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Strategies for Navigating Legal Repression in Student Activist Movements

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the strategies employed by student activists in Tehran to navigate and resist legal repression while maintaining their political engagement and collective organizing efforts. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 student activists based in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had firsthand experience with legal repression. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, identifying patterns of resistance and adaptation in response to legal constraints. Analysis revealed four major themes reflecting the strategic responses of student activists: (1) adaptive communication practices, including encrypted messaging, offline coordination, and misleading digital content; (2) legal literacy and defensive tactics, such as peer legal education, strategic ambiguity, and engagement with NGOs; (3) psychological and emotional resilience, including peer support, identity affirmation, and emotional regulation strategies; and (4) organizational and strategic flexibility, demonstrated through decentralized leadership, tactical mobility, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. These strategies reflected a sophisticated, context-specific approach to navigating surveillance, arrest risk, and institutional backlash. The study highlights the dynamic and resilient nature of student activism under conditions of legal repression. Rather than retreating, activists develop multifaceted tactics that integrate legal knowledge, emotional sustainability, and structural adaptability. These findings challenge assumptions about repression as a solely deterrent force and suggest that legal constraints often catalyze innovation in activist practice. The study contributes to the broader literature on contentious politics by illuminating micro-level mechanisms of resistance and the enduring agency of student activists in repressive contexts.

Keywords: *student activism; legal repression; qualitative research; digital resistance; Iran; emotional resilience; civil society; authoritarianism; tactical adaptation.*

Introduction

Student activism has historically played a central role in shaping sociopolitical discourse, challenging oppressive regimes, and advocating for structural reform across educational, legal, and economic systems (Altbach, 1989). In both democratic and authoritarian contexts, students have served as catalysts for social change, often at significant personal risk. However, the emergence of more sophisticated surveillance regimes and coercive state responses has escalated the legal vulnerabilities faced by student activists, especially in restrictive environments (Butler, 2019;



Tufekci, 2017). In this regard, understanding how student movements adapt to, resist, and survive legal repression is critical for scholars, policymakers, and human rights advocates alike.

Legal repression in the context of activism generally refers to the deliberate use of state laws, judicial actions, police force, and administrative regulations to deter dissent, delegitimize mobilization, and criminalize political expression (Davenport, 2007). This phenomenon is especially evident in societies where civil liberties are constitutionally limited or where political authorities interpret activism as a threat to national security or social stability (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Legal repression of student activism often takes the form of pre-emptive detentions, suspension or expulsion from universities, denial of legal representation, or the strategic use of broadly defined laws, such as those concerning “national unity” or “public disorder” (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These tactics not only curb political engagement but also instill fear and uncertainty, leading to diminished civic participation and widespread self-censorship.

In recent years, state-led legal repression has expanded in scope, bolstered by advancements in digital surveillance and algorithmic policing (Deibert, 2020). Through digital monitoring, governments can track dissent in real-time, identify protest organizers, and criminalize even symbolic acts of resistance. In authoritarian regimes and hybrid democracies alike, these technologies create an omnipresent threat of punishment, deterring open dissent and forcing activists to innovate survival strategies (Feldstein, 2019). The digitization of repression—enabled by artificial intelligence, biometric data, and surveillance platforms—has created a complex terrain in which student activists must navigate not only traditional legal risks but also technologically mediated coercion (Zuboff, 2019).

Despite the risks, student activism has proven resilient and adaptive. Scholars have documented a range of resistance strategies adopted by activists, from nonviolent protest and digital organizing to decentralized leadership and tactical anonymity (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Milan, 2015). These tactics are often learned informally, shared through networks of trust, and continuously refined in response to evolving legal threats. In environments where judicial systems lack independence and access to legal representation is scarce, student activists often rely on informal legal literacy training, community defense mechanisms, and emotional resilience to sustain their engagement (Gordon & Bertram, 2018). However, the literature remains limited in its exploration of how these strategies are localized, adapted to cultural contexts, and shaped by the lived experiences of those most exposed to repression.

While previous research has illuminated the relationship between repression and mobilization, much of it has focused on macro-level analyses—examining national trends, protest outcomes, or state-level coercion (Carey, 2006; Earl, 2011). Less attention has been paid to micro-level adaptations and subjective coping mechanisms, particularly in student populations. Moreover, the psychological and emotional consequences of legal repression—such as burnout, trauma, and identity threat—are often underexplored in empirical studies (Gould, 2009). Addressing this gap requires qualitative inquiry into the inner lives and adaptive strategies of activists operating in constrained legal environments.

In countries with a history of student-led protest, such as Iran, the role of student movements in contesting state authority has long been central to democratic aspirations (Bayat, 2013). Since the early 20th century, student activism in Iran has mobilized around issues ranging from foreign intervention to political liberalization, education reform, and labor rights (Khosravi, 2017). However, since the early 2000s, legal repression of student activism has intensified, with university spaces heavily policed and student unions tightly regulated (Afshari, 2011). Participants in protests have faced arrest, long-term imprisonment, travel bans, and even expulsion from academic institutions.

Under these conditions, student activism persists not by direct confrontation but through a sophisticated interplay of strategy, solidarity, and subversion.

Qualitative research is especially well-suited to capture these dimensions, as it allows for a rich understanding of meaning-making, personal risk calculation, and collective knowledge-sharing among activists. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, provide space for participants to narrate their experiences, reflect on evolving strategies, and articulate insights that may be absent from institutional records or media coverage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Such an approach foregrounds the voices of those most affected by legal repression and recognizes the agency embedded in their everyday resistance.

This study aims to explore the strategies employed by student activists in Tehran to navigate legal repression in their political engagement. By focusing on lived experiences, the study seeks to identify both individual and collective responses that enable activists to sustain their work in legally hostile conditions. Specifically, the research investigates how students adapt communication practices, engage in legal self-defense, cultivate emotional resilience, and restructure organizational tactics in order to reduce risk and maintain momentum. These insights are particularly valuable in advancing our understanding of resistance within authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states, where formal political participation is tightly controlled and informal civic action becomes the principal avenue for change (Schedler, 2006).

Furthermore, the findings have broader implications for understanding the relationship between repression and innovation in social movements. Repression is often assumed to suppress activism, but it can also stimulate creative resistance and adaptive learning (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The strategies developed by student activists in Tehran—ranging from encrypted communication and selective protest participation to trauma-informed peer support—demonstrate a form of grassroots legal resilience that challenges top-down narratives of control. These adaptations not only reflect tactical responses to legal risks but also embody a broader reimagining of how political engagement can occur under conditions of constraint.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that views activists not as passive victims of repression but as active agents of transformation who resist, adapt, and evolve in response to legal coercion. Through an in-depth thematic analysis of interview data, this research offers a nuanced portrait of how student activism endures despite the legal and institutional barriers erected to silence it. In doing so, it provides both theoretical and practical insights into the mechanisms of resistance in the age of digital surveillance and authoritarian resurgence.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the strategies used by student activists to navigate legal repression within the context of their activism. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and perspectives in a legally restrictive environment. The research relied on a purposive sampling strategy to identify individuals with direct involvement in student activism who had encountered legal obstacles or state-led repression as a result of their actions. A total of 24 participants, all of whom were current or former university students based in Tehran, took part in the study. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, field of study, and institutional affiliation, ensuring a broad representation of voices from within the activist community.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to freely express their experiences while allowing the interviewer to guide the discussion toward key areas of interest. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews, covering themes such as experiences with legal restrictions, coping mechanisms, organizational tactics, and support networks. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting that ensured the privacy and safety of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation, were strictly observed. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, at which point no new significant themes emerged from the data.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, to identify patterns and themes related to the participants' strategies for navigating legal repression. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the organization, coding, and retrieval of data. The process involved initial open coding to capture key statements, followed by axial coding to group codes into broader categories, and finally selective coding to define overarching themes. This rigorous analytical process ensured that the resulting findings were grounded in the data and reflective of the lived experiences of the participants.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Adaptive Communication Practices

Encrypted Messaging Use

Participants consistently emphasized the use of secure, encrypted communication tools as a primary defense mechanism. Applications such as Signal and ProtonMail were widely adopted due to their end-to-end encryption features. Many activists received informal training on using self-destructing messages and embedding codes within conversations. One participant shared, "We never talk plainly anymore. Everything has to be wrapped in a layer of metaphor, or we use code names for people and places."

Offline Coordination

Given the surveillance risks associated with digital communication, several activists relied on face-to-face meetings or word-of-mouth to organize actions. Planning sessions were often held in private homes or cafes with minimal public exposure. A participant noted, "Sometimes the best way to stay safe is to go old-school—just talk in person and never leave a trail."

Social Media Risk Management

Students described a range of tactics to manage their digital footprints, including the use of anonymous accounts, VPNs, and avoiding geolocation tags. Some limited their social media activity to 'safe' content while keeping political work underground. One interviewee remarked, "I have two Instagram accounts. One is for activism, but I never log in with my real IP address."

Diversifying Communication Channels

Activists consciously avoided relying on a single platform. They often used a combination of Telegram, WhatsApp, email chains, and even physical USB exchanges. This redundancy ensured continuity if one channel was compromised. A participant said, "We learned the hard way that Telegram can go down. So now, we spread out over five or six tools."

Information Timing and Release

Strategic control over the timing of information dissemination was another reported method. Details of protests were sometimes released only minutes before events to prevent state interception. One student explained, “We don’t give the authorities time to respond. The less they know beforehand, the better.”

Misleading or Decoy Content

Participants described using digital decoys, including fake event announcements or misinformation campaigns, to mislead security forces. These “noise signals” diverted attention from real plans. “We posted a protest location online, but the real one was across town. It bought us a crucial 20 minutes,” said one organizer.

Digital Hygiene Training

Several participants mentioned attending informal workshops on operational security (OpSec), including guidance on encrypted tools, password practices, and data wiping. These sessions were often peer-led. “We train the new members. Everyone needs to know what not to do online,” one veteran activist emphasized.

Theme 2: Legal Literacy and Defensive Tactics

Peer Legal Education

Many activists reported acquiring legal knowledge through peer-run education circles where they reviewed civil rights, legal procedures, and activist case studies. Translations of legal texts and role-playing scenarios were commonly used. “No one teaches us this in school. We teach ourselves so we don’t walk into a trap,” explained one interviewee.

Pre-emptive Legal Preparation

Participants kept emergency contact cards with the numbers of lawyers and legal NGOs. Some carried small donations to bail funds or wrote down rights on the inside of clothing. A participant said, “I always have a card in my shoe with my lawyer’s number. Just in case.”

Selective Participation

To minimize risk, many activists opted to participate in protests only selectively. Some sent proxies or chose roles that kept them off police radar. “I still help, but behind the scenes now. It’s too dangerous for me to be out front anymore,” shared one student.

Engagement with Legal NGOs

Consulting with human rights organizations and legal aid groups was a commonly reported strategy. Activists frequently accessed hotlines for legal advice and even coordinated with NGOs in case of arrests. “They helped us file a complaint after our friend was detained. Without them, we’d be lost,” said one participant.

Documentation of Violations

Participants recorded incidents of repression using photos, videos, or written testimonies, often stored securely or sent to international observers. “Even if they delete everything from my phone, I send it all to a cloud server right after,” noted a participant.

Strategic Ambiguity

Some groups adopted vague language in slogans, event names, and goals to create plausible deniability. Events were framed as cultural or educational to reduce legal risk. “We hold ‘poetry nights,’ but everyone knows it’s political. Just not officially,” shared one organizer.

Theme 3: Psychological and Emotional Resilience

Peer Support Networks

Participants underscored the importance of maintaining supportive relationships within activist circles. These networks provided emotional outlets, collective resilience, and mental health care. One activist reflected, “We talk about the trauma. We cry together sometimes. That’s how we survive.”

Identity Affirmation

Acts of self-expression, such as political poetry, art, and graffiti, were described as empowering tools to reclaim identity and challenge silencing. “When they erased our slogans, we painted them again the next day, louder and brighter,” said a participant.

Rituals of Resistance

Recurring symbolic acts—like wearing specific colors or singing protest songs—served as sources of strength. One student shared, “Even if the protest is banned, we all wear black that day. That’s how we remember.”

Emotional Regulation Techniques

Several participants used mindfulness, journaling, or informal peer counseling to regulate stress. Access to professional mental health support was limited but discussed. “After the arrest, I couldn’t sleep. Journaling helped me put the pieces back together,” explained one participant.

Exit and Re-entry Planning

Some activists took planned breaks from their roles, using structured exit strategies and protocols for safe re-engagement. This protected their mental well-being without losing commitment. “I step away sometimes. But I know when and how to come back,” said a senior activist.

Theme 4: Organizational and Strategic Flexibility

Decentralized Leadership

To minimize targeting, many groups eliminated single points of leadership. Rotating roles and horizontal coordination were common. “There’s no leader to arrest. We all lead together,” explained one interviewee.

Tactical Mobility

Participants often employed highly mobile strategies such as short-duration protests, flash mobs, and rapid dispersals to avoid police crackdowns. “We meet, we act, we disappear in 15 minutes,” said one activist.

Use of Safe Spaces

Activists convened in locations considered less likely to be surveilled—student lounges, bookshops, or private homes. “We meet at the university library. They don’t expect activism there,” noted a student.

Strategic Alliances

Forming coalitions with other marginalized groups—such as labor unions or feminist movements—was a strategic move to broaden protection and visibility. “When we stand together, we’re harder to silence,” stated one participant.

Knowledge Transfer Across Cohorts

Participants stressed the importance of preserving activist knowledge across generations through storytelling, archiving, and mentoring. “We keep journals of what worked and what failed. The next group picks up where we left off,” said a graduating student.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive portrait of how student activists in Tehran navigate the intensifying terrain of legal repression. Drawing on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the data

revealed four interrelated strategies: adaptive communication practices, legal literacy and defensive tactics, psychological and emotional resilience, and organizational and strategic flexibility. Each strategy highlights how student activists manage risk, preserve collective momentum, and sustain political engagement under conditions of systemic constraint.

The first major theme, **adaptive communication practices**, illustrates the technological creativity of activists in response to state surveillance. Participants consistently described the use of encrypted messaging apps, VPNs, and anonymous online identities to protect their communications from interception. These findings align with Tufekci's (2017) observations about "networked protest" in digitally repressive environments, where activists develop hybrid methods of online and offline coordination. The preference for in-person planning, the diversification of platforms, and the deployment of misleading digital content reflect a high degree of media literacy and tactical evolution in the face of digital authoritarianism (Deibert, 2020). As Zuboff (2019) notes in her work on surveillance capitalism, the increasing penetration of state and corporate monitoring into private life has fundamentally reshaped the parameters of dissent, compelling activists to become proficient in digital hygiene and counter-surveillance behaviors.

The second theme, **legal literacy and defensive tactics**, underscores the role of informal legal education and tactical restraint in reducing exposure to arrest, prosecution, or institutional retaliation. Participants shared that knowing one's rights, participating in peer-led legal education circles, and consulting with human rights NGOs had become routine components of activist training. These findings echo earlier research by Gordon and Bertram (2018), who argue that grassroots legal knowledge functions not only as a protective mechanism but also as a form of political empowerment. The strategic ambiguity used by activists—such as framing gatherings as cultural events and avoiding politically charged language—mirrors techniques employed by civil society groups in other repressive settings, such as Egypt and Turkey (Butler, 2019). By engaging with law as both a constraint and a resource, activists reconfigure the legal terrain to create small but significant pockets of agency.

The third theme, **psychological and emotional resilience**, highlights how activists deal with the affective consequences of repression. Participants reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and trauma, especially after episodes of arrest, surveillance, or public shaming. Yet they also described robust peer support networks, shared rituals of resistance, and emotional self-care techniques, including mindfulness and structured breaks from activism. These findings are in line with Gould's (2009) research on ACT UP, which showed that emotional solidarity and shared narratives of suffering are crucial for sustaining long-term political engagement in hostile environments. Moreover, the existence of planned "exit and re-entry" protocols suggests a sophisticated understanding of burnout and activist sustainability, resonating with recent psychological studies on resilience in high-risk social movements (Thomas et al., 2022).

The final theme, **organizational and strategic flexibility**, reveals the structural innovations undertaken by student activists to avoid repression while maintaining collective capacity. Decentralized leadership models, tactical mobility (such as flash protests), and the cultivation of safe physical spaces were commonly employed to reduce vulnerability. These practices reflect what Milan (2015) calls "tactical adaptivity," where activists recalibrate their methods in response to shifting legal threats and surveillance patterns. By building alliances across student cohorts and with other marginalized groups—such as labor unions and feminist organizations—participants expanded their networks of protection and influence. This corroborates the theory of "resilience through networks," wherein movement survival depends not solely on confrontation, but on collaboration and diversification (Chenoweth &

Stephan, 2011). The deliberate effort to archive strategies and mentor new activists indicates a commitment to intergenerational learning, often overlooked in short-term protest cycles.

Taken together, these strategies point to a broader phenomenon: student activism under legal repression is not extinguished—it evolves. Legal repression, rather than entirely silencing dissent, serves as a catalyst for strategic and emotional innovation. This supports the contention of Tilly and Tarrow (2015) that repression and mobilization exist in a dynamic feedback loop, wherein each shapes the trajectory of the other. In Tehran, student activists have not only responded to repression with avoidance or defiance, but with a complex blend of adaptation, reflection, and recalibration. These findings extend Carey's (2006) work on the "repression-dissent nexus," providing empirical evidence that repression generates not only costs but also creative responses at the micro level.

The cultural specificity of these responses also deserves emphasis. For example, the use of poetry nights and symbolic clothing as camouflage for political expression draws on longstanding traditions of aesthetic resistance in Iranian society (Bayat, 2013). The blending of cultural and political domains allows students to articulate dissent without triggering immediate repression, demonstrating how cultural capital can function as a buffer against legal targeting. Similarly, the trust-based networks described by participants—often rooted in long-standing friendships or shared academic spaces—reflect the centrality of social cohesion in sustaining activism within hostile environments (Khosravi, 2017).

Importantly, this study also contributes to theoretical understandings of repression by demonstrating how legal risk is internalized and operationalized by activists. Rather than simply retreating from public life, participants actively recalibrated their tactics to remain engaged. In doing so, they practiced what Schedler (2006) refers to as "contained contestation"—political action that remains within narrowly navigated legal limits, yet carries significant symbolic and material weight. The willingness to continuously adapt and the refusal to fully disengage underlines the persistence of civic agency, even under authoritarian constraint.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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