

Since taking office, President Trump has signed numerous executive orders, including in late January, one, barring Syrian refugees from entering the United States, suspending refugee admissions, and blocking citizens of seven Muslim majority nations from entering the country. Since then, the courts have gotten involved, and the situation seems to change every day. Here is how one individual is affected by Trump's actions.

From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is trending globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Our guest today is Ali Kadivar, a political sociologist who studies pro-democracy movements in the Middle East. Thanks for being here.

Thank you for having me, Sarah.

Ali, you've said that because of the nature of your work, you are not welcome in your country of birth, which is Iran. Why is that?

I studied social movements, pro-democracy social movements in Iran and in broader Middle East that struggle and fight for democratization and transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic regions. Many or most authoritarian regimes, including the Iranian regime, consider this kind of work a threat for their stability and survival. Iranian regime, specifically, has been very sensitive about intellectuals, political scientists, and sociologists who work on topics such as civil society, democracy, rule of law, non-violent civic resistance, and so on.

This has been a pattern since the Iranian revolution. But there was a big escalation in 2009. So we had the presidential election in 2009 when the incumbent President of the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, stood for re-election. The results were announced for Ahmadinejad's victory. People thought this was a fraudulent election. Millions of people came to the streets, and the regime cracked down heavily on protesters.

Can I ask how old you were at that point?

I think I was 26.

So you were 26. So you were well into your studies.

Yeah, I was in the United States there.

Oh, you were in the states then. OK.

Yes, I left Iran in December 2007.

In 2007, so before the presidential elections.

Yes.

And the crackdown.

And the crackdown. Well, having a crackdown is not something new in Iran. During my time as a college student, I was in different protests on college campuses, sometimes on the street. I've been in protests being attacked by militias. I've seen people being beaten up by police on the street.

This is when you were at the University of Tehran.

University, yes. I was a political science student at the University of Tehran at the time. But the scale of mobilization and repression in 2009 were much higher. The scale was much higher.

So at the same time, the regime was cracking down on protesters and arresting a lot of people. About, I think, 100 people were killed on the streets. A lot of my friends were arrested and went to jail for different periods of time. They were tortured. I was here. I was in the states.

You were in graduate school.

I was in graduate school, yeah. So at the same time, they started an anti-social science campaign naming and defaming social scientists for introducing concepts such as civil society, democratization, and so on. And they named several Iranian intellectuals and social scientists. They accused them of working for the United States, for the CIA, MI6, getting money, teaching people how to launch, conduct a revolt, a revolution.

And I was named a few times during that campaign because of a book that I translated to Farsi about transition to democracy. And specifically, one time was in the Iranian national news agency. The master thesis that I wrote in Iran when I did my master's at the University of Tehran, they referred to my master's thesis as an action plot behind the 2009 protest.

How did that feel?

I mean, it feels ridiculous. I don't think people read a manuscript to come to the streets. I mean, I think any social scientist would love for people to read their work and come to it. I don't think that really happened, but I felt also honored to be accused by an authoritarian regime for my work. But I also realized this has a cost.

And did you feel threatened?

Well, I felt like for the time being, I would not be able to go back to Iran. So I tried to expand the area of my study. I think I took Turkish for three semesters. I thought, OK, I cannot go to Iran. I studied Turkish. But then later, Arab Spring happened and my Arabic was already better so I said, OK, I can study Arab Spring.

How many languages do you speak?

Well, other than Farsi and English, Arabic, and my Turkish is very basic.

Oh, OK. So how long have you been in the states?

More than nine years.

Studying all this time, doing your research and teaching. And who's back home in Iran for you? I have two brothers still at home, and grandparents and all the extended family, aunts and uncles and cousins.

So how are you feeling about the thought of maybe not being able to see them until further notice?

It's not a happy thought, especially for my grandparents. My grandmother is turning 92 very soon, and--

Yeah, take a minute.

She barely even go out of the house, I don't think. I mean, before this, usually the plan for people like me was to go to a country like Turkey and visit your relatives there. But when you have someone old in the family that cannot travel, that is not an option.

Mhm, I see. I've also heard you say that while this ban is hurting you deeply, there are others who are even more deeply affected. What did you mean by that?

Well, there are different levels. I have several people that I know in person, grad students who have been out of the country doing their fieldwork, Ali [INAUDIBLE], [INAUDIBLE], [INAUDIBLE] these people I know in person have been out of Iran to do their fieldwork. It's very unclear what is going to happen to their PhD.

And those people, and then you have these refugees who are escaping war, escaping very severe conditions. They have probably gone through a very painful process of just getting vetted as refugees. I mean, we talk about we need more extreme vetting, but people who are familiar with the process know that it's very long and it's very painful, and I cannot just imagine what those people are going through right now.

Let's talk a little bit about your work. So you're at the Watson Institute as a postdoctoral fellow. Is this ban going to affect your research?

Yeah, for sure. Even before this ban, the traveling for Iranians to and outside the United States has not been easy. When I entered here, I was on a single entry visa. That was under Bush administration. It was changed after and during President Obama's presidency. They added the option of giving multiple entry visas, but I still had to leave the country and apply for a new visa.

For Iranians, again, there is a added process of security clearance. This is very uncertain. It can take just one hour or can take four month or six month.

But you've undergone that.

Well, I undergone that once when I entered, but when you have only one month, usually I've been teaching in summer to just get money for-- stipend for living as a grad student. Usually I have not been sure if I have enough time to leave the country and come back here, so that's the reason I didn't leave the country even over past few years.

Aha.

Because it could jeopardize my PhD or my funding. I know, again, other students that left the country and they had to wait for their visa for a long period of time. They lost a year or a semester of funding teaching research. So I was planning to finally travel this summer. I don't have teaching duties this summer, and I said, OK, now I have my PhD. Maybe there is a little bit more at risk.

So I was planning to go to a conference in London. They were going to pay for my travel expenses and lodging.

And is that conference now not possible for you unless something--

I mean, the conference is end of may. This ban is for three months. But if you read the details on the ban, it seems very likely that for Iranians, at least, it becomes permanent because the president has the right to extend it indefinitely. And the condition is for the for it to not get extended for the other countries, seven countries to provide information about all visa applicants.

Well, Iran and United States just don't have any diplomatic relations, let alone providing info on their subjects and citizens to each other. So anyone familiar with the situation knows that that condition is not going to be met.

So yeah, I think that's not an option. And the workshop is about revolutions.

The workshop in London?

The workshop in London is about revolution. And then I was planning to go I spent some time in Tunisia, where

I'm working right now.

Mhm. Can you tell me what you like about teaching and doing research here in the States? Well, I find a academic community very rigorous in the states. I mean, we usually maybe complain about the process of peer review, that it takes so long, sometimes comments are nasty, and so on.

But I like the intellectual exchange, the criticism. I find lots of the criticisms and commentary substantive, and I like to be part of this community, the scholarly community.

For teaching, I think teaching and research make a great balance. Usually in academic writing, just doing the collecting the data, it takes like six month, one year, two years, and then you write several drafts, and then you get comments, present at workshops, and then you submit to journal, you get like, rejected, go to another journal, few revisions there.

So takes a while when it comes out, and maybe you don't also get a lot of views of your article. Because scientific community, I think it's very smart, but it's not big. On the other hand, for teaching, you just go to the class. You have face to face interactions with human beings, you say something, they say something, and you see the results.

You see, oh, someone is now thinking about something new. There is a question that this person is asking about-- especially when you teach sociology, when it just deals with our everyday life.

My research is about social movements, but I've taught classes, intro or sociological theory. These are survey classes. We talk about race, class, gender, which is part of our, like we are all from certain classes, certain genders, race.

So you like the immediacy of knowledge transmission that happens in the classroom.

Exactly.

I understand that. I'm going to ask you another personal question, probably a painful one. Where is home for you?

Yeah, it's funny because it was Thanksgiving, and one of my friend was asking me, are you going home? And I was like, I'm not sure--

Where's that?

Yeah. So my parents have been living in North Carolina. I live here now in Providence, Rhode Island. My brothers are in, Iran and that's where I grew up. Still, the longer period of my life has been there. I don't know, and I think

this is the case for a lot of immigrants like me. Maybe I have multiple homes, maybe--

Either you're homeless or you're at home in the world, or both.

Yeah.

Maybe.

I think time to time probably it changes.

Depends.

Sometimes you feel homeless, sometimes you feel you have different homes. But when I think I'm going to go somewhere new, I get connected with new places, new peoples, and I make friends when I feel safe somewhere. Then that can be home.

Do you feel safe here?

So this is, again, an interesting subject. There are sociologists of Iran, Iranian sociologists, specifically one of them who has called Iran a short term society. Everything is short term. Nothing lasts for long.

This, of course, has been a subject of debate and controversy, but you can find examples for this. Like the mentality in Iran, for example, or a country like Iran, if you find something good, just grab it. Because it can change. Like laws can change tomorrow, regulations can change tomorrow.

So when we came to this state, we were feeling like, OK, this is not the case anymore. We can count on laws and institutions. But since last week, it feels like how we were feeling back there, that things are very unstable. Like we thought, OK, we have a certain legal status as a visa holder, or green card holder.

But all of a sudden, with a turn of pen, with a signature, things become unstable. You don't know how longer we can stay in this country, how longer you can hold a job, and if it comes to that, what your options are going to be.

So then I was thinking maybe short term society is not about Iran. We just carry that with us wherever we go. It's a matter of where you are located in the, let's say, global-- the pyramid of citizenship. Like some citizens of some country you have a stronger and more stable rights than citizens of some countries. Their rights is--

Do you think that's immutable, or do you think that can change?

Well, maybe our situation changes, but I don't think the global pattern.

So there's no mobility in that.

Well, you can go get a green card and become a citizen, so thing can change for individuals, but I don't think the whole unequal the structure of this is going to change. I mean, it's one of the biggest forms of inequality in the world, I think is citizenship inequality. A lot of your life trajectory is shaped based on where you are born. And that is not something that no one chooses.

So back to your work for a minute-- it's focused on the interaction of protest movements and democratization. And I wonder if you feel, in some way, if it's an overstatement to say, that we're experiencing a sort of de-democratization. I don't mean that to sound provocative, just more I'm really asking. And I was reading this morning about authoritarianization, which political scientists call the steady dismantling of democratic norms and practices by democratically elected leaders.

Yeah.

That rang kind of true to me. I wonder-- you have such a broad perspective on these things. I wonder if you feel like we're in the midst of that, or is that an overreaction?

Yeah, I have also seen renowned political scientist, political economists are making that observation, that basic institutions of democracy are being undermined, such as checks and balances, for example, harassment-- we already observe harassment of journalists. And what's something you do see in authoritarian countries. That's something to happen.

So there are clearly signs, strong signs and evidence for that observation. And again, well-known social scientists have made the observation that these institutions, they cannot do things on their own unless citizens mobilize and keep the pressure on. And that's when the institutions would do the function that they are designed for, or they are expected to do.

And well, speaking of mobilization by the citizenry, how do you think we're doing?

I think we're observing a start of something. So we have had some symbolic big protests. I think that matters. That has already mattered. And again, just about the ban, you see that first they said green card holders are part of the ban. They cannot enter. But after the protest, they withdrew a little bit.

I would think this could be taken as a partial sign of success for protest, something that could encourage protesters a little bit better. Clearly, this doesn't mean we are succeeded, we did our job, and we go home. And I don't think people took it as that either. But I think some people took it as something that can reinforce the sense of self advocacy, that we can do things.

And that the government does not act with impunity.

Yeah, exactly.

Which is, I think, an important message.

Yeah. But the protester need to diversify their protest tactics. Just symbolic protest I don't think-- it matters, but on its own is, I don't think can change things.

OK, so what's not symbolic? What does that look like?

Like a strike, a boycott. Those are not symbolic. Basically, so this is what's nonviolent resistance literature talks about, that power holder governments rely on the cooperation of citizens. So when citizens withdraw the cooperation, then that's when the government really get into trouble. So you don't really need to use violence. You can just stop doing things that you have been doing. So I just saw this morning that a Yemeni grocery owners in New York are going to do a strike for an afternoon in next few days.

Yemeni grocery owners?

Yeah. Because Yemen is one of the seven countries, so the community is affected and is being hurt by the ban. So that could be a start. That could be like an example of--

Non-cooperation.

Exactly.

So interesting. Are you hopeful about the near future, and if so, what makes you hopeful?

I am hopeful. I wouldn't say, but the short term, probably if I want to predict, I think things are going to get worse. This is just the start. They're scary. There were scary news over the last two days about the US putting Iran on notice. President Trump came to office by scolding Bush administration to start a war in Iraq, and now they're talking to Iran very aggressively. It's like drumming the war drums.

So those are all bad signs. But yeah, I think if opposition create linkages between different organizations, different part of the resistance, use diverse tactics, I see hope.

I think we have a lot to learn from you. But it's reassuring to me that you see reason for hope, even not in the short term, even if it's in the medium term.

Thank you so much for being here today, Ali, it was a real pleasure to talk to you. And I wish you all the best.

My pleasure. Thanks.

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