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## Iran: Students Are Still a Force To Be Reckoned With

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As the new school year begins, the press shows that students are still a force to be reckoned with in Iranian politics. At the same time, there are warnings about their frustration with the slow pace of reform and their diminishing interest in political participation.

Such warnings are noteworthy because there are some 1.2 million university students in the country now, according to the 30 September "Iran News."

There were several warnings about apathy among the students and splits within student organizations. "Students are interested in political matters," Shiraz parliamentary representative Reza Yusefian said in the 22 September "Aftab-i Yazd," "but someday, they may be disappointed with the atmosphere prevailing in society." A commentary in the 29 September "Aftab-i Yazd" reminded President Mohammad Khatami about the important role students played in his and reformist parliamentarians' election victories, and it warned that the political involvement of students has dwindled since July 1999. Khatami will need the students' backing for the two recently submitted bills on presidential powers and the election law, the commentary said (see "RFE/RL Iran Report," 30 September 2002).

Amir Mohebbian commented in the hard-line "Resalat" on 25 September that the number of politically active students is decreasing. He suggested that this is the result of "disillusionment with the behavior of parties and currents outside the university." Mohebbian warned that it would be a waste to lose the "force contained within the student movement." "Iran News" said that the liberal Office for Strengthening Unity (DTV) and the conservative Islamic Society of Students are the main groups, but "the overwhelming majority" of the student population does not fit in with these groups. As a result, many students either do not have a political voice or they seek one outside the universities.

Hamid Reza Jalaipur editorialized in the 14 September "Hambastegi" that there are efforts underway to break up the DTV. He compared these efforts to the splits that appeared between Islamists and Marxists in the Mujahedin-i Khalq Organization (MKO) in the 1970s. Jalaipur said that opponents of reform are making unfair comparisons between current events in the DTV and the 1975-1976 efforts of a "fascist minority" in the MKO to impose its will through force of arms. The majority of students still favor Islam and religion, Jalaipur wrote, and they favor "people's rule." Extremist opponents of reform are trying to impose their views on the DTV.

Nevertheless, reports of the death of the student movement appear to be greatly exaggerated. On 1 October, the DTV called on the courts to release all political prisoners, and it welcomed the release of three students earlier in the year, IRNA reported. Many of the prisoners were detained after the July 1999 riots. Student leader Ali Afshari was detained in April 2000 for participating in a controversial conference in Berlin. The Islamic Association of Students at Tehran University and the Faculty of Medical Sciences called for Khatami to be firm in pursuing his promised reforms, "Iran News" reported on 29 September, or he should resign. If the Guardians Council rejects his legislative proposals, Khatami should quit because his promises of reform did not materialize.

The Office for Strengthening Unity held its ninth annual meeting in late August, and it issued a statement to the press that was published in the 24 September issue of "Hayat-i No." The statement said that the DTV has resisted pressure to limit its activities to "guild and welfare issues," and it emphasizes the need to maintain its independence and position as a critic of the establishment. At the same, the DTV does not want to be a party, the arm of a party, or an arm of the government. It had previously backed candidates in elections and sought seats on city councils, but the DTV determined that such activities were inconsistent with being a student movement. "We will continue our activity in the sphere of civil society and pursue our special political and guild demands, and from the same angle, we will embark upon sympathetic criticism based on freedom, justice, and the national interest." The statement professed belief in the reform movement but asserted that the capacity of the reform movement that started in May 1997 (with President Khatami's election) to effect change is coming to an end.