachers) could be clearly seen in this statement as well. CCGAIT emphasized free education, rejecting class-based and privatized schools, and suggested ways to prevent violence in schools. It criticized Rouhani for ignoring the teachers’ concerns and sought an audience with him (“Call for Nationwide” 2015). In response Rouhani stated on March 4 that “the government recognizes the right of all social groups and professions to protest,” adding: “Regarding teachers, we acknowledge their right to protest. We know they have problems, and they also know that we have problems” (“Protest Teachers” 2015). Two days later on May 6, in a meeting with some teachers on the occasion of the state’s Teachers’ Week event, Supreme Leader Khamenei warned the teachers who tried to make their subsistence issues political. On May 7, the teachers demanded not only “decent salaries but also freeing imprisoned teachers and the resignation of Minister of Education” (“Protest Teachers” 2015).

While Rouhani’s government and the foreign states (known as P5+1) were on the verge of a historic nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), and with a glimmer of hope for economic and political opening consequently emerged in the country, a new wave of civil society crackdown also began. On June 27, 2015, Ismail Abdi, the Secretary of the I/TTGC, who intended to participate in the World Congress of Education International in Canada, was arrested. Perhaps Khamenei’s aforementioned remarks were codewords to state security to suppress the teachers. Abdi remains in prison to this day. In a statement titled “Take Action Against the Suppression of Teachers and Journalists,” the Congress of Trade Unions in the UK launched an online petition for Abdi’s release (Bakhtiari 2021:189). Subsequently, CCGAIT called for a rally to protest the detention of teacher-activists, including Abdi, on July 22, 2015. Heavy police

presence prevented the rally. I/TTGC issued a statement and accused Iranian intelligence of violating the Constitution, demanding that the government prosecute those responsible (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2015b).

Although the July 22 call to rally was unsuccessful, the crackdown on it received widespread coverage on social media (Bakhtiari 2021:194). The internet had broken the regime’s monopoly on news. Consequently, the International Labor Union supported teachers in Iran, condemned the suppression of teachers, and called on all labor activists worldwide for support, declaring that it would continue its global campaign in support of imprisoned teachers and workers (“News and Repots” 2015). Iran’s Metalworkers’ Union also renounced the suppression of teachers and encouraged its members to fully support the teachers (“News and Repots” 2015).

Despite Iran’s improving foreign relations with Western countries and Rouhani’s promises to defend citizens’ rights, 14 members of I/TTGC were arrested following CCGAIT’s call for a demonstration on the occasion of World Teacher’s Day (Bakhtiari 2021:194). Still, teachers responded to this call by protesting in various cities. Included in this call was the demand to repeal discriminatory laws against female teachers (“Early Reports” 2015), which reflected the growing participation of women in the protests.

The continuing suppression of teachers by the regime had led I/TTGC to understand the need for a more powerful social force. The question was how to organize it. It seemed inevitable that the demands of teachers should grow into the demands of society. This was the nascent *hegemonic* moment of the subaltern. The “100 Teachers’ Statement” had the answer: emphasize free and quality public education and actively defend the demands of other social groups. Other

professional associations were also struggling to find the solution, and it seems that the solution of the Justice-seeking Teachers had become hegemonic.

While Khamenei issued orders to suppress guild associations in his speech of March 6, 2015, President Rouhani in 2016 agreed to grant permits for holding general assemblies to a number of TGCs. The permit was conditional on these TGCs submitting a proposed draft of statute in accordance with the government's guidelines, which limited their scope of activities to their respective province, with the provincial TGCs being subordinated to the corresponding regional TGCs (Ebrahimi 2016). If Supreme Leader Khamenei's strategy was to annihilate TGCs, the President aimed for their *controlled* activities. This proposal received both supporters and opponents among teachers. On one hand, TGCs had been unable to hold a general assembly for ten years (at that point) and as a result could not recruit new activists. On the other hand, the most significant feature of TGCs after the 1979 Revolution was their autonomy, which was now threatened by the government's proposal. According to Jafar Ebrahimi, a Justice-seeking Teacher and member of CCGAIT, "this permit restricted the right to independent teachers' associations, as this right could not be granted or taken away through guidelines or laws" (Ebrahimi 2016). Finally, in the summer of 2016, Ministry of Interior issued permits for the continuation of activities to 16 TGCs. Notably, young teachers with a *justice*-oriented approach and female teachers were elected to the Board of Directors of these TGCs (Bakhtiari 2021:205; my emphasis). In these general assemblies, government representatives tried to impose their views but faced resistance from the teachers. Consequently, the government refused to approve the resolutions of the assemblies (Bakhtiari 2021:206). Nonetheless, based on the Constitution which recognized the right to association for citizens, TGCs considered their general assemblies legal.

They considered their activities to be in accordance with the Constitution and did not deem holding their general assemblies conditional on obtaining government permits, although they consistently urged the government to adhere to the Constitution. With Justice-seeking Teachers entering the leadership of ITM, the movement became political. The next chapter attends to this latest period of ITM.

While the *idea* of ITM as a hegemonic force was born in the early years of the 1979 revolution, it reappeared in the 1990's after one decade of crackdowns on any independent collective actions by the Islamic regime. The so-called Chalk-holding Teachers founded Teacher's Guild Centers as independent/autonomous associations in the late 1990s under the Reformist government of Khatami. Moreover, for the first time, teachers created a democratic coordinating entity named CCGAIT. Teacher's activism under the Khatami government (1997-2005) was best summarized in the statement which was issued in the final months of the Reformist government: “!?”. By this symbol, the teachers meant to suggest that they had followed the law and the Constitution to demand their legal demands but were nonetheless suppressed by the Reformist government. Teachers wonder what to do. The populist Ahmadinejad government (2005-2013) with its social justice propaganda created a hope for some teachers to achieve their just demands. That said, the hope disappeared soon in the March 2007 protests, when teachers were repressed. The question of what to do remained unanswered, until the rise of Justice-seeking Teachers in 2014 by publishing the “Statement of 100 Teachers” and later entering the leadership of the ITM in 2016: politicization of ITM.

## **Chapter 6: Towards a Hegemonic Position: From 2016 to Today**

Upon entering the Justice-seeking Teachers into the leadership of TGCs and CCGAIT, the ITM began to transform significantly, although persistent state repression slowed down this qualitative change. What follows is the story of the ITM's politicization.

### **6.1. The Fateful Year of 2016**

In the 2000s, with the introduction of mobile phones, internet usage became public (“History of Cellphones” 2014), and subsequently social media expanded remarkably. The teachers’ social media grew rapidly as well. In 2016, teachers in 18 provinces had Telegram channels (Bakhtiari 2021:221). The CCGAIT created its Telegram channel in 2016, although it was soon terminated due to a cyber attack by the regime (Bakhtiari 2021:212). The Justice-seeking Teachers created a Telegram channel in February 2017. They launched an online campaign to push for increased budget for education to improve the quality of education and increase the teachers’ salaries, while the next year’s budget was debated in the Majles. While the salaries of permanent teachers were determined according to the Law on Administrative Management of Civil Services, salaries of contract teachers were determined by Labour Law and Minimum Wage pertaining to temporary employees including workers, nurses, and so on. The Justice-seeking Teachers’ statement asked teachers to participate in the campaign for fair minimum wages for all workers, including and especially contract teachers. Additionally, it urged Iranians to support this movement (“Statement of a Group” 2017). The Campaign received 140,000 signatures (Poursoleiman 2017).

In reaction to the authorities' ignoring of this campaign, working and retired teachers protested in front of the Majles and provincial Education offices on March 9, 2017. These rallies were organized through teachers' channels on Telegram ("Protest Demonstrations" 2017). Although the number of participants in this demonstration was not as high as the previous ones, a new phenomenon was observed: the unity of working and retired teachers. The slogans at this demonstration called for *quality, free public education, and the freedom of arrested teachers* ("Report of Retired" 2017).

The online organization of this demonstration provoked negative reactions from some members of Tehran's TGC. Mahdi Bohlouli wrote: "Some active teachers on Telegram try to exploit the grievances of teachers and exert control over civil society. Apparently, they have no problem discarding the TGCs and taking actual control over leadership. Considering that some of these activists are Leftist and adopt a confrontational approach, the issue becomes even more sensitive" (Bohlouli as quoted in Poursoleiman 2017). While Bohlouli correctly identified the growing influence of "Justice-Seeking Teachers", he labeled them orthodox Leftists or communists, a taboo in the Islamic regime.

The CCGAIT held a meeting on September 2, 2017, during which two young teacher-activists, Jafar Ebrahimi and Eskandar Lotfi (of Justice-Seeking Teachers) were elected as inspectors. CCGAIT decided to resume its channel on Telegram (Bakhtiari 2021:213). The Justice-Seeking Teachers entered the highest body of decision-making of the ITM. With their joining CCGAIT leadership, the Justice-seeking Teachers became hegemonic within ITM.

Soon after, CCGAIT issued an online call for nationwide marches of retired and working teachers on World Teachers' Day (Bakhtiari 2021:213). It did not condition the marches on

gaining a permit. Instead, it appealed to Article 27 of Constitution to launch peaceful protests. The main demand of this protest was for a “fair budget for education” (Bakhtiari 2021:213). According to Habibi, “fair budget” meant adequately funding free and quality education for Iranian students, as well as fair salary for working and retired educators. To include a growing portion of contract teachers whose salaries were not dependent on the budget, “fair salaries were demanded” (According to Habibi in “Teachers’ Rallies” 2017). This call was welcomed by retired and working teachers on different types of contracts. In the rallies, the teachers chanted slogans supporting imprisoned teachers (“Reports of Retired” 2017).

The Justice-Seeking Teachers who had the experience of university protests in the 2000s, now, two decades later, as teacher-activists advocated for university student movement. On the occasion of University Student Day, CCGAIT issued a statement on December 7, 2017, declaring that it recognized and supported the demands of student unions, including the right to quality and free post-secondary education, the right to independent student councils, and stopping the commodification of education. It stated that solidarity across independent organizations was the only way to overcome the challenges ahead (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2017). Solidarity between ITM and university student activism emerged which later, with the Women, Life, Freedom movement, expanded to include public school students. The regime desperately strived to unite university and seminary, but the unification of school and university came to appear.

In November 2017, a destructive earthquake struck the town of Sar-e Pol-e Zahab in Kermanshah Province. As the people did not trust the government to deliver aid to the affected population, civil society took upon itself the responsibility to deliver assistance directly to the

region. The CCGAIT launched a campaign to support the affected students and children.

According to its report, CCGAIT received 896,113,000 rials (\$18,670) from both teachers and non-teachers to rebuild a few schools (“Financial Report” 2020).

A grassroots protest of the poor and marginalized rocked Iran in December 2017 (known as the Dey 1396 movement). It started in Mashhad by opponents of President Rouhani, and was led by future President Ibrahim Ra’isi and members of Basiji militias (“Protest in Mashhad” 2017). But it quickly spread to 160 cities across Iran. Despite the regime’s violent suppression, the protests continued for 12 days. The initial slogan “No to corruption and no to high prices” shifted to slogans such as “Reformists, hardliners, the game is over” (Haqiqatnejad 2022), a slogan first chanted at University of Tehran, signifying rejecting the Islamic Republic in its entirety. According to the Minister of Interior, between 700 to 5,000 people were detained during the protests (“Unspoken” 2018). Reports indicated that more than fifty protesters were killed by police (Haqiqatnejad 2022). The state-owned newspaper, *Iran*, revealed in January 2018 that according to the Minister of Education two students were killed in the protests. Among the casualties were farmers, elementary and university students, soldiers, and workers; the casualties were very young or adolescents (Qazi 2021). Meanwhile, Masoumeh Ebtekar, Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs, stated that a significant number of detainees were teenagers and young (“At Least” 2018).

The Dey 1396 protests stood apart from previous grassroots protests. The student protest (1999) and the Green Movement were primarily led by educated youth and the urban middle-class, while protests in Islamshahr (1995) and Mashhad (1992) involved marginalized populations and workers. In contrast, the December 2017-January 2018 protests represented a

blend of both educated middle-class and the marginalized poor. The slogan of the last grassroots, movement, Green Movement, was “Where Is My Vote?” and its leader was former premier Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was backed by the Reformists. But the Dey 1396 protests were primarily centered around the slogan of “Reformist, hardliner, the game is over”, indicating a radical shift in the political landscape to oppose the entirety of Islamic regime.

The CCGAIT issued a statement regarding December 2017 on January 23, 2018. It viewed the protests as a result of the regime’s mismanagement and strongly rejected attributing them to foreign countries, pointing out that the solution was not repression but rather meeting the people’s demands. Defending the right to peaceful protests and emphasizing the people’s rights, the statement honored the protest victims, especially elementary students, and called for dismantling the security conditions in society and universities. It demanded an end to discriminatory policies such as privatization, price hikes for essential goods, energy price increases, and maintaining wages below the poverty line (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2018a).

While the teachers’ movement was gradually becoming politicized with the involvement of Justice-Seeking Teachers in its leadership, the December 2016 protest movements accelerated the ITM’s politicization. After CCGAIT condemned the regime’s crackdown on protesters, it called on both retired and working teachers to support the retirees’ rally in front of the Majles on January 28, 2018 (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2018b).

On February 19, 2018, CCGAIT issued a statement regarding fair increase to Minimum Wage. As mentioned, all temporary-contract employees’ salaries were determined by the Labour Law and Minimum Wage. The CCGAIT statement stated: “Since the fate of temporary teachers is entangled with that of workers and all those who are waged based on Labour Law, we demand

the presence of representatives from independent teachers' and workers' organizations in the process of determining wages" ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2018c).

Meanwhile, the regime sought to identify and arrest teachers and school principals who were involved in the protests. Mohammad Habibi was arrested in March 2018. His brutal arrest sparked a wave of anger and hatred towards the regime. The International Education Organization issued a press release regarding the imprisoned teachers, demanding the release of Habibi. The hashtag #FreeMohammadHabibi was widely posted on Twitter (Bakhtiari 2021:217). The CCGAIT warned that if their demands, including the release of arrested teachers, were not be met by the time of the upcoming Teacher's Week starting from May 2, 2018, it would organize rallies, sit-ins and strikes ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2018d). The ultimatum issued by CCGAIT was blamed by the Secretary-General of the Reformist Teachers' Organization, Alireza Hashemi Sanjabi, who argued that CCGAIT's strategy of issuing ultimatums, calling for strikes, sit-ins, and rallies was misguided and ineffective. Instead, he said, the teachers' demands should be pursued by working with the government, not confronting it (Hashemi Sanjabi 2018).

On the occasion of the Iranian New Year of March 21, 2018, CCGAIT pointed out the events of the past year, declaring the teachers could not remain indifferent regarding social issues. Reiterating the demands of permanent, contract and retired teachers, it condemned the policy of privatization of education and objected to security measures against TGCs and teacher-activists ("Message" 2018).

In April 2018, a teachers' union in Britain, the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, awarded its International Solidarity Prize to Ismail Abdi, demanding

his unconditional release (“International Solidarity” 2018). Later, Abdi declared he would be on hunger strike in defense of teachers’ and workers’ rights beginning on April 10, 2018 (“I Will” 2018). The CCGAIT issued a statement on the occasion of May Day 2018, expressing its strong support of workers’ demands, including the right to independent unions, sustainable wages, security for workers and trade union activists, and proper healthcare. It pointed out that these demands connected teachers to workers. Furthermore, CCGAIT advocated for free and quality education for all (“Happy May” 2018). The next day (May 2), two imprisoned teacher activists, Mahmud Beheshti Langrudi and Esmail Abdi and an imprisoned human rights activist named Abdolfatah Soltani stressed that society’s problems could be solved by teachers and workers, not by politicians for whom the preservation of power or wealth was the priority (“Beheshti” 2018). Then, the Guild Council of University Students declared that the regime’s policies of labor cheapening, privatization of education, and suppression of independent trade union activities had imposed shared condition for teachers, workers, and university students. It emphasized that students stand with teachers and workers (“May Day” 2018).

While the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal had somewhat reduced Iran’s antagonistic relations with the West and brought about meagre economic improvements, the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States in 2017 intensified Iran-US hostilities again. President Trump repeatedly threatened to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action if it was not renegotiated, and finally he officially pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on May 8, 2018. As a result, Iran’s foreign relations went on the path of increasing tensions with the West, once again, and international sanctions worsened the domestic economy, already plagued by high inflation, unemployment rates, and the government’s printing money to cover its costs,

which led to the continued devaluation of the Iranian rial against the US dollar. While the protests of December 2017 undermined President Rouhani's social base, Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action put an end to two of Rouhani's key promises: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action settlement, and controlling inflation rates.

The CCGAIT declared its support for the retirees' demonstration in front of the Majles on May 8, 2018. It then called on teachers to refrain from holding classes on May 9 and called on both retired and working teachers to rally in front of the Organization for Planning and Budget building on May 10 ("CCGAIT' Call" 2018a). The Justice-seeking Teachers articulated three demands: fair funding for education, the right to have independent associations, and the release of imprisoned teachers.

The general assembly of CCGAIT convened in July 2018 and changed CCGAIT's charter. While previously the general assembly was held in person, it has become possible to hold it on-line ("CCGAIT's Charter" 2018). Remember that after March 2007, the Supreme National Security Council had prohibited the holding of general assembly, and banned the coverage of teacher-related news, while also suspending *Qalam-e Mo'alem*. Now, the expansion of the internet allowed CCGAIT to overcome these two limitations. Another change to its charter was the condition for membership in CCGAIT. While in the first charter, accepting CCGAIT's charter and not being sentenced by courts were two main conditions for membership, in the new charter, independent associations with permits or independent associations that had submitted their application to the Ministry of Interior could apply for membership in CCGAIT. In the 2019 version of the charter, this clause was modified: teachers' associations that submitted their application to Ministry of Interior and did not receive a response within six months could

become members of the CCGAIT council if these associations had held elections for their general assembly under the supervision of CCGAIT, and with the presence of a representative of CCGAIT (“Council’s Charter” 2019). It appears that CCGAIT attempted to prevent organizations affiliated with the government from infiltrating it.

The CCGAIT issued a statement on October 9, 2018, to protest inflation, rising prices, and the unprecedented decline in the purchasing power of teachers. In the statement, teachers across the country were called upon to participate in a two-day sit-in on October 13-14 and to refrain from attending classes. The issues of both working and retired teachers, and students were addressed within three main categories: subsistence, the right to free education, and security treatment of independent TGCs and activist teachers (“CCGAIT’ Call,” 2018b).

The CCGAIT’s call was supported by the Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers’ Union and the Guild Council of University Students across Iran. The former declared that the problems outlined in CCGAIT’s call were the problems of the entire society, from teachers to workers, nurses to retirees, students to youth (“In Support” 2018). And the latter stated that

teachers in Iran, despite economic and social pressures and the suppression by security agencies, do not limit their protests to their grievance but speak on behalf of *the whole society*... From protesting commodification and privatization of education to the violation of the right to free and equitable education and the decline in educational quality, from suppressing independent trade unions to security treatment of teachers’ activists and demand for the freedom of the imprisoned guild activists. These indicate one reality: the pains and the cries are shared. (“Teachers and University Students” 2018; my emphasis)

However, the government's response was unsurprisingly repressive. Iranian intelligence launched a cyber-attack on the Telegram channel of CCGAIT and deactivated it on October 14, 2018, in order to frighten teachers and prevent them from participating the two-day sit-ins (Shirmohammadi 2018). The call to sit-in, however, received positive response from teachers.

The CCGAIT created a new Telegram channel on October 27, 2018. In its welcoming message, it stated that CCGAIT's objective was to achieve a developed, happy, and peaceful society, where participation, freedom, equality, and other values were cherished. It argued that this ideal could only be realized through a modern education system, where teachers' subsistence was ensured, and the students received high-quality and free education to improve their skills for a better future. It emphasized that teachers' power lay in their unity, and that teachers chose to rely on the support of Iranian teachers and publics to achieve their goals ("Welcome" 2018). Teachers' subsistence demands were now linked to the universal demand of seeking a fair and just society. From the viewpoint of CCGAIT, this ideal society could not be realized without quality, public education.

In the early 2000s, concurrent with the expansion of teacher protests and strikes, an authority from the Budget and Planning Organization stated in a television program – in response to the question of why teachers' salaries were lower compared to other government employees – that teachers worked fewer hours compared with the other government employees. One decade later, this idea reappeared in Minister of Education's "Full-Time Teacher Plan." The idea behind this Plan was the more hours work, the more salary receives. According to this plan, teachers were required to teach six, then twelve, and finally twenty-four additional hours per week, and

the salaries for these extra hours would be paid annually (Niknejad 2018). This plan was criticized by TGCs and CCGAIT as a way to intensify the exploitation of teachers. In objecting to the government's "Full-Time Teacher Plan", CCGAIT urged teachers to refrain from attending classes on November 13-14, 2018. It encouraged all teachers to participate in this movement, and assured them that their actions were constitutional. CCGAIT also asked for the support of students and parents, reminding them that teachers wanted free, quality, and fair education for all students ("CCGAIT' Call" 2018c). The CCGAIT then started a petition campaign addressed to President Rouhani, asking teachers to collectively sign and send the petition to his office. The letter urged him to enact Articles 3, 30, and 43 of the Constitution, according to which the government was obligated to provide free and quality education for all citizens. The letter pointed out that Iran ranked first in privatizing education among all UNESCO member countries ("Letter to President" 2018).

In its report of the first day of teachers' protest, November 13, CCGAIT declared that in more than 50 cities, towns, and villages teachers joined the sit-in protest. In some schools, male and female teachers stood together to take photos, demonstrating that their demands transcended gender boundaries ("Report of First" 2018). This was while the main policy of the regime had been gender segregation in schools. The report of the second day of the protest emphasized the prominent presence of female teachers and the arrest of several teacher-activists. The report condemned the so-called "yellow organizations", such as the (pro-reformist) Teachers' Association of Islamic Iran (*Majma'e Farhangiyan-e Iran-e Eslami*) that had claimed the sit-ins were cancelled. The CCGAIT appraised the November 2018 job action to be a success, despite adversities and suppression ("Second Day" 2018).

Later, on December 22, 2018, CCGAIT issued another press release regarding the successful nationwide teachers' strike in October and November 2018. It stressed that despite adverse security measures, the sit-ins were widespread and the teachers' message to the authorities was so strong that it garnered social support. CCGAIT claimed that the messages of solidarity from workers and students to teachers' protests indicated that the society was increasingly supported teachers' demands ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2018e). The statement encouraged all teachers to join the existing independent teachers' associations and called for the establishment of independent guild centers in cities where TGCs did not exist ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2018e).

In an open letter addressed to the Minister of Education, Mohammad Batha'i, dated November 20, 2018, CCGAIT reminded him of his unfulfilled promises and held all post-revolutionary governments responsible for the severe suppression of TGCs. Criticizing the government's "Full-Time Teacher Plan", the letter reasserted the resolve of Justice-seeking Teachers to fight for the improvement of education and social life in the country by teaching students to be advocates of freedom and justice ("Open Letter" 2018).

## **6.2. Strengthening Solidarities**

While Article 44 of the Constitution declared that all major industries were publicly owned and operated by the government, the Rafsanjani's government initiated the privatization of state-owned industries over the 1980s. However, due to the obstacles of Article 44 of the Constitution, privatization faced difficulties. To pave the way for privatization, Supreme Leader Khamenei provided a new interpretation of Article 44 in 2005 under General Policies of Article 44

(“Announcement” 2006). Although the privatization of state assets happened under the name of increasing efficiency, the assets were transferred to the individuals close to the authorities, leading to the decline of the country’s industries. For instance, the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Corporation was one of the state-owned companies which was sold in the private section in 2015 to the lowest bid. Following that, the workers faced difficulties ranging from unpaid and low salaries to unjust contracts, leading to prolonged job actions (Kordi 2021). On November 16, 2018, the workers’ protests escalated during the Friday prayers in Shush in Khuzestan Province. The workers interrupted the prayer leader’s speech and chanted “Death to the oppressors, long live the workers” (“Protest of Khuzestan” 2018). The next day, a large crowd marched in the streets of Shush to support the workers (“Protesters” 2018). Workers’ protests were suppressed by police.

The protests of the workers of Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane and Ahvaz Steel Corporation sparked reactions by TGCs. On November 26, 2018, I/TTGC issued a statement in solidarity with the Haft Tappeh and Ahvaz Steel workers. The statement demanded an end to securitization of independent trade unions and supported the workers’ opposing privatization (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2018a). On November 28, 2018, Aligoudarz’s TGC also issued a statement in support of the Haft Tappeh workers, singling out privatization as the root cause of problems including the increasing poverty of workers (“Statement of Aligoudarz” 2018).

On December 3, 2018, CCGAIT released a statement in support of workers and university students. It interpreted the demand for free education as a defense of the rights of working-class children. The statement strongly condemned the suppression of independent associations, creation of parallel and “yellow” (state-affiliated) unions, and the detention of

worker-activists. The statement expressed support for the demands of university students by highlighting the slogan of the students, “We are the children of workers/teachers, we stand by them.” The statement maintained that although workers, students, and teachers had distinct demands, they shared grievances like subsistence, privatization, freedom, and the right to independent associations. Therefore, it was necessary for workers, teachers, and students to bring together their struggles (“CCGAIT’ Statement” 2018). On December 7, 2018, Iran’s national University Student Day (16 Azar), marching students across campuses chanted slogans in support of workers, saying “We are the workers’ children, we stand with the workers” (“Solidarity” 2018).

On December 18, 2018, a group of military retirees announced that they would rally in front of the Majles to demand an increase to their pensions in the next budget. Other groups of retirees, including teachers, announced their intention to participate in the rally. The CCGAIT declared its support of the retired teachers, promising to join them (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2018e). Later, retirees announced that they would rally in front of the Majles to protest inflation and the declining subsistence on February 26, 2019. The CCGAIT declared its support of teachers’ retirees again (“Notice of CCGAIT” 2019).

On February 25, 2019, CCGAIT declared that after the teachers’ protests in September and October 2018, and despite previous failed negotiations, it would once again attempt to negotiate with authorities. However, in the early March 2019 meetings with some Majles deputies, it became clear that education and teachers were not a priority for the authorities. The CCGAIT invited teachers to go on strike on March 3-5, 2019 and inform students and parents about the objectives of this action (“CCGAIT’ Call” 2019a). Later, CCGAIT declared that the

first day of the sit-ins saw a greater turnout compared to those in October 2018. It anticipated that the second and third days of the sit-ins would witness even larger participation than did the first day (“Report of First Day” 2019). It declared that in more than 110 cities, towns and villages teachers joined the sit-ins. It called on the Minister of Education to meet the teachers’ demands (“Final Resolution” 2019).

Although “the Ministry of Education received the highest share of the whole budget of the country in 2019, partly due to teachers’ organized, continued protests,” (Sa’adat n.d.) CCGAIT urged teachers, both working and retired, to rally in front of Education departments on May 2, 2019, on the occasion of Teachers’ Week. CCGAIT came up with a radical demand: the elimination of all forms of discrimination: ethnic, gender, religious, and class (“CCGAIT’s Call” 2019b). This demand had first appeared in the “Statement of 100 Teachers”. The arrangement of the demands presented in this statement clearly demonstrated the leadership of “Justice-seeking Teachers” within ITM: first, improving education in schools; second, ending privatization of education; third, upholding the right to have independent associations; fourth, ensuring proper pension and healthcare; fifth, the implementing of a Coordinated Payment System Law; and six, defending the rights of temporary-contract teachers to permanent employment (“CCGAIT’s Call”, 2019b).

Following the CCGAIT’s call for rallies on Iranian Teachers’ Day and the positive response of teachers in dozens of cities, a new wave of suppression began. Security guards attacked the protesters in Tehran and arrested several teachers and teacher-activists, including Mohammad Taghi Fallahi, the Secretary-General, and Rasoul Bodaghi, inspector of Tehran’s TGC. Heavy sentences were issued for teacher activists in other cities. In response, the CCGAIT

emphasised that it would support every teacher in any part of Iran who was subjected to oppression due to their guild activities (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2019a).

The Minister of Education resigned in June. He stated that the non-approval of the Teachers’ Ranking Plan in the government and the lack of enough budget for paying the overdue salaries of working and retired teachers were his main reasons for resignation (“Story of Education” 2019). Following that, on the September 23, 2019, CCGAIT issued a press release to call upon the new Minister to address the problems of education that affected 14 million students and approximately 2 million working and retired teachers. The CCGAIT’s new motto was: “Education cannot be ideological” (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2019b).

The Islamic regime had always considered the Syrian regime as its strategic ally, and after the widespread protests in Syria in 2011, the Islamic regime provided significant financial and military assistance to Bashar al-Assad. The importance of Syria should be understood within the transformation of the ideology of the 1979 revolution from “Governance of Downtrodden” in which social justice played a central role, to the “Governance of *World* Downtrodden,” in which the liberation of Jerusalem (symbolizing a depicted Muslim-Jewish conflict) held centrality. Since Syria was the link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon it played a central role in the Islamic regime’s ideological foreign policy. Syria was so crucial for the hardliner faction that Mehdi Ta’eb, the head of the Strategic Command Council, in response to the slogans of the protesting workers of Haft Tappeh and Ahvaz Steel in Khuzestan who chanted, “abandon Syria and address our problems”, stated that Syria was the 35th province of Iran, and its importance was even greater than Khuzestan (“Head of Ammar” 2012).

On October 24, 2019, the CCGAIT issued a statement protesting Turkey’s invasion of

northwestern Syria, where the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) has been governing since 2012, and where Syrian Democratic Forces had managed to liberate the region from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and its massacring of civilians. The statement criticized the violent crackdown by Bashar al-Assad against the Syrian civil protests. This was clearly a critique of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2019c). This statement marked a turning point in the history of ITM: its concern was no longer limited to teachers' interests.

### **6.3. The 2019 Protest Movement and ITM's Radicalization**

At midnight on November 15, 2019, the National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company announced a threefold increase in gasoline prices without prior notice. This news shocked Iranian society and triggered widespread protests that became famous as the Aban 1398 protest movement. At first, authorities attempted not to take responsibility for the gasoline price hike and people hoped the Majles would reject the price hike. Following the intensification of street protests, the Supreme Leader declared on November 16, 2019 that this decision was made by the heads of the branches of government and he supported it. He ordered authorities to maintain security (Amirshahi 2020), a code for bloody oppression of the protests. After this speech, the wave of crackdown intensified, and security guards shot and killed hundreds of protesters.

The November 2019 protests had similarities with those of December 2017 but had two significant differences in terms of the level of participation and the intensity of the regime's violence. Aban 1398 protests took place in over 500 cities ("A Deputy" 2019). According to Reuters, approximately 1,500 people were killed (Amirshahi 2020). Moreover, more radical

slogans were chanted in the Aban 1398 protests and the protesters rejected any symbol of the Islamic Revolution, including its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini (Amirshahi 2020).

On December 5, 2019, CCGAIT issued a statement regarding the “Bloody Aban 1398 Protests”. For the first time, it implicitly blamed the Supreme Leader for the regime’s disastrous policies. It took a moral position: “As teachers, we could not witness the distorted portrayal of truth and the labeling of the protesters as agitators, nor could they witness the killing of school pupils, university students, and desperate people in various cities across the country (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2019d). The CCGAIT condemned the internet shutdown, the transformation of schools into detention centers and barracks, and the use of high school students in anti-riot forces. It challenged political corruption and privatization in education and healthcare, continuous suppression of civil society organizations, cheapening of the workforce, environmental destruction, elimination of subsidies for basic goods and energy, and spending Iranian resources on pursuing ambitious political and military purposes in other countries. The solution, CCGAIT argued, was democratic governance and the citizens’ participation in shaping their own destiny through civil society organizations and independent political parties. The statement called on people to support the families of the deceased, injured, and detainees (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2019d).

While CCGAIT supported the Aban 1398 protest movement, it did not overlook specific issues such as the education budget and negotiations with authorities. Just a few days after the release of its Aban 1398 statement, on December 14, CCGAIT stated that the 2020 proposed budget entailed cutbacks to the education budget on the pretext of a budget deficit (“Notice One” 2019). Given that the largest teacher protests typically occurred during March, when the budget

was approved by the Majles, as in March 2004, 2007, and 2015, early attention of CCGAIT to the budget could be interpreted as a lever to push the government and the Majles to allocate enough funding to education, and to prepare teachers for potential protests in March.

While the security atmosphere still dominated the country, all government pensioners declared that they would rally on December 23, 2019. The CCGAIT supported retirees' protests and called on retired teachers to join the pensioners in front of the Majles. Under the slogan "Teachers won't back down until we get our rights" ("Notice Two" 2019), CCGAIT urged all working teachers to hold sit-in protests at schools on December 23. It stressed that the teachers' movement was stronger and more determined than ever to achieve justice, freedom, and the elimination of discrimination and poverty ("Notice Two" 2019). A new motto appeared in this round of teacher sit-ins: "Teachers are the voice of working children" ("Teachers Sit-in" 2019). This was significant as the teachers' demands evolved into general demands like children's rights. While the first retirees' call for a protest after the December 2017 protests did not take place due to state repression, this time the retirees succeeded in holding their protest. In response to CCGAIT's call, teachers from dozens of cities staged sit-in protests in their schools simultaneous with the retired teachers' rally in Tehran. In the rally before the Majles, slogans like "The response to people's demands should not be prison and bullets", and "Imprisoned teachers should be free" ("Teachers Sit-in" 2019) were chanted.

On the December 26, 2019, Jafar Ebrahimi, an inspector of CCGAIT and a member of Tehran's TGC, was arrested in a Karaj cemetery, where he participated in commemorating the mourning day of the victims of November 2019. The TGCs condemned the bloody crackdown on the Aban 1398 protests; some of the leading teacher-activists had actively participated in these

protests. The wave of support for Ebrahimi continued through various TGCs across the country, and the CCGAIT also condemned his arrest (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2020a). Subsequently, Aligodarz’s TGC also condemned Jafar Ebrahimi’s arrest, calling him a dedicated teacher whose concern was to improve the lives of people, the well-being of children, and promote better and free education for all (“Statement of Aligoudarz” 2020).

On January 3, 2020, Qassem Soleimani, a top Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) general, was assassinated at the Baghdad Airport by a United States drone strike. The leader of the Islamic Republic threatened a harsh response. The regime extensively exploited the incident to promote its anti-American propaganda. During the funeral ceremony for Soleimani on January 7, several people lost their lives in the mayhem. The next day, the IRGC targeted the US base in Ain al-Asad in the Al-Anbar province in Iraq with multiple missiles, which caused no American casualties as, it was rumoured, the Iranians had already informed the Americans about their plan to strike the base! On the same day, the Ukraine International Airlines flight PS-752 from Tehran to Kyiv was shot down by an Iranian air defense missile, resulting in the tragic death 176 passengers and crew on board. This incident garnered global outrage. Initially, the Islamic Republic denied the responsibility for the missile’s strike. But after a few days, as videos of the missile strike on the plane circulated on social media, the regime confessed that the plane was shot down by the IRGC due to human error.

The guild associations expressed their reactions to these incidents in several press releases. The I/TTGC criticized the regime’s confrontational foreign policy. It questioned the missile strike against the US base in Iraq that was propagandized by the Islamic regime as a great victory. The I/TTGC also taunted the regime’s inability to manage the funeral of Soleimani,

which resulted in the loss of 70 lives. Not least, it referred to the downing of flight PS-752 by the IRGC as the “fall of truth” (“Let the Sad” 2020).

On January 19, 2020, a group of TGCs representatives finally managed to meet with the Majles Speaker, Ali Larijani. During the meeting, they discussed the budget, school standards, educational justice and quality, harmonizing retirees’ rights with those of working teachers, and the security concerns of the TGCs. As it turned out, none of the teachers’ demands were met. While one of the main demands of teachers in their meeting with Larijani was to release the imprisoned teachers (“Meeting” 2020), a few days later, harsh court sentences were issued for seven members of North Khorasan’s TGC. These sentences sparked reactions from CCGAIT and other TGCs. They wrote a letter to Ebrahim Ra’isi, Head of the Judiciary, using the hashtag #Justice\_goes\_to\_abattoir (*Edalat Be Maslakh Miravad*) to express their support for the teachers (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2020b). Still, issuing unfair judgments against teacher activists continued. Then, on February 20, 2020, CCGAIT wrote an open letter to the leaders of the three branches of government and questioned why the guild demands of teachers were met with suppression (“Open Letter” 2020). Their efforts were fruitless.

The coronavirus initially emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and quickly spread globally. The Iranian authorities denied any COVID-19 case in Iran until February 19, 2020 (“Death” 2020). One reason for such denial was the upcoming state rally on the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution and the Majles’ elections scheduled for February 21. Eventually, on February 19, 2020, Iran’s Ministry of Health announced that two patients had died from the coronavirus in Qom (“Death” 2020). Subsequently, as of May 3, 2020, Iranian officials reported a total of 6,738 deaths due to COVID-19 (“Official COVID-19” 2020).

On February 28, 2020, the CCGAIT issued a statement regarding the spread of the coronavirus. It criticized the profit-oriented approach of authorities, especially their declining to restrict flights from China to Iran. Then it criticized the regime's policy of concealment, as well as a lack of necessary facilities and infrastructure, resulting in the official statistics of infection and mortality being significantly lower than unofficial reports. The CCGAIT listed privatization and commodification of educational and healthcare, increasing poverty, and corruption, among other factors, as contributing to the state's inefficient crisis management. It criticized the preferential treatment of officials in accessing COVID-19 test kits compared to ordinary people, and called on the government to provide masks, gloves, and disinfectants to everyone free of charge. It also demanded that classes be held online ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2020c).

While a fair budget was one of the main demands of TGCs' representatives in meeting with Larijani ("Meeting" 2020), on March 5, 2020, CCGAIT declared that the share of education in budget was insufficient. Moreover, it stated that instead of implementing the Teachers' Ranking Plan, the Ministry of Education opted for a 50% increase in salaries ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2020d). This was while the minimum wage for temporary employees and workers was set at 18,000,000 rials (\$123). The spokesperson of CCGAIT, Eskandar Lotfi, emphasized that discrimination against contract workers in both public and private sectors should not be overlooked: the 18,000,000 rials (\$123) monthly minimum wage would fall under the poverty line. He added that many students come from working-class families, and determining the minimum wage in an unjust manner meant spreading poverty and misery for the majority of society ("Positions" 2020).

For the first time, Marivan's TGC issued a statement on the occasion of International Women's Day, emphasizing that women were the first victims of widespread poverty due to patriarchal relations. The statement highlighted that despite significant increases in the education of women, they still made up less than 20% of the employed workforce. More specifically, it identified underage marriage, unequal wages compared to men, discriminatory laws, and structural deprivation and poverty as some of the challenges faced by women. It declared that teachers would not stop fighting until they achieved a world free from any form of oppression and gender equality ("Marivan's TGC" 2020).

The spokesperson for CCGAIT, in a message on the occasion of the 2020-2021 Iranian New Year, expressed disappointment that none of the teachers' demands had been met. Lotfi declared that CCGAIT's approach in the new year was to strengthen TGCs and encourage greater participation of teachers in union activities. It would strongly emphasize the right to independent association and the defense of imprisoned teachers ("spokesperson" 2020).

Meanwhile, the campaign for Habibi's release soared as in a petition signed by twenty TGCs dated on April 10, 2020, to the Chief Justice, Ra'isi. It requested the release of Habibi and other political prisoners who were teachers, lawyers, human rights activists, writers, workers, and even ordinary civilians ("Letter From" 2020). Surprisingly, the Ministry of Education fired Habibi on the eve of Iranian Teacher's Week. This led to widespread protests from TGCs. In a statement dated April 22, 2020, the International Education and Teachers' Union of the United Kingdom condemned the arrest of Ismail Abdi and the dismissal of Habibi, considering these measures to indicate a new wave of repression ("Statement of International" 2020).

After Habibi was fired, CCGAIT honoured him on May 7, 2020 as an exemplary teacher, and considered imprisoned, expelled, and exiled teachers as the symbolic assets of ITM. The CCGAIT rejected the government's selection of exemplary teachers during Iranian Teachers Week, which was based on ideological values ("Selection" 2020). Meanwhile, news of heavy prison sentences, flogging, and exile for seven teachers from North Khorasan province was disseminated through CCGAIT Telegram channel.

#### **6.4. COVID and Educational Challenges**

On January 8, 2021, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, declared a ban on Western Covid vaccines. This was while according to the statistics of Iranian Ministry of Health, 6360 new cases of COVID-19 were identified on January 7, 2021, bringing the total number of COVID-19 patients to 1,268,263 and the total number of fatalities from COVID-19 to 55,933 ("Identification" 2021). Khamenei's position sparked criticism from civil society activists. Several TGCs called for universal vaccination in line with the global standards accepted by the World Health Organization. A group of teachers, guild and civil society activists issued a statement and called for public vaccination ("Statement of a Group" 2021). At the same time, Rasoul Bodaghi, a leading member of Islamshahr's TGC, appeared on Iran International television program and criticized the policies of the Islamic Republic regarding mass vaccination ("Conversation" 2021). This marked the first time a TGC member appeared on an opposition television network. Another teacher activist appeared on Radio Canada International and talked about the necessity of public vaccination ("Urgent" 2021). It seemed that the ITM's leadership aimed to convey the positions and perspectives of teachers to the Iranian society through foreign

media, indicating a new wave of radicalism within the movement since these interviews with foreign-based media could provide a pretext for the Islamic Republic to arrest and detain teacher-activists.

Sistan-and-Baluchestan and Kurdistan were two provinces with predominantly impoverished, Sunni populations. In these regions, some resorted to fuel smuggling to Pakistan and Afghanistan (aka *sukhtbari*) and merchandise smuggling from Iraqi Kurdistan or KRG (aka *kulbari*) for survival. Individuals are hired by major smugglers to carry the items on their back, in their truck, or on donkeys across borders, and as such, they are really not smugglers but porters. These porters are often shot by Iranian border guards. On March 1, 2021, CCGAIT released a press release to condemn the killing of the *sukhtbars* in Sistan-and-Baluchistan and *kulbars* in Kurdistan provinces, stating that the regime shows its utmost hostility towards the most deprived and oppressed segments of society (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2021a). This particular press release received media attention. Qasem Azizzadeh, a leading member of Gilan’s TGC, appeared on Iran International television, pointing out “the *moral duty* of teachers to create a coalition among all grassroots social protest movements to shift the balance of power in favor of the people” (“Feedback” 2021; my emphasis). Later, CCGAIT issued a statement on the occasion of International Women’ Day for the first time. The statement criticized discriminatory laws and beliefs against women, condemned all forms of violence against women, listed their demands, and advocated for women’s rights (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2021b). Meanwhile, several domestic and foreign trade unions supported the imprisoned teachers, Abdi in particular, and called for their unconditional release. Sweden-Iran Labor Syndicate, several TGCs, Independent Union of Workers of Iran, the Retirees’ Trade Association, and independent cultural

figures also expressed their support for Ismael Abdi in separate statements. On March 28, 2021, CCGAIT warned against the suppression of civil society activists and demanded the release of all political prisoners, including journalists, writers, workers, and women activists, especially Abdi (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2021c).

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, schools in Iran transitioned to online education. While general vaccination had not yet commenced as late as May 2021, the Ministry of Education announced in the late April that final exams for grades 11 and 12 would be held in person. This decision sparked protests from high school students. They took to social media with hashtags such as *#Na\_Be\_Emtehan-e\_Hozuri* (*#No\_to\_In-Person\_Exams*), *#Tabe'iz\_Nagozarid* (*#Don't\_Discriminate*), and *#Ma\_Qorbani-ye\_Covid\_Hastim* (*#We\_Are\_COVID\_Victims*) to voice their objections to the Ministry. Ultimately, on May 5, 2021, student protests were held in several cities across Iran in front of Education buildings. In Yazd and Fooladshahr, the students were violently suppressed by police. In response, the students chanted: “Don’t be afraid, we’re all together” (“Violence” 2021). This slogan had appeared first in the Green Movement. The harsh crackdown on the students was strongly opposed by TGCs. Nine TGCs separately condemned the crackdown. They emphasized citizens’ rights to peaceful protests and free education as articulated in the Constitution (“Nine Statements” 2021).

### **6.5. Workers, Teachers, and Further Protest Movements**

The activities of teachers increasingly drew the support of other civil society associations as well as international and foreign trade unions. The TGCs and CCGAIT also increasingly supported the struggles of other social groups. After the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Mill was privatized in

2015 for 60 billion rials (\$1,818,000) out of its real value of 2,860 billion rials (\$ 86,666,000), workers faced numerous issues with their contracts and wages. Under the leadership of independent workers' councils, they launched organized protests. Eventually, they succeeded in canceling the sale contract to the private sector and returned the company to government ownership under the management of a workers' council, led by Isma'el Bakhshi, in March 2021. The success of the workers received both domestic and international attention. In its press release titled, "Haft Tappeh: Model of Civil Movements," Islamshahr's TGC stated that the workers of the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Mill achieved this victory by uniting their struggles and utilizing collective wisdom. It expressed hope that this historic victory would also manifest in the struggles of other workers, as well as retired and working teachers, healthcare workers and professionals, and other oppressed sectors of society ("Haft Tappeh" 2021). Then, in July 2021, contract workers in the oil and petrochemical industries initiated a series of strikes and protests known as the "2021 Campaign" (*Kampeyn-e 1400*) due to poor working conditions and low wages. On July 27, 2021, a group of independent worker councils and other independent associations issued a shared statement and defended the workers' 2021 Campaign, urging all workers, retirees, teachers, students, intellectuals, artists, and journalists to support the workers' protests. The statement pointed out that the right to have decent subsistence and independent councils and peaceful protests were shared by all workers ("Support of Twelve" 2021). Although the statement was signed by several TGCs, the CCGAIT was not among the signatories. This discrepancy might indicate differences of opinion among TGCs regarding involvement in struggles of other social sectors and national issues at that time.

On July 15, 2021, a series of grassroots protests erupted in several cities of Khuzestan province, home of Iran's oil industry, focusing on the issue of water scarcity. These protests spread to several other provinces. They were immediately suppressed by the regime and evolved into anti-regime demonstrations. On July 20, 2021, CCGAIT condemned the massacre of the protests in Khuzestan and the killing of sukhtbars and kulbars. Once again, it criticized the interventionist foreign policy of Islamic Republic. The CCGAIT announced that the regime's suppression could not stop the protests, and would instead cause the people to unite ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2021d). Several TGCs also condemned the bloody crackdown on the protesters in Khuzestan.

President Rouhani finished his term while he unraveled his most significant foreign policy initiative, the Iran Nuclear Deal. Domestically having failed to deliver the Nuclear Deal and with rising inflation, Rouhani's government contribution to the bloody crackdown on November 2019 mass protests. He also failed to control inflation and unemployment, leading to country wide protests in December 2017 and November 2019. Attested by the increasing number of Iranians participating in protests against the regime, growing numbers of Iranians had already abandoned the idea that the Islamic Republic was reformable. A key outcome of these was the refusal to participate in the May 2021 presidential election. Although the IRI is notorious for manipulating votes as well as its statistical information, according to the state's own statistic, only "48 percent of eligible voters participated in the election. This was the lowest level of participation since the 1979 Revolution" ("Final and Official" 2021). Interestingly, the Reformist candidate, Abdolnaser Hemmati, finished fourth out of five candidates. Ebrahim Ra'isi, the Supreme Leader's favourite and known for his prominent role in the massacre of political

prisoners in 1988, won the election. He allowed the importation of western-made vaccines, promising that up to 80 percent of the population would be vaccinated within 3 or 4 days (“President Ra’isi” 2021).

While the surge in COVID-19 between 2020-2021 made it difficult for demonstrations to occur, with the expansion of general vaccination and the reduction in COVID-19-related fatalities, health concerns relating to attending the rallies reduced.

If the years 1979 to 1981 witnessed the explosion of imagination of ITM, September 2021 to March 2022 witnessed the explosion of action. Fourteen protests were organized by the CCGAIT between September 2021 to March 2022. Moreover, if the leadership of the teachers’ movement became political by the entry of “Justice-seeking Teachers” in 2016, the body of ITM became political between September 2021 and March 2022. On September 12, 2021, CCGAIT issued an ultimatum to the government and the Majles to meet the demands of teachers by the new academic Iranian year (September 23). It demanded the Teachers’ Ranking Plan and equalization of salaries (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2021e) – the former being the primary demand of working teachers, the latter that of retired teachers. Again, this reflected the strategy of CCGAIT to mobilize the maximum number of teachers. It urged teachers to collectively send letters to the heads of education offices in their cities and provinces and follow up on their guild demands. The CCGAIT emphasized that it would support any legal protest held by teachers (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2021e). Following this call for action, a series of spontaneous protests by teachers took place in various cities. The CCGAIT declared its full support for any legal protests by teachers, students, and their families. It announced its plans for organizing a series of nationwide protests (“Notice” 2021). The next day, CCGAIT declared that the salaries of active

and retired teachers did not meet the minimum required for livelihood. It also highlighted that families could not afford to pay tuition fees. The statement called on working and retired teachers to rally on September 25, 2021, in front of the Education offices in cities and in front of the Organization for Planning and Budget in Tehran (“CCGAIIT’s Call” 2021). Although the two main teachers’ demands initially were the Teachers’ Ranking Plan and equalization of salaries, the leadership channelled these demands into free public education, the release of imprisoned teachers, and the right to independent associations. Later, the CCGAIIT reported that its call for rally had received a significant response from teachers in over 23 provinces and 45 cities, involving both working and retired teachers. Alongside subsistence issues, teachers chanted slogans for ending the commodification of education and for the freedom of imprisoned teachers (“Short Report” 2021). From then on, four spontaneous and 13 CCGAIIT-organized teacher protests took place by March 20, 2022 (the end of the Iranian year). While spontaneous protests mostly reflected specific layers of teachers’ grievances regarding their working conditions and contracts, the organized protests led by CCGAIIT, in addition to addressing teachers’ subsistence, also advocated for the release of imprisoned teachers, free, quality education, and the right to independent associations. Furthermore, CCGAIIT supported all grassroots protests and included their demands in its calls to action as well. Over six months, the teachers’ body reiterated the broader public demands of ITM in at least 13 sit-in protests or rallies. According to Habibi, the January 30 sit-in was the largest, with teachers joining over 300 cities and villages (“Continuation” 2022). The more protest actions were held by teachers, the more political the ITM became. The final resolution of teachers’ rallies held on February 19, 2022 stated: “The nature of the teaching profession requires teachers to attempt to raise society’s awareness about

its rights” (“Final Resolution” 2022a). Meanwhile, some teachers chanted in front of the Majles, “Teachers, Workers, Unite!” (“Sixth” 2022). On February 21, 2022, CCGAIT expressed that ITM would determine the Iran’ future (“Final Resolution” 2022b).

Mona Heidari was a 17-year-old child bride who was brutally murdered by her husband on February 5, 2022. Images of the gruesome murder circulated on social media (“After Brutally Murdering” 2022). On February 10, 2022, I/TTGC condemned the murder of Heidari and attributed her victimization to discriminatory laws of the Islamic Republic and patriarchal culture. The solution, it proposed, was modern education. The statement also highlighted women’s leadership in ITM over the past decade (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2022a). Later, Mohsen Emrani, a leading teacher-activist and a member of Bushehr’s TGC, declared that “a guild movement will only achieve its objectives when it can connect its demands to general demands of society.” Referring to the murder of Mona Heidari, he stated, “teachers cannot be indifferent to the rights of women and children. Undoubtedly, one of our demands is women’s rights. One of our demands is children’s rights. We are opposed to child marriage” (“Connection” 2022).

On the occasion of International Women’s Day of 2022, CCGAIT criticized the discriminatory gender laws and attributed them to patriarchy and religion. It acknowledged and supported the leading roles of women in ITM. In the same press release, CCGAIT condemned Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, in opposition to the Islamic Republic’s defending the Russian invasion. CCGAIT called for the end of the Russia-Ukraine war, whose first victims were women and children (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2022a).

The more the teachers’ movement struggled for general demands, the more support it received nationally and internationally: from Education International, Ontario’s Secondary

School Teachers' Federation, Teachers' Union of Ireland, Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Mill Workers' Syndicate, the Guild Association of Public Retirees, the Council of Iranian Retirees' Club, the Unification of Retirees, and the Council of Iranian Retirees. The Independent Voice of Workers of Iran's National Steel Industrial Group expressed its support for teachers on January 30, 2022. It stated that the teachers' demands for the elimination of discrimination, a decent life, free education, and the abolition of the commercialization of education were demands of all workers and the people ("Independent Voice" 2022).

The last permit to hold general assemblies had been conditionally granted to TGCs in 2016. The retired and working teachers of Fars province successfully held elections for a general assembly in October 2021 without a permit by invoking Article 26 of the Constitution. Subsequently, teachers in Kurdistan and Kermanshah conducted elections for their general assembly in a street on February 3, 2022, despite the harsh security atmosphere ("Congratulations" 2022). Two weeks later, teachers in Divandarreh in Kurdistan province held their election for general assembly and board of directors ("Bijar and Divandarreh" 2022). It is important to note that following the teachers' protests in March 2006, the regime had prohibited the coverage of news related to teachers, and imposed a ban on holding general assemblies of ITM. With the expansion of social media, the state's publication ban had now become totally obsolete. The ITM had won its active public voice and presence.

As usual, the regime's response to all of the above was suppression. It also engaged in broadcasting misinformation about ITM, reducing the teachers' demands to salary increase, and

portraying them as greedy. Additionally, the regime confused teachers about if and how the Teachers' Ranking Plan was implemented through its bureaucratic maze.

After the largest teachers' sit-in protest on January 30, 2022, the state's crackdown intensified. Before the Iranian new year of 2022 (on March 20), the teachers held their sit-in protest on February 22, 2022 in over 100 cities and villages ("Nationwide Teachers" 2022). The Iranian year came to an end without any significant improvement in ITM's reaching its goals. On April 15, 2022, CCGAIT announced that intelligence agencies had prevented it from holding its election of a general assembly. It pointed out that none of the teachers' demands had been met in the last Iranian year and called on teachers to rally at the Ministry of Education in Tehran and Education offices in other cities on April 21, 2022. ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2022b).

Rasoul Bodaghi received a five-year prison term on April 19. Bodaghi's harsh sentence triggered protests from TGCs throughout Iran. The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Mill Workers' Syndicate, and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation each separately urged that his sentence be annulled. The regime's message was clear: it showed an iron fist. The April 21 teachers' rallies faced security pressure and over 70 teachers were arrested ("Statement of I/TTGC" 2022b). Tehran faced the heaviest crackdown. Police dominated the streets, dispersing teachers and preventing them from rallying ("Oppression of Rally" 2022). Following this day, CCGAIT issued a statement prior to Iranian Teachers' Day on May 2 and called for rallies on May Day so that teachers would join workers ("Call for Nationwide" 2022). This was the first time CCGAIT called for a May Day rally. It seems that the intensification of oppression had led the leadership of the ITM to come this decision. The statement pointed out that teachers' demands like quality and free education, livable salaries, the

right to independent associations, and freedom of the imprisoned teachers and workers were also the demands of workers. CCGAIT also called on students' parents to join the teachers' rally in front of the Majles ("Call for Nationwide" 2022). In its final resolution of the May Day rallies, CCGAIT called the ITM a movement fighting for justice and freedom ("Final Resolution" 2022c). Following CCGAIT's call, several TGCs also published press releases on the occasion of May Day. I/TTGC saluted May Day and stressed the need for solidarity among teachers, workers, retirees, and students ("I/TTGC Salutation" 2022). After that, four members of I/TTGC were detained on April 30 ("Breaking News" 2022). The next day, while police were heavily deployed in cities, dozens of teachers took to the streets in 50 cities and chanted "the imprisoned teachers must release". In Tehran, police had taken control of all the streets leading to the Majles from the day before May Day and on May 1 detained approximately 50 protestors, some of whom were worker-activists. The CCGAIT condemned the illegal arrests of teachers, and called for their unconditional release ("Arrest" 2022).

The arrests and summons continued. The Human Rights Defenders Center condemned the detention and charges against teachers and worker activists ("Statement of Human" 2022). Ismael Abdi, the imprisoned teacher, went on a hunger strike to protest the arrestment of teacher- and worker-activists. He condemned the massacre of protesters in December 2016 and November 2019 ("Text of Abdi" 2022). Following him, several other teacher-activists also went on hunger strikes to support Abdi. Manouchehr Bakhtiari, the father of Pouya Bakhtiari, one of the victims of the November 2019 protests, declared from Karaj prison that he would go on hunger strike to support Abdi ("Manouchehr Bakhtiari" 2022). On May 6, the National Union of Truck Drivers condemned the imprisonment of teachers, stating that teachers were symbols of

consciousness and love, stressing that to imprison teachers meant to imprison the people's conscience ("Statement of Nationwide" 2022).

The wave of suppression of activists of all shades did not stop. To further suppress ITM, Iranian intelligence masterfully crafted a plot against TGCs. On the encouragement of some expatriate labour activists, two French teachers travelled to Iran on March 28, 2022 and met some teacher-activists. The Islamic regime arrested them on May 16, 2022. The state's media declared that these two French citizens had met the activists to cause unrest among teachers and workers, thus attributing the labour and teachers' unrests to plots of foreign states ("Confirming Detention" 2022). This scenario aimed to discredit the leaders of ITM and provided the pretext for further suppression of the movement. The CCGAIT flatly rejected these charges and emphasized that ITM was independent and autonomous ("Mountain" 2022).

#### **6.6. The Revolutionary Uprising of Zhina**

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini was a 21-year-old Kurdish girl who was arrested by morality police on September 13, 2022 while visiting Tehran. Due to police mistreatment while in custody, she was taken to hospital quickly, where she passed away three days later. Her death sparked nationwide outrage in the country, leading to 100 days of street protests against the entirety of the Islamic Republic which were met with severe state violence. Within the next nine months after September 2022, according to reports of human rights organizations, more than 500 citizens, including 72 children, were killed by the Islamic thugs ("When Iran Sunk" 2023). This protest movement was soon called Mahsa's or Zhina's movement, or Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement (after the key motto of the movement).

This movement had similarities with the December 2017 and November 2019 protests. But the difference was that Zhina's uprising not only marked a revolt against religious authoritarianism, it offered a new perspective within Iran's political imagination through its key motto, "Women, Life, Freedom" unifying all walks of life. Another distinguishing feature of this revolutionary uprising was the extensive participation of school students. Since the 1979 Revolution, this was the first time the school had turned into a revolutionary hub, and even when street protests had subsided, elementary students remained active. Universities and school were the two main centers keeping the movement active at its times of hiatus. One could see a convergence of school pupils, teachers, and university students.

Following the death of Amini, different independent guild associations issued statements in condemnation of the oppression of women. While some statements were radical, others were more conservative. For instance, the Free Union of Workers in Iran called on workers in major production centers and industries to go on strike to put an end to the existing catastrophic conditions ("Statement of Free" 2020). The Council of Iranian Retirees, National Union of Retirees of Iran, and Independent Retirees Group of Tehran declared that the retirees sought to overthrow all inhuman laws and fought for freedom ("We Hate You" 2022). The Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company demanded the prosecution of those responsible for Mahsa's death and stressed the equality of genders ("We Condemn" 2022). Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Mill Workers' Syndicate demanded the punishment of perpetrators and the abolition of all misogynist laws and called on oppressed women and men to unite ("Statement of Haft Tappeh" 2022). The CCGAIT demanded the prosecution of perpetrators and disbanding the morality police ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2022c).

Previously, CCGAIT had simply issued press releases in regard to the 2017 and 2019 uprisings. This time, CCGAIT took further steps by issuing consecutive statements, relaying the protest news including school student protests, and the government suppression of these protests. It also released the names of detainees and casualties, called for sit-in protests, and supported calls for nationwide strikes (“Statement of I/TTGC” 2023). The first CCGAIT call after Zhina’s uprising was a call for teachers and students not to attend school on September 26 and 28 (September 27 was a holiday) as a protest against the violent suppression of protests and the arrests of elementary and university students, as well as the militarization of schools. It called on police personnel not to open fire on people (“CCGAIT and Guild” 2022). While following the Guild Council of Sharif University Students’ call, university students widely boycotted classes across Iran (“Widespread Boycott” 2022), CCGAIT’s call did not receive as much support from teachers as did it before Zhina’s movement. Meanwhile, a high school student named Mahsa Mowgoee was killed by police in Isfahan on September 22. Criticizing her teachers, who did not boycott the classes, the Progressive Students of Isfahan University called on teachers to stand with the elementary and university students and organize nationwide strikes (“Why Did You Come?” 2022).

On the occasion of World Teachers’ Day, CCGAIT stated that Iranian teachers had fought for free public education and against the militarization of education and turning schools into seminaries. It criticized the suppression of teacher-activists and called on elementary students and teachers not to attend classes in solidarity with Zhina’s movement (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2022d). CCGAIT called on people to stop paying their water, electricity, and gas bills to prevent

the regime from funding its repressive forces (“CCGAIT: Don’t Pay” 2022). This Call was not successful.

The most important act of CCGAIT was to sign the “Charter of Minimum Demands” signed by twenty guild and civil society organizations (dated February 14, 2022). The Charter stated that Zhina’s movement aimed to end any kind of top-down power forever, and marked the beginning of a revolution for the liberation of people from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and dictatorship. It raised 12 demands, including: freedom of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, as well as freedom of speech; an end to death sentence in Iran; full equality of women’s rights with men; fair salaries for all workers, both employed and retired; ending environmental destruction, and upholding children’s rights. One of the most interesting and radical demands in this statement was to recognize LGBTQ+ community rights, a taboo in the Islamic Republic (“Charter of Minimum” 2022).

This Charter garnered the attention of society and the media, sparking extensive discussions and conversations. The CCGAIT now faced its chronic paradox between guild and political action. According to its charter, CCGAIT was a guild or professional association. As a teacher pointed out, while CCGAIT signed the Charter of Minimum Demands, which is obviously political, it had rejected proposals with merely a political label. The question is not why CCGAIT signed the charter, but rather its dualistic position (Rahimishad 2023). The revolutionary movement of Zhina caused the paradox to surface. I/TTGC stated that the guild/professional nature of TGCs made it challenging to deal with non-guild issues. It argued that the national and moral duty of teachers and TGCs was to stand with elementary students, university students, and the public (“Statement of T/ITGC” 2023).

Zhina's uprising put a fundamental question to the ITM: What was the historical duty of teachers? Aziz Qasemzadeh, a leading teacher-activist and a member of Gilan's TGC, posed the question: "What is the guild and historical duty of teachers now?" He argued that reducing guild activity to subsistence matters was self-deception since corruption and skyrocketing inflation made any subsistence improvement impossible. He argued that being a "guild" association meant to avoid any specific political ideology, not being impartial with respect to society's issues. He asked, "is it possible to witness violent oppression of university students, the youth, and people and as teachers, not express any position?" He believed the professional, moral, and historical duty of teachers required them to act as vanguard in standing with people in this historical moment ("What Is" 2022).

The CCGAIT issued a statement in support of TGC of Fars province for a rally on February 22, 2023. The statement mentioned the names of teachers, students, and children who were killed by the regime in the protests and announced that CCGAIT would stand with the families of the victims ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2023a).

On November 30, 2022, an all-girls high school was chemically attacked in Qom, the religious capital of Iran. Then, multiple chemical attacks happened in mostly girls' elementary and high schools in other cities. The students smelled an odor and soon after felt sick with headaches, nausea, asthma, and so on. In all cases the paramedics attended to students, and in many cases, the pupils were taken to hospitals. While the regime never took responsibility for these attacks, it was clear that the hardliners were punishing the pupils, especially the girls, for their continued support for Zhina's movement. TGCs and CCGAIT expressly condemned these

chemical attacks and called on parents to form human-chains around schools and be vigilant (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2023b). The chemical attacks continued until May 1, 2023.

The CCGAIT called for rallies across the country on March 7, 2023. It condemned the chemical attacks on schools and called for lifting the ban on education for the arrested elementary students (“CCGAIT’s Call” 2023). In addition to its traditional allies (i.e., retiree’s and workers’ independent associations), Human Rights Defenders Center, United University Students, and Revolutionary Elementary Students of Bushehr supported CCGAIT’s call. The students of Tarbiat Modares University declared that the students would support elementary students alongside teachers, chanting “Woman, Life, Freedom” (“Tarbiat Modares University” 2023). The question arises: are teachers able to play a coordinating role between school and university?

Just as the 1979 Revolution had created a space for new and revolutionary ideas among teacher-activists, the 2022 Zhina’s movement also opened space for new ideas among rank-and-file teachers and students. These ideas manifested themselves in the form of new groups and committees, especially student committees. The “Committees for the Protection of Elementary Students and Schools” announced their existence on November 9, 2022. The Committees declared that the recent nationwide uprising revealed the necessity of complementing and strengthening previous forms of resistance against the regime. The Committees argued that the formation of committees in schools was necessary not only to support students against violent suppression but also to pass on all the experiences of teacher activism gained from previous struggles. It concluded that “we previously stated that guild/professional is political, but today guild is not just political, but universal/public. Our struggles have taught us that guild liberation

is impossible without universal liberation” (“Statement of Existence” 2022). The teachers who called themselves “A Group of Freedom-Seeking Teachers in Tehran, Alborz, and Fars” declared on September 26, 2022 that any reconciliation and negotiation with the regime was impossible, and they stressed united protests in the streets (“In the Name” 2022). Grassroots councils and groups such as Women Teacher Activists of Iran, Vanguard Elementary Students, and Council of Freedom-Seeking Elementary Students came into existence. The Vanguard Students declared that they would remove the mandatory hijab as of September 26, 2022 and would chant the slogans: “Freedom, not Compulsory Hijab”; “Neither Headscarf, Nor Turban, Freedom and Equality”, and “Imprisoned Students Must be Released” (“We Remove” 2022). Although these ideas declined with the ebbing of the uprising, it remains to be seen whether they would re-emerge in future grassroots protests.

With Justice-seeking Teachers entering the leadership of the ITM in 2016, the ITM turned towards a hegemonic position. Universal, free, non-ideological education and rights of children moved into the center of teachers’ discourse. This did not mean that subsistence issues lost their importance. Subsistence demands remained central to the ITM. Indeed, the most effective motivation of the teachers’ body to participate in collective activism was related to subsistence. Remember that the body’s overabundant activism in 2021 was fuelled by the Teachers’ Ranking Plan. That said, what qualitatively distinguished teachers’ collective activism in 2021 was the developing of connections between subsistence demands, and political demands like free, non-ideological education, and fair budget for education. In other words, although the body of teachers started from subsistence, it did not stay at this point and moved towards a hegemonic position by putting forward universal demands. The period ended by the revolutionary uprising

of Zhina in 2022. The Zhina uprising posed a historical question to the ITM: what is the moral responsibility of teachers towards the Woman, Life, Freedom movement? Following the revolutionary atmosphere caused by the Zhina uprising, numbers of new ideas were born in the form of new councils. Although the tide of the Zhina uprising is now low, its effects on various segments of society have not stopped and continue to influence teachers.

## Chapter 7: Analysis and Conclusions

This chapter offers an analytical account of the ITM based on ITM's historical development from a subaltern social group to a potentially hegemonic social force. By drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, I shed light on how the ITM can rise as such a force. This chapter concludes the thesis by delving into the question of alliance and, more specifically, its potential pitfalls for the ITM.

### 7.1. The Question of Guild

To figure out the significance of "guild" in the ITM, I adopt a two-fold approach: first, I look at the brief history of the development of guilds, and second, I contextualize guild in the history of the ITM. Before the advent of capitalism, guilds not only had significant regulatory and trade-related powers, but they also played a role in local and national governance ("History of Guild" n.d.). In Iran, the history of guilds goes back to the Sassanian Empire (224-551 CE). During the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736), the guilds witnessed substantial growth. But it was not until 1971 that modern Iran's first guild system law took effect. From then on, guild associations operated under the state and the local authorities' supervision. After the 1979 revolution, the Central Council of Guilds (*Showra-ye Markazi-ye Asnaf*) was dissolved, and a significant portion of its authority was delegated to unions controlled by state ("History of Guild" n.d.), while the guilds historically enjoyed *relative autonomy* from the state. Historically, the most crucial functions of guilds had been to control and manage guild's affairs and defend their interests. The former is related to the internal affairs of a guild, while the latter is inevitably interconnected to the external conditions in which the guild operates.

Now, let us go back to the history of the ITM to figure out how a specific group of teacher-activists known as the Chalk-holding Teachers came up with the idea of the teachers' guild in 1998 and what they meant by guild. To appreciate the reason why the Chalk-holding Teachers decided to select the term guild for the teachers' organization, it is necessary to go back to the distant origins of the ITM: the first teachers' association, the Society of Degree Holders from Iranian Teachers' Colleges, which later changed into Teachers' Society, founded in 1932. In the 1940s, the Leftist Tudeh Party of Iran was influential across the country. It exerted a great influence over the Teachers' Society, but then disagreements between the Society and the Tudeh Party appeared in 1949 when the Tudeh Party was declared illegal (Rabi'e 1996:229). After the Tudeh Party was banned, security pressure on the Teachers' Society increased. This experience caused the teachers to come up with the idea of forming a union led by teachers. Out of the historical experience of the Society and crackdown on the Tudeh in the 1940s, the Mehregan club came into existence in February 1952 (Rabi'e 1996:229), with the teacher and politician, Mohammad Derakhshesh, as its head. While any oppositional party was under severe oppression, thanks to "Derakhshesh, who became Tehran's deputy in the 18th Majles, and the Club's position as a guild and cultural entity, it received more support from the Ministry of Culture" (Rabi'e 1996:229). The Club "quickly became one of the most significant organizations for elementary and high school teachers in Iran" ("When Teachers" 2019), and it managed to launch the historical teachers' strong protest in Tehran in 1961, which led to the resignation of Premier Sharif Emami and the appointment of the leader of protesting teachers, Derakhshesh, as Minister of Education. Derakhshesh officially declared an end to the teachers' strike on May 12, 1962, but the teachers' demands were not met. As a Majles deputy, Derakhshesh was allied with

premier Ali Amini, the rival of Sharif Emami, in the 20th Majles election. Derakhshesh's political affiliations caused suspicion about whether the political factions merely took advantage of the teachers' collective action for their own objectives. Out of these two main historical experiences—that is, the Society of Teachers' parting ways from Tudeh in 1949 and the Mehregan Club, with Derakhshesh being a teacher and politician in the position of its leadership in 1961—18 years later during the early years after the 1979 revolution, Iranian teachers put forward with the idea of autonomy or independence (*esteqlal*) from political parties. In this context, “autonomy” meant that the teachers' associations did not depend on the state or political parties, but not implying “a separation of teachers and students [from society]” (Safarzadeh 2016). This is when “guild” became a useful concept for the teachers' movement.

The relative political openness of the first years after the Revolution soon came to an end when the crackdown of 1981 (continued throughout the 1980s) descended upon activists. The Islamic regime annihilated any and all opposition, especially Leftist parties like Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas, People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, and Tudeh Party. Later in summer 1988, the regime purged all political prisoners, killing thousands. With the Reformist Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) and his rhetoric of political freedom, following some twenty years of steady repression by the Islamic regime, civil society organizations found an opportunity to grow. Out of this political opening, three teachers' associations came into existence: (1) the House of Teachers (*Khaneh-ye Mo'aleman*) associated with the Islamic hardliners; (2) the Teachers' Organization (*Sazman-e Mo'aleman*) affiliated with the Islamic Reformists; and (3) the Teachers' Guild Center (*Kanun-e Senfi-ye Mo'aleman*) (“Mourning” 2019).

The Teacher's Guild Center or TGC was established by the Chalk-holding Teachers. Contrary to the two pro-regime teachers' associations, the Chalk-holding Teachers declared their autonomy from any factions in power and any political party. The teachers' historical experiences in 1949 and 1961, and the suppression by the Islamic regime had led them to the idea of "guild." Now, the question is, why did the Chalk-holding Teachers select the term "guild"?

As previously discussed, "guild" was an old type of advocating for interests. This was when political parties were a new phenomenon in Iran. Political parties first appeared in the relative politically open atmosphere of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar (1853-1907), whereas guilds went back to the Sassanian Empire. Political parties have been violently oppressed by the modern Iranian authoritarian regimes, both under the Pahlavi dynasty and the Islamic regime. The political parties have been regarded as a security threat unless they were affiliated with the ruling elite. Moreover, contrary to the guilds, whose demographic constituency is clearly identifiable and thus representable, the political parties lacked such identifiable constituency, as they attract adherents from different social groups and classes, and as such they only claimed to be the representative of the social groups they wished to mobilize. So, while it is difficult to identify the body of political parties, guild's constituencies are easily identifiable. Teachers' guilds defend the teachers and students' interests.

Annihilation of independent collective actions by Iranian authoritarian regimes under the pretext of actions against national security has been the most important barrier for any independent collective (or union) activism. In this context, *de*-securitization of collective actions was the first step in forming any independent association. Guilds best fit into this goal. On the

one hand, guilds already had a history under Iranian authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, guilds had functioned relatively independent from the state.

Now let us look at “guild” from the lens of I/TTGC Charter. According to Article 1 of its Charter, I/TTGC was a non-political and non-profit organization. The Charter stressed that I/TTGC was independent. Its objectives included fostering unity and cohesion among teachers and defending the rights of all educators. The Charter pointed out creating a deep and lasting relationship between teachers and other segments of society. Article 16 of the I/TTGC Charter forbade members of its Board of Directors and the General Secretary from being members of any political parties (“Iran/Tehran” n.d.). In the Iranian context, the guild appears to be close to the Gramscian concept of the non-instrumental and hegemonic group. That is why this study of ITM is of immense importance since it implies that teachers “have reached the class consciousness of their own possibilities, of the fact that they can become a historical agency of building a new world” (Gramsci 1971:159). This is exactly how the Chalk-holding Teachers perceived TGCs as guild associations.

## **7.2. A Gramscian Analysis of Historical Development of ITM**

Regarding building hegemony, Antonio Gramsci (1971:53) considers *autonomy vis-à-vis* enemies and support from other subaltern groups as the two necessary conditions for any subaltern group to become hegemonic. Gramsci’s theory has been discussed in chapter 3, but we need to retrieve his approach for our analysis here. Gramsci (1971:181) goes on to elaborate on how a subaltern group develops into a hegemonic group. Briefly, he refers to three main moments: first, the moment of gaining homogeneity and self-awareness among members of the

subaltern group, and second, the moment of solidarity not only among members of the subaltern group but also among subaltern classes. Of course, this solidarity is still purely economic at this moment. The third and purely political moment is when “one becomes aware that one’s own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcends the corporate limits of the purely economic class and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too” (Gramsci 1971:181). Now, let us look at the historical development of the ITM from the lens of Gramsci’s three main moments. We will see that the ITM represents and embodies, almost exactly, the three Gramscian moments.

Although teachers held three significant protests in the early 1920s in Tehran, it was not until the 1940s when their initial concerted effort to organize and consolidate their disparate activities materialized with the formation of Iran’s first teachers’ union, Teachers’ Society. Through the Society, Iranian teachers emerged as a social group with a certain degree of homogeneity and self-awareness. But again, this did not come into fruition until the teachers’ famous, massive protest on May 2, 1961, at which Dr. Khanali was shot and killed by police. While in the 1960s, the salaried middle-class—and the teachers as an important component of the salaried middle-class—grew into a reliable social force, Dr. Khanali’s death deeply etched itself into the collective memory of teachers and became the symbol of teachers’ struggles for justice. Recall that the day of his martyrdom for the teachers’ cause became the National Day of Teachers. The collective action of 1961 and especially the murder of Dr. Khanali laid the foundation of teachers’ identity as an independent social group which struggled for justice and against dictatorship. The 1961 protest represents the Gramscian first moment.

This identity developed remarkably in the politically relaxed atmosphere of 1979-1981, when the nascent Islamic Republic had not yet fully consolidated its authoritarian political power, a process that came with the purging of all Iranian opposition in the 1980s. Independence/autonomy and supporting other subaltern groups were among the main principles of the Teachers' Independent Centers' charter. This represents the first two moments of Gramscian theory for a subaltern group to become hegemonic. In Gramscian term, the 1979-1981 was the moment when the idea of the ITM as a hegemonic force was born. Moreover, the teachers' ideas for universal public education can be best summarized in Gramsci's subaltern-centered pedagogy and common schools: free, non-ideological education and managing education by councils of teachers and students—a most progressive idea of self-governance.

The crackdown of the 1980s not only crushed the embryonic teachers' movement, it prevented the idea of ITM as a hegemonic force. It was not until 1998 when the Chalk-holding Teachers re-articulated the most basic principle of ITM as a hegemonic force: independence or autonomy of ITM in the form of Teachers' Guild Centers (TGCs). The Chalk-holding Teachers can be identified as the second generation while the Justice-seeking Teachers stand out as the third generation of teachers' organic intellectuals. The latter took the leadership of ITM in 2016. While the Chalk-holding Teachers revised and defended Gramsci's first moment (indeed, principle) of a hegemonic group, i.e., independence/autonomy, in 1998, the Justice-seeking Teachers represented Gramsci's second moment or principle of a hegemonic group, i.e., winning support of other social groups and making other subaltern groups' demands its own. In other words, Justice-seeking Teachers sought to articulate these demands within the ITM agenda in 2016.

After five years of reorganizing from 1998 to 2002, CCGAIT and TGCs gradually began to engage in social activism, beginning in 2002. The initial statements of CCGAIT did not call for direct action. Instead, CCGAIT called for feasible collective actions, above all, asking teachers to express their ideas about their subsistence and education issues. There is an extremely important lesson here for subaltern activism. Knowing that the authoritarian Islamic regime would not tolerate any independent collective activism, CCGAIT and TGCs adopted a two-fold strategy. First, time and again they emphasized their guild nature and their following legal avenues in accord with the Constitution. This strategy aimed at de-securitization of their collective actions and paved the way for the body of teachers to engage in activism. Secondly, CCGAIT's and TGCs' activism was based on the teachers, striking a balance between security pressures, on the one hand, and the teachers' organized social force, on the other. Whenever the former outweighed the latter, they put a stress on their guild nature and their legal-constitutional actions and demands. In this balance of power, they preferred to limit their calls for action only to the members of CCGAIT's and TGCs or to engage the body of teachers in the most practical (and relatively safe) forms of activism. Whenever the latter outweighed the former, they called on teachers for nationwide strikes and marches before the Ministry of Education and the Majles and they tried to impose their demands on the regime. For example, while initially CCGAIT held teachers' demonstration in front of the Ministry of Education or the Majles only upon receiving assembly permit from the authorities, after 2016 it relinquished applying for permits for teachers' protests altogether. Instead, CCGAIT argued that Article 27 of Constitution guaranteed the right to peaceful protests. The same applied to TGCs. While initially CCGAIT granted membership only to those TGCs with official permits, in its 2019 Charter, it relinquished that condition and

granted membership to any TGC that had submitted an application to the authorities and had not received a reply for six months. Another example is the General Assembly elections. Initially, the General Assembly elections were conditioned on getting permits from the authorities, but this changed in 2022: CCGAIT had held 13 sit-in protests and rallies between September-2021 and March-2022, and several TGCs held their General Assembly elections in the streets. Recall that the Islamic regime intended to destroy CCGAIT and TGCs by banning their General Assembly elections in order to break the relationship between the body and the leadership. Obviously, the street is the place where dissidents make their appearance, the only place where the regime cannot deny the existence of the protestors. As a result, it was crucial for the regime to control the streets in a such a way that no opposition appeared. Now, thanks to the teachers' collective activism in 2022, TGCs imposed their will on the regime by holding their General Assemblies in the public arena. This represents Behrangi's famous motto: A right is to be taken, not given away.

The first CCGAIT call for a street protest was issued in January 2004. It conditioned the protest on receiving assembly permission. Expectedly, the government denied the permit and CCGAIT instructed teachers to attend schools but refrain from teaching classes for three days (January 17-19, 2004). The most important teachers' protest action took place in March 2004 when the teachers refrained from teaching classes in more than 400 cities for one week (March 6-13, 2004). Following the teachers' collective action, a wave of suppression was launched by the state. The last statement of CCGAIT in the final months of the Reformist government expressed the essence of their activism from 2002 to 2005 through a symbol: “!?” This symbol meant that teachers were met with oppression by the Reformist government for expressing their

legal demands. What was to be done? The question that arises from the concrete experience of activism is of immense importance. This question, which was first posed in 2005, was answered by Justice-Seeking Teachers a decade later in 2014: the politicization of ITM, or in Gramsci's terms, putting the second moment or principle of becoming hegemonic into agenda: gaining the support of other subaltern social groups by putting forward universal demands and expressing support for other subaltern groups by making their questions ITM's own, which means understating and struggling for various demands of other subaltern groups (Gramsci 1978:443).

While CCGAIT could not organize any teachers' protests in public space between 2002 and 2005, it issued its first call for demonstration in front of the Majles in February, 2007, during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013). This was CCGAIT's first call for action in public without applying for a permit. Highlighting the importance of public education, the rally's final resolution acknowledged that teachers could not achieve their demands unless society at large recognized the teachers' demands as its own (Khaksari 2014d). Although based on their direct activism from 1998 to 2007, the Chalk-holding Teachers intuitively realized the necessity of elevating their struggle to an ethico-political level, to build a wider coalition cemented not on primarily instrumental grounds (though these too are important). Then, the Chalk-holding Teachers sought a principled project of social justice, as the hardliners with the central role of authoritarian government of Ahmadinejad put such great pressure on ITM that CCGAIT and TGCs could not organize any significant collective action until 2013, when Rouhani (2013-2021) became President. The Chalk-holding Teachers' intuitive observation in 2007 was systematically formulated by Justice-seeking Teachers in 2014 through the "Statement of 100 Teachers."

It can be said that this Statement was the manifesto of Justice-seeking Teachers. The central point of the “Statement of 100 Teachers” is this: “As a collective of Iranian teachers, we are concerned about the future of public education and believe that we should express our demands and strive for their realization independently from the government” (Habibi 2014). Like the Chalk-holding Teachers, the Justice-seeking Teachers stressed independence from the state, and their emphasis on realizing the teachers’ demands independently from the governments implied that no matter what faction (Reformists or hardliners) was in power, governments would not meet the teachers’ demands unless they were forced to do so by teachers’ activism. Thus, the focus shifted from negotiating with the authorities to mobilizing and strengthening the teachers’ collective body. Similarly, while quality public education was always a demand, the “Statement of 100 Teachers” articulated public education and students’ and children’s rights as the central signifiers around which all other teachers’ demands, including their salary and contracts, should be articulated. Later, the Justice-seeking Teachers regarded quality public education as necessary for achieving a flourishing society based on freedom and justice and called on eliminating all kinds of discrimination. The aforementioned Statement also expressed its support for other subaltern groups from workers to nurses (Habibi 2014). As such, the “Statement of 100 Teachers” stands out indeed as the manifesto of making the ITM a potentially hegemonic force.

Although Justice-seeking Teachers gained growing attention following their manifesto in 2014, they remained active outside of CCGAIT and TGCs until 2016, when the Rouhani government granted TGCs conditional permits to hold General Assemblies. The influence of Justice-seeking Teachers could be seen in statements even before 2016 when they did eventually enter into TGCs and later CCGAIT. In 2017, with the Justice-seeking Teachers entering the

leadership of CCGAIT, the Justice-seeking Teachers become hegemonic within ITM. This is a Gramscian moment when the organic intellectuals gain the “intellectual and moral leadership” of the movement of which they are a part. Now, the body of teachers started to change until 2022 when it became political. It is interesting that even in 2022, when the body of teachers became political, subsistence demands played a central role in organizing any collective action. That said, teachers’ subsistence demands evolved into political ones, meaning that while the body was struggling for its subsistence demands, it demanded the release of the imprisoned teacher activists; free, public, non-ideological education; and the right to have independent civil society organizations.

By 2017, CCGAIT and TGCs started to support other social groups. On the occasion of University Student Day, CCGAIT issued a statement on December 7, 2017, declaring that it recognized and supported the demands of student unions, including the right to quality and free post-secondary education, the right to independent student councils, and stopping the commodification of education. It stated that solidarity across independent organizations was the only way to overcome the challenges ahead (“Statement of CCGAIT” 2017). CCGAIT started to engage with the general public’s issues from the perspective of students’ and children’s right. Following the destructive November 2017 earthquake in the town of Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, CCGAIT raised money to support affected students and children. In 2019, CCGAIT condemned Turkey’s invasion of northwestern Syria. While after 2017, CCGAIT and TGCs started to engage with social issues, the December 2017 grassroots protest of the poor and marginalized (known as the Dey 1396 movement) accelerated this tendency. Later, CCGAIT declared that the teachers could not remain indifferent to social issues. Since 2018, the ITM has increasingly

received support from Left civil society organizations across the world. The more teachers' activism fought for general demands, the more support they received nationally and internationally. In 2021, Qasem Azizzadeh, a leading member of Gilan's TGC, formulated the hegemonic approach of CCGAIT and TGCs: it is "the moral duty of teachers to create a coalition among all grassroots social protest movements to shift the balance of power in favor of the people" ("Feedback" 2021).

The teachers' discursive shift from salary discrimination (from the earliest teachers' activism, from the 1920s to the 2000s) to fair budget for quality public education in 2016, had a real impact. In 2018, Free Trade Union of Iranian Workers' Union and the Guild Council of University Students across Iran separately declared that teachers speak on behalf of the whole society by defending quality public education and the right to have independent associations ("In Support" 2018; "Teachers and University Students" 2018). The Independent Voice of Workers of Iran National Steel Industrial Group expressed its support for teachers in January 2022 by stating that the teachers' demands for the elimination of discrimination, a decent life, and free education were demands of all workers and the people ("Independent Voice" 2022). Meanwhile, CCGAIT and TGCs put forward more general demands: livable salaries, the right to independent associations, and freedom of the imprisoned activists ("Call for Nationwide" 2022). On May 6, the National Union of Truck Drivers condemned the imprisonment of teachers, stating that teachers were symbol of consciousness and love, and stressing that to imprison teachers meant to imprison the people's conscience ("Statement of Nationwide" 2022). From 2014 on, the ITM and other subaltern groups have been experiencing Gramsci's second moment, i.e., solidarity as a class. From 2018 onward, the ITM has managed to put its main demand, i.e., free, quality

education as a universal demand, that is, Gramsci's third moment of building hegemony. Just as Gramsci states that in the third and most political moment, a subaltern group realizes that its interest is and must be the interest of the whole society (Gramsci 1971:181), since 2018, the ITM's demands for free, non-ideological education, children rights have been increasingly becoming the demands of other subaltern groups as well. Moreover, some common demands have appeared among subaltern groups: decent salaries, the right to independent activism and release of the imprisoned activists, among others. Interestingly, various segments of society even went as far as saying that teachers were struggling for the whole society, not solely for their own demands. Teachers' demands are increasingly becoming the demands of other subaltern groups.

### **7.3. The ITM and the Woman, Life, Freedom Uprising**

While CCGAIT and TGCs supported the people in the uprisings of the poor and marginalized in December 2017-January 2018 and November 2019 in over 100 cities and blamed the regime for the bloody crackdown on protestors, they went one step further in the revolutionary movement that was named after its prime victim, the young Kurdish woman Mahsa/Zhina Amini: CCGAIT and TGCs provided full coverage of protest news and expressly supported the protestors from the perspective of defending the rights of school students and children, more broadly. Although CCGAIT issued calls for sit-ins in support of Zhina's movement, or the WLF movement, in its Telegram channel, its calls were not received by teachers, as well as, before WLF movement. Moreover, in those days, any action less than overthrowing the Islamic regime was considered as reformist. In this atmosphere, teachers' guild activism for higher salaries or the release of

imprisoned teachers was blamed so that CCGAIT declared it was not a crime to undertake guild activism and demand the release of the imprisoned teacher activists.

Zhina's movement brought to the surface the contradiction between guild and political activism. Some teachers argued that since CCGAIT and TGCs were guild or professional organizations, and thus they should have avoided engaging with political issues. Others maintained that the teachers' moral responsibility mandated them to stand with the people. As Aziz Qasemzadeh put it, the professional (*senfi* or guild) duty of teachers is to stand with the people. CCGAIT and TGCs had defended various subaltern groups' struggles, including the participants in the December 2017 and November 2019 protests, but it was the WLF movement that had brought up a new situation: first, Zhina's was a revolutionary movement with its objective being to end the Islamic regime; second, the regime had significantly lost its legitimacy already after the bloody crackdown on the November 2019 protests. Thus, the contradiction was not really between professional/guild and political activism, since as discussed, the ITM had already engaged with diverse political issues. Instead, the seemingly contradiction was in fact between ITM as a growing hegemonic force and the seizing of the state as the ultimate victory of the subalterns as the new, rising hegemony. While there was a great pressure on the ITM to take more radical actions, CCGAIT and TGCs actively defended Zhina's movement from the perspective of students' and children's rights, especially given that schools were one of the most active centers of revolutionary protest that were subsequently heavily repressed by the regime.

The most important question that Zhina's movement put to the ITM was this: What was the teachers' responsibility regarding the revolutionary WLF movement? One of the achievements of Zhina's movement was to bring the idea of ending the regime to the masses.

Now, in my opinion, the most important question before the ITM was this: how could the ITM adopt and make its own (Gramsci 1978:443), the central motto of the movement—Woman, Life, Freedom? It requires a great deal of effort by the teachers’ organic intellectuals to make the demands of Zhina’s movement their own in a Gramscian way (Gramsci 1978:443). Of course, it is not only a matter of quantity of organic intellectuals, but more importantly, it requires the type of organic intellectuals best fit for the new revolutionary landscape. The historic social events not only create new horizons, new imaginations, and new ideas, they also produce their own actors. Sooner or later, out of Zhina’s revolutionary movement a new generation of activists will make their appearance. The teacher Atekeh Rajabi is a good example of this new generation of organic intellectuals within the ITM.

### *7.3.1. Atekeh Rajabi: Pioneer of New Teachers’ Organic Intellectuals*

The ITM has been exceptional not only in terms of the number but also the quality of its organic intellectuals. The ITM is ahead of other subaltern groups in creating its organic intellectuals. If the Chalk-holding Teachers rose from the experience of the 1979-1981 explosion of ideas for the teachers’ movement as a hegemonic force and came up with the idea of “guild” (read: autonomous) teachers’ councils, the Justice-seeking Teachers, who put forward the strategy of turning the ITM into a hegemonic force, came from the experience of university students’ protests of 1999, the Green Movement of 2009, and the activism of teachers under the leadership of Chalk-holding Teachers from 1998 to 2014. After 2014, there were three main protests with qualitative differences with the previous ones: the grassroots protest of the poor and marginalized in December 2017; the November 2019 protests of the poor and middle-class poor;

and finally, Zhina's movement of 2022. It is true that due to the bloody suppression by the regime, these movements seem to be finished. That said, these movements, their demands, and their repression have been constant matters of reflection for the self-conscious layers of society, i.e., university students, teachers, and school students. Just as the experiences of the university students' protests of 1999, the Green Movement of 2009, and Justice-seeking Teachers radicalized the ITM's vision, it is likely that out of the grassroots protests of 2017, 2019 and 2022, a new layer of teachers' organic intellectuals will emerge. Some signs of this molecular change can be seen in the ITM.

Born in 1987, Atekeh Rajabi used to be a teacher at a girls' elementary school in a poor village outside Mashhad. On September 24, 2021, a few days after the WLF movement's onset, she declared that she had stopped serving the Ministry of Education as an instrument of oppressing school students ("Atekeh Rajabi" 2022). In November, she was fired by the Ministry, which caused CCGAIT's harsh protest. In spite of growing pressure, she declared she would participate in CCGAIT's call on May 9, 2023 for defending *children's rights* ("Atekeh Rajabi's Support" 2023). Rajabi and her sister were arrested on May 9. Upon arrest, Rajabi declared her dry hunger strike (refusing both food and water). She continued her strike until May 14 when she was conditionally released. CCGAIT and several TGCs praised her courage and resistance and celebrated her freedom. On May 23, she declared she would "fight for life and freedom" (Rajabi 2023a). On July 22, she received a new sentence for refusing to wear the mandatory hijab. In response, she quoted the teachers' legendary figure, Samad Behrangi, that activism would remove her fear (Rajabi 2023b). Her latest note titled, "Children's Rights Know No Border" (October 18, 2023), sheds light on the teachers' emerging organic intellectuals (Rajabi 2023c).

While the Justice-seeking Teachers re-articulated the teachers' demands around public education and children's rights, Rajabi reorganized Justice-seeking Teachers' discourse around children's rights. From her point of view, it is the right of children to have access to public education without any discrimination (Rajabi 2023c). She objected to the chemical attacks on schools and arresting, jailing, torturing, and killing the protesting school students. She criticized verbal and physical violence against girl students for their hijabs. She specifically mentioned female, transsexual, and queer school students who were under the harshest pressure at schools (Rajabi 2023c). Given that the Islamic regime does not recognize any gender identity outside its heteronormative views, articulating and defending the rights of trans and queer students is indeed radical. She traced from the roots of child marriage and so-called honour killing (the murder of Mona Heidari in 2022 in chapter 6) to the Islamicized curriculum that forced archaic gender clichés. Beautifully, and without sliding into the unproductive rhetoric of essentializing the working class, she connected these cultural demands to economic ones. She saw the privatization of education as a cause of child labor and child marriage. Then, she linked economic discrimination to discrimination among Iranian peoples, children who were forced to do *sukhtbari* in Sistan and Baluchestan and *kulbari* in Kurdistan. Remember that the "Statemnet of 100 Teachers" in 2014 stressed the right of immigrants' children to public and free education. Of course, this demand did not appear in CCGAIT's and TGCs' statement anymore. Rajabi articulated the right of these children to education. She called on all teachers, child activists, and transsexual feminists to take further steps to defend children's rights and put an end to any discrimination against children (Rajabi 2023c). Interestingly, while teachers' collective activism began in the 1920s with the demand of ending salary discrimination, now after 100 years of

activism, it has developed into a call for ending any sort of discrimination against children. Rajabi's memo is a brilliant example of how to make the WLF her own as a rising organic intellectual and to make a chain of equivalence between otherwise distinct demands. Rajabi is one the leaders of ITM to come.

#### **7.4. Subaltern-centered Pedagogy and Common School**

The objective of education in both the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic has been cultivating conformist and obedient students, but under different rubrics. They both failed to achieve their goal. Teachers and university students have been one of the pioneering groups in resisting these regimes. After the 1979 revolution, teachers have consistently rejected the Islamic regime's ideological education ("Statement of CCGAIT" 2019b). While the Islamic regime seeks to train obedient students, teachers aim at training students equipped with critical thinking, one could say in a Gramscian way, students who demand and fight for freedom and social justice. The teachers' ideals for education have been as follows: abolishment of private schools and cessation of commercializing education; educational equity and eliminating center-periphery imbalances; free education at all levels and compulsory education until the end of middle school; administration of education by joint councils of students and teachers; elementary education in the mother tongue; development of textbooks by teachers and cultural organizations; distribution of teachers based on population density of regions; and reforming the teacher training programs (Safarzadeh 2016). These ideas are clearly in line with Gramsci's subaltern-centered pedagogy and common schools: free education for the pupil equipped with independent moral judgement,

self-discipline, and preparing the pupil for “ruling—or controlling those who rule” (Gramsci 1971:41).

Obviously, the ITM has not succeeded in achieving these goals. However, this does not mean that teacher’s collective activism has not affected the body of school students. For more than two decades, school students have been experiencing their teachers’ protest actions. The CCGAIT and TGCs have always asked teachers to explain to their students the reasons for their protests. Teachers borrowed the famous motto of their legendary figure, Samad Behrangi, in order to elucidate the *raison d’être* of their continued collective action: “A right is to be taken, not given away.” Moreover, out of teachers’ collective activism, a growing stratum of organic intellectuals has been developing. Obviously, these teachers have been spreading their consciousness among school students in classrooms. This explains why high school pupils, especially female students, participated so vehemently in the WLF movement.

Not only did their subaltern-centred idea for education but also the teachers’ constant activism paved the way for the pupils to gradually grow into organic intellectuals, the ultimate objective of modern school in Gramsci (1971:43). Obviously, school students bring their hegemonic consciousness to their immediate social circle—first to their families, then to their social life as university students, and later to their professional careers. We can see how long-lasting are the effects of critical education. If culture is the basis of building hegemony, education is the basis of culture (Reed 2012:262), and school and university are two main pillars of education. The Islamic regime grasped this early on and has been trying to align university and school curricula with its ideology through three waves of the so-called Cultural Revolution—in 1980, 2009 (after the Green Movement), and 2023 (after the WLF movement).

Remarkably, the regime failed, of course! For the first time since 1979, in Zhina's uprising, high schools became a center of revolutionary protests.

### **7.5. The Question of Alliance: The Approach of the Iranian Orthodox Left**

Continued repression of all independent associations by the Iranian regime has led subaltern groups to the necessity of building alliances. Regarding the ITM, this tendency may be traced to back to March 2007 when a group of teachers chanted: "Teacher! Worker! Unity, Unity!" (Safarzadeh n.d.). With the Justice-seeking Teachers at the helm of ITM in 2016, it came into the agenda of ITM to put forward universal demands to win the support of other subaltern groups. The more the regime suppresses the subaltern, the higher the necessity of alliance becomes. With Zhina's revolutionary uprising, a group of independent associations, named Independent Guild and Civil Society Organizations, published the well-received "Charter of Minimum Demands" in February 2022. This was the first allied action among various civil society organizations of marginalized social groups. The Charter of Minimum Demands was signed by 20 independent associations, including the CCGAIT. The Independent Guild and Civil Society Organizations published its second statement on the occasions of May Day *and* Iranian Teacher's Day on May 1 and 2, 2023. The second statement reiterated the most important items of Charter of Minimum Demands and claimed that "we believe by positioning working *class* at the center of future political transformations, the Iranian working *class* will be able to advance its emancipatory and historical role to the utmost" ("Resolution of Independent" 2023; my emphasis). While the Charter of Minimum Demands had been signed by 20 independent associations, this statement was signed by 15 independent associations, most of which were related to workers' councils.

CCGAIIT signed this statement, as well. This statement repeated the orthodox Left propaganda regarding the presumed revolutionary role of the working class—a legacy of uncritical application of classical Marxism to the Iranian situation in the 21st century. The second statement implicitly subsumed the teachers under the working class. For the orthodox Left, alliance is an inevitable result of the objective position of actors in the process of production. Since workers sell their labor power and have no other means of production but their labor power, and since workers are all exploited by capitalism, workers are regarded by leftist orthodoxy as already united in the so-called the “working class”. Another assumption of the orthodox Left is the revolutionary potential of the working class that makes it the privileged agent of historical change, i.e., the socialist revolution, while the middle classes lack this potential. The orthodox Left’s approach to the question of alliance and social changes is prevalent in Iran, at least among associations that claim to represent workers. Now, let us investigate the most important challenges the ITM faces in this regard.

#### *7.5.1. Teachers: Middle Class or Working Class?*

The class position of teachers has constituted one of the most heated debates among teacher-activists, thinkers, and Leftist activists. While teachers have mostly and consistently identified themselves as members of the middle-class, some teachers (and non-teachers) argue that teachers are in fact workers. Of course, those who attempt to demonstrate that teachers are workers imply that if teachers are workers, the material conditions for unification of teachers and workers will be met. Thus, they can make a kind of alliance within the so-called working-class.

Among others, Bakhtiari (2021) and Darkesh (2023) argue that teachers are cultural workers. Darkesh (2023) employs Marx's theory of value to prove this. Bakhtiari (2021), on the other hand, blames teachers for regarding themselves as middle-class. She believes that teachers cannot realize their anti-capitalist potentials until they throw away their middle-class ideology and its concomitant reformist attitude, and finally unite with workers (Bakhtiari 2021).

Bakhtiari's perceived unification of teachers and workers is not a result of making a connection between the experiences of the two through a chain of equivalence. It is, rather, theoretically imposed! With an amazing conceptual twist, for her it is enough to prove that since the teachers are exploited by the government or private sector, and since they are paid less than the value they produce, they are actually workers. Bakhtiari's and Darkesh's approach to the perceived class position of teachers and the question of alliance comprise what I have called the orthodox Left. The schoolish and arithmetical understanding of Bakhtiari and Darkesh can hardly be missed. The main problem with considering teachers as workers is that it ignores meaningful differences between workers and teachers. Perceiving teachers as workers and removing the significant differences among teachers and workers destroys the hegemonic potentials of the ITM.

To explain the teachers' social class, I would like to employ Ervand Abrahamian's concept of "salaried middle-class" and Asef Bayat's concept of "middle-class poor". According to Abrahamian, the salaried middle-class came into existence under Reza Shah (1925-1941) and under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979), expanding into a formidable social class with "more than 700,000—some 9 percent of the entire working population" (Abrahamian 2008:138). After the 1979 revolution, the salaried middle class continued to grow. "It further grew to more than a million civil servants in 2004" (Abrahamian 2008:169). Historically, teachers have been

an important part of the salaried middle-class. After the implementation of neoliberal policies (starting with Rafsanjani's presidency), this salaried middle-class was gradually pushed towards the middle-class poor. The middle-class poor is economically poor, but it has aspirations of the middle-class. It is "a paradoxical class that enjoyed college degrees, knowledge of the world, and middle-class dreams but was pushed by economic deprivation to live the life of the poor in the slums and subsist on precarious jobs" (Bayat 2021:9). While teachers have historically been a part of Abrahamian's salaried middle-class, due to aggressive neoliberalization of economy, corruption, sanctions, and the rising rates of inflation, teachers have increasingly become a part of Bayat's middle-class poor. Still, teachers have still retained their middle-class aspirations and prestige. As a result, there is a rift between the teachers' declining economic conditions and oppression and their middle-class aspirations.

Now let's address the second part of Bakhtiari's argument: that the working class is revolutionary while the middle class is essentially reformist (Bakhtiari 2021:12). Her essentialism is evident. First, she and the orthodox Left equate the *totality* of workers with the working *class*. Yes, there are millions of workers of Iran but they are so diverse in every conceivable way that lumping the workers into a neat category of working class reports more a fascination with the concept than attending to the empirical existence and lived experiences of workers. For the Iranian orthodox Left, the working class is "an empirical referent" (Mouffe 2018:50), not "a discursive political construction" (Mouffe 2018:50). In other words, there is no pre-given working "class". In Marxian terms, the Iranian working class is still a "class in itself," meaning that although Iranian workers share a common economic or social position, they have not yet developed conscious of their shared interests as a class. Iranian workers' consciousness is

still limited to their own particular economic interests. They have not yet developed a consciousness of their economic interests as a class, let alone transcending their economic interests to a moral and political level. In other words, while they have a common economic or social condition, they have not developed a collective awareness of it. By contrast, working class can only become an agent of historical change if it becomes “class for itself,” meaning not only workers become aware of their common economic or social position but have also become conscious of their shared interests as a class. Now, they have become organized, have a collective identity, and actively work to pursue their class interests.

Moreover, the middle-class aspirations have been inspiring even for the working people. The middle class enjoys prestige, a fundamental characteristic of every social group which aspires to assume the moral and intellectual leadership of society (Gramsci 1971:13). Workers seek social mobility through education to become a part of the middle class. That is why Iranian workers make sacrifices to send their children to university. In this sense, the middle class is commonly perceived to be in a better economic and social position compared to the working class. So, contrary to Bakhtiari’s (2021) position, teachers’ identification with the middle class, not the working class, has helped the ITM to understand its hegemonic potentials.

## **7.6. Two Traps for the ITM**

There seem to be two dangerous traps before ITM leadership: the current leaders of the teachers’ movement may decide to move, or they may be driven by either circumstance or persuasion or both, towards the orthodox Left. Some indication of this tendency can be detected in the discourse of some Justice-seeking Teachers. The danger is this: given that the Islamic regime has

unrelentingly regarded Leftist organizations as security threats linked with foreign enemies, if the ITM moves towards the orthodox Left, it will be likely to become a target of harsh state repression. Let us recall the reason why the Chalk-holding Teachers chose the term “guild” for teachers’ organization: it meant to reduce the securitization of teachers’ collective actions under the authoritarian regime. De-securitization has been the foundation of ITM, and it grew because of that, despite continued repression. If ITM falls into the trap of securitization by leaning towards the Left, it will likely collapse, possibly beyond resuscitation, at least in short term. Let us consider a few historical instances of exactly this trend. “Students for Freedom and Equality” was a Leftist group of university students—the first to arise after the massacre of Leftists and radical members of opposition in 1988—that unwittingly fell into this trap. Students for Freedom and Equality declared its existence at University of Tehran as a Leftist/Marxist community in 2006. Having published Leftist journals and held meetings and lectures for about a year, they decided to launch their most spectacular march on the occasion of Iranian University Day (16 Azar) on the campus of university of Tehran on 4 December 2007. Following this rally and other, radical acts, Iranian security descended heavily upon them, crushing the group (Vahabzadeh 2021:1), thereby preventing the Left from growing on university campuses. Clearly, Student for Freedom and Equality had a poor vision of their movement and never seriously considered any long-term strategy as activists under an authoritarian regime. Let us also recall that ITM also experienced heavy-handed repression in 2022 when for the first time, CCGAIT called for action on May Day. This does not mean that the ITM should avoid allying itself with workers’ movements. *Au contraire*, the ITM should attempt to make the workers’ demands its own. The point is that radical, rushed, or ill-conceived tactics could alarm Iranian

security, in which case such tactics would have devastating consequences for ITM; and its potential alliance with other subalterns, including the working people, would fall apart. Its potential hegemony could easily dissipate.

The regime has tried to further securitize the ITM several times. Recall the 2010 execution of Farzad Kamangar, charged with affiliation with the alleged subversive Kurdistan Free Life Party; recall also the arrest of two French citizens from a French teachers' union along with several teacher-activists in 2020 on charges of plotting to foment unrest in Iran. The failure of Iranian workers to organize themselves nationwide has in part been ascribed to the fact that worker-activists have been and still are targeted by state security as a threat under the pretext of their (supposed) affiliation with expatriate Leftist parties or organizations. Contrary to teachers who have tried, with certain success, to de-securitize the ITM by employing a complicated legal discourse, Iran's orthodox Left, which has no organic relationship with workers, has inadvertently contributed to divert workers' activism into a security trap.

The Iranian orthodox Left's relationship with workers is similar to Reza Pahlavi's (Crown Prince of Iran) relationship with Iranian mass protests. While both are unable to organize any mass action, once a collective action surfaces, they both appear to be leading it and loading such movements with their desired meanings and intentions. It is worth noting that there is an abundance of this type of self-acclaimed working-class intellectuals in Iran. Apparently, nowadays in Iran having read (or pretending to have read) Marx's *Das Kapital* qualifies one to become a "working-class intellectual". But these intellectuals lack organic relationships with the workers in the way the teachers' organic intellectuals have with teachers. It is worth noting that the most organized and progressive Iranian workers' councils are the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane

Mill Workers' Syndicate and the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company. There are numerous, fragmented, and spontaneous workers' protests across the country. And there are a handful of workers-associated Telegram channels and websites in social media. That said, they do not have any organic relationship with workers. While Iranian workers have been, to a large extent, unable to organize themselves for their most basic demands such as salaries, contracts, pensions, and so on, the working-class intellectuals write about a socialist revolution led by Iranian working class.

The orthodox Left and communist discourse is regarded by the Islamic regime as anti-Islamic worldview. In this context, the regime's intelligence forces easily suppress any action of Iranian workers by accusing them of being Marxist and communist. While the Iranian orthodox Left, which claims to be representative of the Iranian working class, has been unable to overcome this security obstacle, teachers' collective activism can be useful for workers. Historical experience of teachers demonstrates that it is impossible for a social group to organize itself as long as it fails to get out of this kind of security trap. Let us also recall that after the crackdown on Tudeh Party in 1949. The teachers had no choice but to part ways with Tudeh and found Mehregan Club due to the Tudeh Party's influence on Teachers' Society. These lessons led teacher activists in the late 1990s to revitalize the term *senfi* or guild to *de*-securitize their movement. In the 1990s, the teachers' motto was: "we are not Left or right, we are teachers." This motto made it difficult for the Islamic regime to annihilate teachers' independent councils on the charge of having connections with communist ideologies or parties. This motto can be employed by workers as well: "we are not Left or right, we are workers." De-securitization is the basis for workers to build their own independent organizations. Out of worker's activism, in time

workers' organic intellectuals and their own unique Leftist discourse is likely to develop just as it did in ITM.

The second trap for the ITM is discursive. As discussed earlier, while the discourse of the Iranian orthodox Left is the product of self-acclaimed working-class intellectuals who in fact lack organic relationships with workers, the ITM has been creating its own unique justice-seeking discourse out of its activism and through its own organic intellectuals. The ITM's discourse has been successful in mobilizing not only different strata of both working and retired teachers, and permanent and temporary-contract teachers, but partially other social groups as well. In contrast, due to its ideology, the Iranian orthodox Left has been unable even to mobilize workers, and its anti-capitalist revolutionary propaganda cannot motivate the workers since "people do not fight against 'capitalism' as an abstract entity because they believe in a 'law of history' leading to socialism. It is always on the basis of concrete situations that they are moved to act" (Mouffe 2018:43). The orthodox Left sees workers from the lens of its theories rather than through concrete conditions of the workers. As a result, its discourse does not resonate with workers. While teachers' justice-seeking discourse has been developing out of teachers' collective activism under the Islamic authoritarian regime, the Iranian orthodox Left's discourse is a heritage of Iranian Marxist-Leninist parties, which were annihilated by the Islamic regime after the 1979 revolution. In other words, the Iranian orthodox Left's discourse does not come out of Iranian workers' collective activism, and it is unable to influence even Iranian workers, let alone other subaltern groups. In this context, subsuming the ITM's justice-seeking discourse under the orthodox Left in the name of alliance will diminish the hegemonic potential of ITM. It is crucial that the teachers avoid mixing up their justice-oriented discourse with the doctrinal

discourse of orthodox Left that hinges on assuming that the working class has a magical ability to bring about a revolution.

### *7.6.1. From the Orthodox Left to the Justice-seeking Left*

In the context of ITM, it is crucial to make a distinction between the orthodox Left that is trying to melt the ITM into a spectral “working class movement”, on the one hand, and the Left that is embedded in the ITM as a result of some thirty years of solid and sustained movement activism, on the other. The Left is known by the values for which it struggles: “equality and social justice” (Mouffe 2018:64). Contrary to Leftist orthodoxy that reductively views diverse movements in terms of capital-labor contradiction and thus can only represent “the interests of determinate social groups” (Mouffe 2018:64), the Left as such, in the wider sense, can and should articulate “heterogeneous democratic demands” (Mouffe 2018:64).

Since the ITM is a grassroots movement with a long history whose objective is to realize “justice, freedom, and the elimination of discrimination and poverty” (“Notice Two” 2019), it can be considered a movement within the Iranian Left. As a result, it can advance the discourse of a non-doctrinal Iranian Left. Contrary to Iran’s orthodox Left, this all-encompassing Left embodies and signifies the distinct demands of diverse subaltern groups relating to equality, equity, fairness, and social justice, in addition to democratic demands. The ITM’s anti-discrimination discourse can lay the foundations for this emerging/growing Left: to end discrimination based on genders, religious beliefs, class and income, nationality/ethnicity, center-periphery, or (dis)abled bodies. Given the repressive nature of the Iranian regime, this emerging Left cannot—indeed, it should not—have any specific designation or organization, or Iranian

security will descend upon it. This Left must only live within grassroots movements. What matters is that equality, equity, justice, and elimination of discrimination remain the hegemonic signifiers around which diverse struggles of the subaltern groups can be articulated. Thanks to the abundance of organic intellectuals within ITM, its constant activism and its ever-growing inter- and intra-connection with other subaltern groups, the ITM enjoys a unique position to play a leading role in expanding its anti-discrimination discourse to the movements of subaltern groups and co-articulate the diverse demands of these movements. It is crucial for the ITM's leadership to distinguish its justice-seeking approach from the orthodox Left in order to avoid the two above-mentioned traps.

### **Concluding Remarks to the Thesis on ITM**

Thanks to its century-long activism and its growing central role in building hegemony, the ITM has risen to become a significant social force. It embodies a sustained and visionary social movement with increasing influence over subaltern groups and their movements, despite continued repression. Its most amazing accomplishment has been to *de*-securitize, relatively speaking, its collective action and build an *independent* social force under the authoritarian Islamic regime. Its other achievements come from its autonomy and independent activism. The ITM has grown its own strata of organic intellectuals. They serve to create cohesion and self-awareness among the teachers. Gramsci regards the ability of a social group to create its own organic intellectuals as one of the most important potentials for becoming the hegemonic power of the subaltern. We can observe that in Iran, the university student movement has also created its own organic intellectuals, but contrary to the teachers' movement, university student

movement goes through cycles and ebbs and flows due to the short lifespan of students within university. On the other hand, other movements of subaltern -- those of workers, retirees, nurses, urban poor—have at best had very limited success in producing their own organic intellectuals and thus a sustained movement. Thus, aside from its hegemonic role, the ITM stands out as model for organizing for other subaltern groups, especially the workers that had only limited success in creating independent unions. Furthermore, it is fair to say that thanks to the teachers' activism, high schools have proven to be active centers of protests in Zhina's uprising.

We saw in this thesis that after 2014, the ITM adopted a two-fold strategy: quality public education as a universal demand, while supporting other subaltern groups. The former fomented the teacher's leadership role among other movements, as is a universal demand. What strengthened the ITM's connection with other social groups was ITM's echoing and supporting the particular demands of these groups: fair, liveable salaries and pensions, the right to independent associations, the release of prison activists, and ending gender discrimination in employment. This has led to growing solidarity between ITM and other movements, which in turn has encouraged the participation of diverse activists in the movements and rallies of one another ("Interview with Habib" 2022).

This thesis offers a detailed study of the history and activism of ITM and has placed its subject matter within an analytical lens provided by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. No other social movement in Iran, this thesis contends, enjoys the unique position of the Iranian teachers' movement. The ITM's growing into a hegemonic force of the subaltern is real and strong. Facing continued state repression, the ITM has many challenges ahead, but as this thesis has shown, the teachers' movement has gone through unbearable challenges and has not only

survived them all, it has grown into a farsighted and formidable social force with vision and passion. No other social movement in Iran stands where ITM stands, thanks to its fearless members of vision but also their sacrifices.

This thesis, I hope, has brought to life one of the most fascinating and promising social movements in contemporary Iran. The ITM proves that Iranian people are far ahead of their stagnating rulers in terms of their values and outlooks. The ITM has increasingly realized its historical potential to become a leading social group. Just as we witnessed through the WLF movement of 2022, a possible, future opening in the country's political life will only further propel the teachers into the leadership position of subaltern groups. To confess that I personally feel extremely privileged to have studied this unrivaled movement remains an understatement.

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